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Location: West Bank

In Bethlehem's Manger Square, under a full moon, two lovers recite Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish's words of affection and longing. Where they stand, shadows cast on the stones of Christ's birthplace unite and then the scene shifts to a meeting at a sports club. Debate flares over which game to watch: Real Madrid v. Barcelona or Zamalek v. Al-Ahly? Conversation spills over to politics and one club member nicknamed Platini declares: "We should live the way we believe."

Welcome to *The Team*, a 28-part dramatic series recently produced in the Palestinian Territories, soon to be broadcast on the Palestinian television network Ma'an.

Last Fall I travelled from Jerusalem to meet the series' creators and to watch part of the filming. I met first with the show's creator, writer and director, Nabil Shoumali, who studied film in Prague. He directed and produced episodes for the Palestinian version of *Sesame Street*. During a screening of the first episode, Shoumali joked that *The Team* is a "soap opera for social change."

Other television series focus on the inside workings of football clubs, such as *Dream Team* (UK) and *The Champion* (Israel), but they emphasise romantic entanglements and power struggles. These aspects appear in *The Team*, but the political and social realities of Palestinian life under occupation, as well as a strong desire to resolve problems creatively and peacefully, are what distinguish the Palestinian programme as an evocative work of art.

The political events affecting Palestinians' daily lives, including economic hardship, land confiscation and resistance weave seamlessly into the plot. We see effects of high

unemployment as two players, Tony and Hakim, sneak into Israel for work despite great risk. Another player, Abu Ayaaed, flees from the Israeli army, while Ahmed is injured by a rubber bullet during a demonstration and later is arrested by Israeli soldiers.

Gender relations are an important theme. Featured are several strong women, including Zeinah, the mother of one of the players. After her husband's death she decides not to marry his brother, as dictated by local custom, but begins studies at Bethlehem University.

Without compromising on story or entertainment, Shoumali and fellow creators emphasise the rule of law and freedom of association, challenges faced by women, peaceful conflict resolution and the importance of pursuing one's dreams.

Placing an athletic club at the centre of the action evokes the early history of Palestinian sports when such clubs were centres of cultural and political life and identity-building. Archival footage helps show the effects on football of larger historical realities such as the 1948 Nakba – the exodus of some 750,000 Palestinian Arabs following the civil war and the creation of Israel as a modern state.

In *The Team*, players are active in the community. For example, special events are organised for the disabled. And, similar to the recent history of the Palestinian national team which lost members to Israeli attacks and arrests, members of the fictional club are also imprisoned.

We see children playing in the street like their peers around the world, their shirts bearing the names of football heroes, as well as the way that individuals meld into a team with common goals, reflecting the series' aim of fostering such unity in society at large.

"We wanted to transmit values of peace and to do that you need to convince, not impose," Shoumali says. An ex-Marxist, he emphasises the importance of living together with the Israelis and of communication, with each side recognising the other's humanity. "War is the corpse of all civilised things... our dreams should be connected."

"Palestinians always show the victims, the evils of the occupation," says Raed Othman, general director of Ma'an, an independent non-profit Palestinian news agency and media network that co-produces the show. "That exists, but we wanted to concentrate on the personal lives, what happens at home, relations between people. We are presenting a new look at the Palestinians. Many people in the West have images of Palestinians as bad people. With drama we can speak about our dreams, how to build things together, how we will be when we have our own state, the power of the group to shape its future. The team represents the Palestinian society."

The Team is co-produced by Search for Common Ground, an international conflict resolution organisation that, amongst other projects, helps create radio and television programmes that offer alternatives to conflict. So here in Israel and Palestine, as in many places where ethnic and national enmity prevail, football provides a logical subject and common language.

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