

SMASHING STEREOTYPES IN ADVERSITY

Syria's civil war has inadvertently brought women's football to life as the men's game crumbles, writes *Ben Jacobs*



Ten years ago football in Syria was flourishing. Eight-time champions Al Karamah became the first Syrian team to reach the Asian Champions League final, dumping out 2005 winners Al Ittihad in the process before valiantly losing 4-2 over two legs to South Korean heavyweights Jeonbuk Motors.

The so-called 'Eagles of Asia' looked unbeatable at their Homs-based Khalid bin Walid Stadium, which was expanded to 32,000 in 2004 due to huge demand.

"2006 was a special year," Mohannad Ibrahim tells *beIN Sports*. The striker scored the winner in the 2-1 home victory over Jeonbuk. "We felt invincible at home in front of thousands of passionate fans driving us on to achieve the impossible. Back then the stadium was a safe and magical place and it turned Karamah into the strongest force in Syrian football. This in turn benefited the Syria team."

Three years later, spurred on by its Karamah stars, the Syrian national side enjoyed a fairy tale run of their own as they qualified for the 2011 Asian Cup – their first appearance at the tournament in 15 years. Fajir Ibrahim's men even topped their group ahead of China, who they beat 3-2 at the Aleppo International Stadium.

"This match was one of the highlights of my life," midfielder Maher Al Sayed reveals from a small coffee shop in the Bab Shaqiri neighbourhood. He scored twice in the game. "My goals made every Syrian smile. Our country was at one."

The Aleppo International Stadium no longer hosts football matches. It is primarily used as a detention centre, the place where the government tried and failed to get the rebels to play a friendly against them in a bizarre publicity stunt

last November – is also a known military base meaning these days very few stadia in north Syria are considered arenas of joy. Over the past four years affected clubs have been forced to withdraw from the Syrian Premier League or migrate down south to temporary venues.

The national team, meanwhile, has been exiled to Seremban – a quaint riverside town in south-east Malaysia. Macau had fleetingly offered to host all five of their 2018 World Cup qualifiers, but pulled out last September citing security concerns just days before Syria’s goalless draw with Iran.

“We don’t want to play outside of Syria,” bemoans manager Ayman Hakeem. “The decision is out of our hands. We are footballers not politicians. Where we play is ultimately for FIFA to decide, but forfeiting home advantage is irreparably affecting our qualification campaign and team morale.”

Homeless Syria currently sit fourth in Group A and although unlikely to finish above Iran or Korea Republic could conceivably pip Uzbekistan to a playoff spot, keeping their faint hopes of reaching Russia next summer alive.

The fact Syria are still in contention for the 2018 World Cup, though, is pretty astonishing, especially when one considers some notable pro-rebel absentees from the squad.

Aged only 19, promising Under-20 goalkeeper Abdul Baset Al Sarout hung up his boots to join the revolution as commander of the Shuhada Al Bayada rebel group. He has since survived three assassination attempts and is believed to be in hiding in Turkey.

Striker Firas Al Khatib – one the finest footballers Syria has ever produced – also retired from international duty in 2011 out of solidarity with those being snubbed for selection due to their political beliefs.

“I was put in a horrible position because I no longer felt proud to wear my Syria shirt,” admits Al Khatib, who scored 26 goals for his country in just 51 appearances. He was speaking to us from his Kuwait home via Skype. “I got labelled unpatriotic and a traitor, but I didn’t want to be part of a team that didn’t represent or play for all of Syria.”

The same year Mosab Balhous – a Karamah stalwart and Syria’s 2011 Asian Cup goalkeeper – was arrested in a middle-of-the-night raid under allegations of sheltering rebels. He was also accused of sourcing weapons for a covert group, consisting largely of Karamah teammates, supposedly plotting the downfall of Syrian president Bashar Al Assad.

The charges were soon dropped, but Balhous still went into hiding for a year following his release. He rejoined the Syria squad in 2012 going on to win his 100th cap at last June’s King’s Cup in Thailand.

“I don’t remember much about my arrest,” says an understandably guarded Balhous from the Syrian Football Association in Damascus. He claims to support no particular side. “I didn’t do anything

Syria’s bloody civil war hasn’t stopped kids in Aleppo taking to the streets to play football



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wrong. Me and my family returned to normal life quite quickly, but there is still an element of fear every time there’s a knock at our door.

“I am a footballer and nothing more. I always have been. All I want is a peaceful Syria that allows football to take place in a safe environment in front of big, happy crowds.”

Balhous was on the books at Karamah until last season, helping them to a second-place finish behind champions El Jaish – a fantastic feat considering the club were banished to Damascus’ archaic Al Fayhaa Stadium due to the ongoing bloodshed in Homs. Aged 33, he retired last November, shortly before Karamah were allowed back into Syria’s third-largest city for the first time in three years.

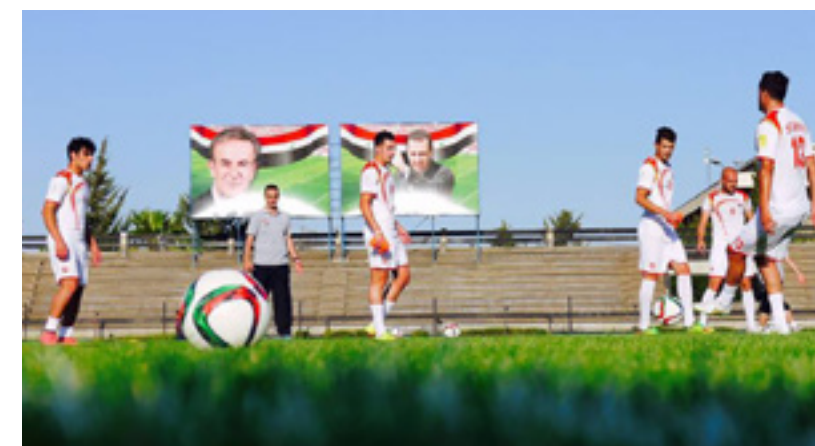
Without his safe pair of hands, though, Karamah could be in for one of the worst seasons in their illustrious 88-year history. Amer Hamwiah’s men sit in ninth place in the Syrian Premier League having



Abdul Baset Al Sarout quit Syria’s Under-20 team in 2010 to join the rebel forces



Syria’s next 2018 World Cup qualifier is a must-win game against Uzbekistan in March



won just two of their opening five games, scoring only three times.

Part of the problem was reluctance from key players, Balhous included, to relocate from comparatively calm Damascus to Homs. Other promising prospects chose to move abroad, with Iraq the most popular destination. This has led to a threadbare squad of just 17 with an average age of 31.

“I don’t think we can win the title,” sighs Karamah manager Hamwiah. His frustration is crystal clear even via a translator. “Being back in Homs will take some time to get used to. Slowly we will recruit players for the future and hopefully restore the club to its glory.”

Yet there may not be time to plan long-term since Karamah are on the brink of financial ruin. They can barely afford travel to away games, while four players told *beIN Sports* they haven’t yet been paid in full from last season. The team recently had a stalemate with second-place Shorta in front of just 44 fans and that number must increase to at least 500 in order to cover the wage bill.

THE FOOTBALL UPRISING FROM SYRIA'S SPORTS-MAD WOMEN

On this evidence it would be easy to conclude civil war has desecrated football in Syria, but that's only really true of the men's game. Syrian women arguably have more opportunity than ever before to play the beautiful game.

Syria's women's national team operate out of Jordan's capital Amman and are about to embark on qualification for the 2018 West Asian Football Federation Championship – a competition they won bronze at in 2005 in yet another sensational Syrian underdog tale.

“Being embroiled in a war hardens you,” says 28-year-old forward Amneh Al Shater. She has treated us to the traditional Bedouin dish mansaf at Amman's bustling Al Quds restaurant. “If you survive you believe you can conquer anything. I think all the adversity is actually empowering girls to become more independent – to break the mold and defy the culture that says

they can't play sport. They are starting to ask why playing football is such a shameful act and to be honest the men have no answer.”

Between 2013 and early 2015 Aleppo's Al Yarmouk Sports Club staged regular (albeit secret) five-a-side games for girls before constant shellings made matches impossible. During the same period a sports hall near Idlib (that has requested anonymity) would intentionally set off its fire alarm, allowing Sulim Rima and her friends to play behind closed doors whilst the venue was being 'spoof' checked for smoke.

“The owner of the club was very generous and like a father to me,” reveals the tearful 18-year-old. She has mild nerve damage and a prominent scar on her right leg after being hit by shrapnel in 2012 and runs with a limp. “Once a month he used to gather around 12 of us outside in the car park, then go and press the fire alarm. During all the chaos we would sneak into the sports hall.

“We had around ten minutes to kick a ball about that he would leave inside for us or just sprint up and down or sometimes dance. We could do what we wanted and such

freedom was priceless. There was just one rule: we had to be as quiet as possible.

“The owner would stand outside and if anyone approached he'd tell them not to enter because it might be dangerous. If a fireman or the police ever came to check the hall we had to stop immediately.”

Sadly extreme measures like this are necessary since no women's team can run openly in Syria. Yet in neighbouring countries an encouraging number of teen refugees who have fled over the border are thankfully able to play football freely.

Jordan's Zaatari camp, 120 kilometers from central Amman, is home to the so-called 'Flame of Syria' team. Most of the girls are aged 12-16 and hail from Daraa, 14 kilometres north of the Jordanian border. Using graffiti as a means of expression it is believed to be the first Syrian city to voice anti-Assad protests sparking the 2011 uprising.

Given 55 percent of Zaatari's 80,000 residents are female and 58 percent are under the age of 18, there is a large talent pool for any prospective women's team to choose from.

“So many girls want to play football,” beams vivacious coach Bdour Al Majaresh. She also teaches karate. “We could easily fill a league of ten teams. The hard part is persuading the parents to consent.

“Girls who haven't played before need some time to learn the basic skills and it is rewarding to see them develop. I guess my only request is we need a few more balls, bibs and cones. These aren't always easy to come by.”

Charities such as Right to Play and Save the Children do donate substantial quantities of sports equipment, although aren't always responsible for distributing them effectively or evenly. Former FIFA presidential candidate Prince Ali bin Al Hussein also founded the Asian Football Development Project (AFPD) in 2012 – one of the few sports-specific non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to operate directly inside Zaatari.

“I don't deny that sports facilities in Zaatari are still a problem,” Prince Ali tells *beIN Sports* from the opulent headquarters of the Jordanian Football Association. “There's a lot of demand for the few pitches that do exist. We built an artificial field for both sexes, but it proved so popular that it caused fights over who got to use it and the surface soon got cut up and even vandalised.

“However we continue to try and improve conditions and have already invested around \$1 million into our Zaatari football project. This includes a league for girls, hopefully launching in 2017.”

A league can't come soon enough for Amal Hosham, who was forced to flee Al Hajar Al Aswad 18 months ago when Assad soldiers stormed into her home and tried to suffocate her youngest daughter Farah. The single mother of five set up her own team last year in order to offer her kids some much-needed escapism.

“What I need now is a bit more support,” pleads inspirational Hosham. She got to meet British pentathlete Samantha Murray last December who was visiting on behalf of the International Olympic Committee. “There is a huge appetite for football in Zaatari. The girls know all about Barcelona and Manchester United and always want to play with the boys.

“This probably won't be possible, but I think two things are. Firstly, Syrians need to stop questioning a young girl's morals if she wants to try football. Secondly we want better funding and infrastructure. Football teaches us about teamwork and yet there

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Amal Hosham (left) is hoping to take her daughters to next summer's UEFA Women's Euros in Holland



Around 250 Zaatari girls were invited to attend the FIFA Under-17 World Cup in



Syria's women have been drawn against Iran, Myanmar and Singapore as they look to qualify for the 2018 Women's Asian Cup

is limited coordination taking place in terms of allocating pitch time or balls.”

Zaatari could perhaps learn lessons from Baqaa – the Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Amman. Right to Play have taken sole ownership of coordinating the football leagues here. They employ an impressive 60 coaches – 30 of which are female – who run weekly training sessions on a concrete pitch funded by the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy. The tie-up with the organisers of the Qatar 2022 World Cup even led to a surprise cameo from former Barcelona midfielder Xavi Hernandez last September – a memory the kids still can't stop talking about.

“It was an honour for me to share a pitch with the kids and to hear about their lives,” said Xavi after his visit. He currently turns out for Qatari side Al Saad and is a 2022 World Cup ambassador.



The Baqaa refugee camp boasts a number of women's football teams each with their own coach employed by Right to Play

“This programme is more than just one day or one football session. We have built because a fantastic facility here for the community. You can really feel what it means for these kids to be involved.”

There are obvious cultural and logistical challenges still to be overcome but Jordan’s thriving football scene for female Syrian refugees proves the future is bright.

And it’s a similar story in Lebanon, too, which houses around 1.2 million Syrian refugees. The Johannesburg-based NGO ActionAid formed a women’s refugee team last August to coincide with the ground-breaking one travelling to last summer’s Olympics. The 10-strong party in Rio included 17-year-old Syrian swimmer Yusra Mardini, who used her talent in the water to keep afloat a sinking dinghy en route to Lesbos, heroically saving 20 lives in the process including her own.

The ActionAid side, known as the ‘Red Arrows’, consists of Syrian and Palestinian refugees plus a few Lebanese locals. The

aim is to integrate the three different nationalities through sport and in doing so promote tolerance outside of it as well.

“When we first decided to form a football team the men in our community laughed at us,” wrote 17-year-old striker Hanin in an ActionAid blog to mark the team’s launch. “They said, ‘Stop playing a man’s game!’ Well, we have sure shown them!

“When my dad died and it became too dangerous for us to live in Syria. I joined the football team to fill my free time. I work in a bakery from one in the afternoon to 11 at night and I wanted a way to relax. But it’s become so much more to me.

“When I’m on the pitch I forget all my worries and the hard things I went through in Syria. I want to break the stereotypes around women – this box men put us in – and I’m prepared to work hard to do it!”

The volume of grass roots football programmes for Syrian girls outside of their homeland is slowly but surely increasing leading to more talent being unearthed. Maria Selo, for example, became the first Syrian refugee to gain a professional contract. The 24-year-old hadn’t even seen a football firsthand until two years ago, but is now plying her trade in Austria’s second division with Vienna-based outfit Altera Porta.

Of course the primary goal isn’t to develop world class footballers – not yet anyway – but instead to build an infrastructure that gives every Syrian child, whatever sex or level of talent, the opportunity to play football. In an ideal world this will put pressure on institutions within Syria to follow suit.

But finding a few stars, especially girls, is a very welcome byproduct. After all when one is born they offer hope through adversity and as powerful role models encourage others to shatter stereotypes as they fight for the basic, blissful right to kick a football.



Syrian girls are being encouraged to take up football, coaching... and even journalism!