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Despite Hamas-Fatah split, Gaza's sportsmen score a truce. Game on.

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The schoolboys chasing after a soccer ball at Ittihad Al-Shajayia sports club here hardly seem to notice the concrete shell nearby ? all that's left of what were the club's offices before Israeli planes bombed them.

And not one boy stopped to admire the large mural that depicts Israel's target: masked militants kneeling next to a rocket launcher.

Gaza's sports fields became battlegrounds in the violence that has shaken this tiny coastal territory in recent years. When the Islamist group Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip from the ruling secular Fatah party in 2007, Hamas commandeered sports clubs and transformed many of them into police stations and military bases. All youth leagues and professional sports games in Gaza stopped.

But today, athletes consider that ancient history. Though the Palestinian infighting still continues, with the two parties set to resume high-stakes reconciliation talks this month, Gaza's sportsmen recently signed a miniature peace deal of their own ? and reopened the clubs.

"It's best to separate sports from politics," says Saeb Jundeya, captain of Ittihad Al-Shajayia's soccer team, as he watches the kids play.

Hamas takes over Gaza's 40 main clubs

After Hamas ousted Fatah from Gaza in 2007, the Palestinian Football Federation ? affiliated with the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority ? cut off its funding of Gaza's professional

soccer teams.

"No leagues, no matches, and no games in Gaza," says Eyad al-Rais, a sports commentator for Palestinian radio and TV.

For about a year, the neighborhood sports centers remained open for youth leagues and amateur athletes who just wanted to kick around a soccer ball for fun. But then Hamas took over Gaza's 40 main clubs, almost all of which were administered by Fatah-affiliated directors and received partial funding from Fatah.

SPECIAL REPORT: In Gaza, rise of Hamas military wing complicates reconciliation with Fatah
A neighbor of the Ittihad Al-Shajayia club, who declined to give his name for fear of repercussions from Hamas, described what he saw from his window on July 17, 2008. One hour after midnight, he watched dozens of Hamas military jeeps surround the club. Armed men broke down the doors, changed all the locks, and declared the area a military zone. He said militants later converted the office building and locker rooms into a base for shooting rockets into Israel ? a base Israel later bombed in its 2009 military offensive in Gaza.

Sports clubs are magnets for Gaza's young men, and some in Hamas wanted to keep them open, thinking they could "influence large numbers of youth and attract them to their side," says Mr. Rais.

Managers, coaches, fans push back

But the ousted managers couldn't stand the thought of Hamas men sitting in their old offices, with their feet up on their desks ? so they asked Gazans to stay out. Rais began publishing op-eds against the political hijacking of Gaza's sports life. Coaches and fans also spoke out.

"Sports sends a message to the world that we are a civilized people," says coach Majid Abu Maraheel, the first Palestinian athlete to compete in the Olympics, as young trainees sprinted past him at Gaza's Al-Yarmouk stadium. "Both Fatah and Hamas leaders must realize that we want sports to represent Palestine ? not to represent the factions."

The runners once practiced free of charge on this track field. Now Hamas charges the team a fee, and they can't always afford it. So the Olympic trainees sometimes run on Gaza's streets, pockmarked by war. When they do meet at Al-Yarmouk stadium, they run under an enormous portrait of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh.

How Hamas leader Haniyeh shored up negotiations

It was Mr. Haniyeh, a former professional soccer player who now serves as prime minister in Gaza's Hamas-run government, who pushed sportsmen from his party and the rival Fatah party to negotiate a truce. His eldest son, Abdel Salam, was appointed the head of the three-member Hamas negotiating team and met with the Fatah team in each and every disputed club for the past two years.

Abdel Salam Haniyeh, a cheery and round-bellied man, is candid about two things. First, his physique makes him a better negotiator than sports player. Second, it helped that his father is Gaza's prime minister.

Politicians from both parties made frantic nighttime telephone calls to the negotiators to try to stop the talks, the younger Haniyeh recalled, but his father would step in, and the negotiators

could move forward.

Mahmud al-Neirab, a Fatah member who participated in the talks, says he had little support from his fellow party members. "Other Fatah supporters at first didn't want me to talk about the idea of reconciliation," he says. "They weren't convinced that we should take that route."

But by September, the majority of the clubs agreed to appoint equal numbers of Hamas and Fatah representatives as board members, and to elect an independent as chairman. When the truce was reached, Jibril Rajoub, Fatah official and president of the Palestinian Football Federation, resumed funding, sending \$5,000 to every reconciled sports club in Gaza from his office in the West Bank.

"This is our message as sportsmen for all the politicians," says the younger Haniyeh of the power-sharing compromise. He hopes it can serve as a model for larger Palestinian political reconciliation.

Sports truce will bring smiles, if not wider reconciliation

There have been other deals between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, such as administering the standardized Palestinian high school final exam and coordinating pilgrims' trips to Mecca. But all these mini-peace deals could crumble if the political reconciliation talks collapse, says Hasan Jaber, a Gaza-based political correspondent for the Palestinian newspaper Al Ayyam.

The sportsmen will "always look back to the political level, to continue or to stop, to continue or to stop," he says.

"This is a good way to go to direct reconciliation," says Interior Ministry spokesman Ihab Ghussein, who nevertheless remains skeptical about the truce's broader impact. "But when we talk about sports clubs ... it is not as big as the other problems. How to deal with the big issues of the country? It's not just a game."

But as long as the truce holds, soccer is back to being just a game ? and that is cause enough for celebration.

"I'm very happy," says teenager Ahmed Adas during a break from playing soccer with his school buddies. "We weren't able to play in the past. But now we are playing."

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