Episode #1. Syrian soccer team inches closer to World Cup spot

Syria tied Iran in a qualification match last Tuesday, September 5th, extending the team’s hopes of reaching the World Cup for the first time. Striker Omar Al Somah scored in the 93rd minute to clinch a 2-2 draw and a playoff spot against Australia next month.

The result brought a glimmer of hope to a country decimated by six years of civil war. People crowded into public squares and cafes to watch the match, waving flags and dancing in the street when it was over. The Syrian team has surmounted formidable obstacles to reach this point: Because of the ongoing conflict, their “home” matches have been played in Malaysia. In addition, some former team members have defected.

Syria will face Australia in two matches on October 5th and October 10th. The winner of the series will then need to defeat a team from the Concacaf confederation, covering North and Central America and the Caribbean, for a spot in next year’s World Cup in Russia.

Joshua: What an inspiration for the Syrian team, and for Syria! To see the players rushing the field after the tying goal -- with just the word “Syria” on their jerseys, instead of their names -- was truly incredible!

Emily: It really was, Joshua. It has given the country something to celebrate -- and a reason to stop thinking about the war, if only for a little while.

Joshua: I can’t help but wonder if some in Syria feel torn... particularly if they oppose President Assad. After all, he controls many aspects of the team.

Emily: Oh! That’s a very good point. Don’t all of the players have to be approved by the government?

Joshua: Yes, that’s how it is in Syria today. According to a Syrian sportswriter, at least 13 league soccer players who have spoken out against Assad or vocally supported the opposition are either missing or in government detention. Emily, I hate to think that the government is using the team’s success as an excuse to gloss over what’s really happening, and to imply that things are somehow “back to normal”.

Emily: Well, even if Syrians have mixed feelings, I have little doubt that they will be cheering proudly for their team next month.

Joshua: I am sure they will! By the way, Emily, a few players who had left the team or had been exiled have returned. In an interview last week, one of them insisted that the team represents all Syrians.