

Lebanese rugby players tackle Beirut blast relief challenge

Fri, 2020-11-20 00:06

BEIRUT: In the months leading up to the Beirut port blast, Lebanon was already going through unprecedented crises. From the protests of Oct. 2019 to the collapse of the banking sector, the devaluation of the currency and the COVID-19 pandemic, the country has faced relentless challenges throughout the past year.

“The explosion was the straw that broke the camel’s back. And as I’m sure you have seen from the footage and carnage caused by the explosion, it was much more than just a straw,” said Sol Mokdad, CEO of Lebanon Rugby, a group established to promote the sport.

The explosion was a devastating experience for Mokdad. Although he survived the blast with no considerable damage to his property, many others were less fortunate.

“Seeing our capital in pieces and the tragic loss of life has taken a toll on all Lebanese citizens, in Lebanon and abroad. It was a challenge holding back tears for the first few days, just dealing with the trauma and the aftermath,” he said.

But Mokdad and his teammates knew they had to act quickly, joining the relief effort by instilling what they describe as the “values of rugby” into their community.



As football remains the most popular sport in the MENA region, courting a huge fan base, generous investments and billions of dollars in revenue, more niche sports such as rugby struggle to secure the resources they need to survive. (Supplied)

As a federation, the group launched the Lebanon Rugby Disaster Fund with help from one of their board members based in the UK. A GoFundMe campaign was set up to collect donations from the global rugby community.

At the time of writing, the campaign has raised almost £15,000 (\$19,500), with the federation planning to donate the money to trusted relief organizations such as the Lebanese Red Cross.

The team also raised funds internally to support one of the players who lost his home in the blast. The amount needed to rebuild the house was raised almost instantly.

Lebanon Rugby players also contributed to the physical relief effort by volunteering to clear rubble, prepare food for displaced families and deliver medicine.

“Rugby Union is a beautiful sport, and the culture that it brings to its participants both on and off the field is unlike any other sport,” Mokdad said.

INNUMBERS

Beirut Blast

* \$10-15 billion – Estimated cost of blast damage.

* \$2-3.5 billion – Estimated insured losses.

As football remains the most popular sport in the MENA region, courting a huge fan base, generous investments and billions of dollars in revenue, more niche sports such as rugby struggle to secure the resources they need to survive.

“When it comes to Lebanon Rugby and our efforts to develop Rugby Union in Lebanon, it has always been an uphill battle,” Mokdad said. The sport faces similar challenges elsewhere in the region.

Lebanon Rugby gained official status from the government in 2009 and is currently a full member of Asia Rugby and an associate member of World Rugby. Only six other nations in the region are members of the World Rugby Federation.

And the sport has built a successful community in Lebanon with little to no funding, relying on its volunteers and annual player fees to operate. Lebanon Rugby also runs a fledgling junior section with over 300 young people playing regularly at their schools and academies.



Volunteers at the Lebanese Civil Defence work in the the control room at the headquarters of the public emergency service in the capital Beirut, on

September 28, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

The fact that the region organizationally falls under Asia Rugby further complicates things for the sport in MENA.

“The challenges we face here are very different from a country like Thailand, which falls under the same banner. Asia Rugby covers a huge area, and efforts need to be made to split Asia geographically to be able to focus on specific regions,” Mokdad said.

While rugby may still be a long way from competing with more established sports in the region, recent achievements for The Phoenix, the Lebanese Rugby Union national team, in addition to local initiatives around the region, have already increased awareness of the sport.

Mokdad is hopeful about the future. “The formation of the Arab Rugby Federation, and the appointment of Qais Al-Dhalai – president of UAE Rugby – as the president of Asia Rugby has given a boost to development in the region,” he said.

This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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Author:

Thu, 2020-11-19 23:58

ABU DHABI: The Emirates Society, the UK-based institution focused on strengthening ties between the UK and UAE on economic, political and cultural affairs, hosted a high-level online roundtable discussion on Thursday on the historic Abraham Accords. The participants explored the advancement of UAE-Israel, regional and Muslim-Jewish cooperation.

Representing the UAE at the event was Reem bint Ebrahim Al-Hashimy, Minister of State for International Cooperation, who spoke alongside Ban Ki-moon, the former UN secretary general, and Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth.

Speaking on the impact of the historic accords for the UAE and Israel, Reem Al-Hashimy said: "The UAE believes in the importance of dialogue and in shaping what this region could look like for many generations to come. We are committed to a two-state solution in a Middle East that will fight extremism and that believes in plurality, multiculturalism, the right of minorities, and the opportunities that exist for young people by embracing technology, innovation, and economic empowerment."

Ban Ki-moon reflected on the role of multilateral organizations, the importance of religious tolerance, and how lessons from the Abraham Accords can be applied to other longstanding issues. He said that the Abraham Accords offer a "cooperative space not only for leaders but also for citizens of all the participating countries."

He continued, "The architects of this important agreement must ensure that the Accords are not an agreement just for their countries, but for their people. The Abraham Accords should serve as a launchpad for the sustainable peace and prosperity in the region."

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis said: "The Abraham Accords have unlocked a range of exciting opportunities for closer political, economic, and diplomatic collaboration between the UAE and the State of Israel. In addition, I am particularly hopeful that they will also herald a new era of Muslim-Jewish interfaith dialogue. This is a time for faith leaders to be courageous and work together to build a culture of peace and cooperation in our communities."

Chairing the event was Alistair Burt, former UK Minister of State for the Middle East and Chair of the Emirates Society, who commented: "The UK has supported the Abraham Accords as a bold diplomatic move to suggest a different future for the Middle East, beyond the conflicts which have afflicted it for so long."

Building on the positive impact the accords have had on the Gulf region, Reem Al Hashimy noted that the event was a welcome step in furthering the discussion on how diplomacy and goodwill are central to a peaceful Middle East and showcase what is possible for not only the region, but the rest of the world.

The virtual event was attended by more than 100 high-level guests from the UK, UAE, and across Europe and the Middle East.



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Bahrain tells Pompeo there must be two-state solution for Israel-Palestine
Pompeo visits occupied West Bank settlement, infuriating Palestinians

Jordan to open consulate in Western Sahara amid dispute

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Thu, 2020-11-19 20:29

RABAT: Jordan will open a consulate in Western Sahara, Morocco said on Thursday, in an apparent show of support for Rabat after the disputed territory's Polisario independence movement said it was returning to an armed struggle.

The consulate will be in Laayoune, the largest city in Western Sahara, and the decision to open it came after a phone call between King Mohammed VI and King Abdullah II.

Arab Gulf monarchies have expressed support for Morocco after its army intervened on Friday in a UN-monitored area to open a road that was blocked by Polisario supporters and armed fighters for three weeks.

The Jordanian monarch welcomed "the reopening of the passage to the safe movement of people and goods between the Kingdom of Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa," the Royal palace said in a statement. Following the entry of the Moroccan army into the UN-monitored buffer strip, the Polisario independence front said it has quit the UN-brokered cease-fire and declared war.

Algeria, which backs the Polisario, was the only Arab state that has condemned Morocco's actions in the Western Sahara passage.

The Polisario front, which seeks independence for the territory, announced it has quit the UN-brokered cease-fire and declared war against Morocco.

The UAE and some 16 African states have already opened consulates in the disputed territory as Rabat reaps more support for its position over the Western Sahara conflict since it joined the African Union in 2017.

Morocco has held the vast desert region since Spain quit in 1975 and regards it as an integral part of its own land.

Rabat has said the most it can offer as a political solution to the dispute is autonomy. The Polisario and its ally Algeria reject this and say they want a referendum, with independence for Western Sahara as one of the options.



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[US general: Iraq government wants continuing US presence](#)

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Thu, 2020-11-19 19:32

WASHINGTON: The US Middle East commander said Thursday that troops in Iraq will be cut to 2,500 on President Donald Trump's order, but that Baghdad

wants a continued US presence to fight the Daesh group. Central Command Commander General Kenneth McKenzie told a conference that the continuing US presence has successfully limited the activities of Iran and Daesh.

Iran has recently curtailed attacks, McKenzie said, "based on the hope that we would be asked to leave Iraq through the government of Iraq's political processes."

However, he said, "the government of Iraq has clearly indicated it wants to maintain its partnership with the United States and coalition forces as we continue to finish the fight against Daesh."

Speaking to an online conference held by the National Council on US-Arab Relations, McKenzie cited estimates that Daesh still has a body of 10,000 supporters in the Iraq-Syria region and remains a real threat.

"The progress of the Iraqi Security Forces has allowed has allowed the United States to reduce force posture in Iraq," he said.

But US and coalition forces have to be there to help prevent Islamic State from reconstituting as a cohesive group able to plot major attacks, he said.

"When you're running for your life up and down the Euphrates River Valley, listening to the noise of an armed MQ-9 drone overhead, it's hard to think about conducting attack planning against Detroit."

McKenzie said the US presence and measured retaliations had also successfully deterred Iran from persisting in attacks on Gulf shipping, and limited its proxy attacks in Iraq.

"Today I believe Iran has been largely deterred because the regime now understands we possess both the capability and the will to respond," he said.



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[Meet Gaza's first woman taxi driver](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-11-19 01:24

GAZA: Palestinian mother-of-five Nayla Abu Jubbah launched a small revolution this week by becoming the first female taxi driver in the deeply conservative Gaza Strip.

In the impoverished Palestinian territory, women have the same legal rights as men to drive a vehicle, but in practice the trade of taxi driver has been exclusively male – until now.

“One day I was talking with a friend who works as a hairdresser and I said to her: ‘What would you say if we started a taxi service for women?’ She said it was a crazy idea,” the 39-year-old told AFP.

The Israeli-blockaded territory was suffering 50 percent unemployment even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

After drinking a steaming cup of tea in her home, the social work graduate in a headscarf puts on a face mask and marches to her car parked outside.

After slotting her smartphone into its holder and giving a toot on the horn for show, she starts the engine and is off on the roads of Gaza, where the Islamist Hamas movement has ruled for more than 13 years.

Abu Jubbah does not cruise the streets for fares, taking only advance bookings.

“I leave my home and I will pick up my clients, to bring them for example from the hairdressing salon to a wedding,” she says.

She bought the vehicle with her inheritance when her father died.

“I said to myself one day that I needed to take advantage of the car, to put it to work,” she said. “Hence the project of a taxi service entirely for women, to put them at ease.”

Today she is driving through the streets of Gaza City to pick up 27-year-old Aya Saleem for a shopping trip.

"We live in a conservative society. So when I saw that there was a taxi company especially for women ... I felt a kind of freedom," says Saleem.

She wears a long brown tunic, beige headscarf and a pale blue mask and carries a stylish bag.

"When I'm with a woman, I feel comfortable ... I feel freer and then we can talk," she says, adding that women's taxi services are in line with sharia, the Islamic code which Hamas promotes in the Gaza Strip.

Saleem is delighted with the idea and hopes to see more female taxi drivers on Gaza's roads soon.

Abu Jubbah says she wants to expand her business.

"A woman called me recently to tell me that she wanted to work as a taxi driver by my side," she said.

"I told her that we would talk again but I already have the feeling that the project will gain momentum."



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