



Episode 404 – Tarek Alsaleh | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello, hello, hello! Welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 404 and today, my guest is Mr. Tarek Alsaleh. I'm Jeremy. I'm your host. I love martial arts and that's why whistlekick was born because my love for martial arts needed to turn into something and here it is! It's my career and that's why I come to you twice a week with this show and that's why we do so many other things from First Cup every weekday morning to Martial Journal to the products that we have at whistlekick.com and at Amazon. If you check out those products at whistlekick.com whether that's uniforms or sparring gear or apparel, you can save 15% using the code PODCAST15. A lot of people start martial arts. Some of them continue and some of those folks turn into instructors but a very small percentage of those people, and we've had a few on the show, have turned their instruction into a greater mission. Something that reaches beyond the boundaries of style or system or, even, country. Well, today's guest is one of those people. Mister Tarek Alsaleh is engaged in spreading Capoeira throughout the world through and organization he founded called Capoeira4Refugees. On today's episode, we talk about his start, why he's so passionate, not only about Capoeira but also, about spreading this beautiful martial art to some who, otherwise, wouldn't have this opportunity and, in some ways, folks who need it more than anyone else so let's welcome him to the show. Mister Alsaleh, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Tarek Alsaleh:

Hello. Thanks for having me!



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Of course! Thanks for coming on. We got a little bit of a time difference here. It's early here, it's far less early there but I appreciate you doing this. I appreciate you coming on and getting to know you.

Tarek Alsaleh:

I just moved to Berlin so we have a day right now. Just had some lunch. I'm ready to talk.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Well, good! You've had lunch. I haven't had breakfast yet. I tend to wait a little bit so we'll be wrapping up and I'll be running into the kitchen to grab some food.

Tarek Alsaleh:

Sounds good. Sounds good.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There are a lot of things that we can talk about and I'm sure the listeners are all picking up, okay, we've got somebody who's living in Europe, we've got someone who has a bit of an accent. At least, if you're an American, you have a bit of an accent and what is all these mean? What's happening? What's going on? And I know we're going to get there and I'd rather we just kind of find our way there organically but we always ask our guest kind of the same question. It's a great jumping off point so I'm going to ask you that same question. How did you first find martial arts?

Tarek Alsaleh:

As a kid, you definitely watched TV sometimes. You've seen martial arts here and there. You think oh, that's cool, that's cool and most of the martial art you see, it looks quite positive, think maybe in the next life, hmm, you know? This happens to me with Capoeira as well. Basically, I'm half German and half Syrian. I grew up in Germany and outside Jamaica and Cologne, basically the biggest reggae festival in Germany, Cologne, and so, I was there with 10 of my friends and they had friends, so on and then, my friends basically start playing Capoeira in the morning and basically, I just joined. This is basically how I really found martial arts. Basically, friends, it was something in common and I was always into sports and those were my first steps into Capoeira because, also, I know if you do something professionally, it was also really, like I said, discouraged. Basically, in Capoeira, where feet is flying through the air, creating a circle. If you're part of the circle, that's great. You're part of the family. If you're out of the circle, you often think, they're doing their own ritual, maybe you feel shy, you want to join them. That's, by the way, one of the policies we have when we're working the Capoeira. When there's conflict, you go on the space, you're not really allowed to just watch. You're not sending people back, of course, but you have to have, at least, clap and the rhythm. They have to be part of the circle. I think that's really important for the work we are doing.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Wow, so...for the folks listening who have never watched Capoeira, maybe you've seen some of the movements, what you're referencing here, of course, is the circle, the roda, in which Capoeira is played and one of the things I've experienced, I've done a couple years of Capoeira, and I had the chance to play a little bit off and on, other martial artists, people who are, have spent decades training in, let's call them more conventional arts: Karate, Taekwondo, Kung Fu, etcetera, look at Capoeira and, we have an event where we bring together people of all different martial arts and the class that attracts some of the most attention, but also the most anxiety, is the Capoeira because you have different movements but you also have the dance quality and it can be really nerve-wracking for someone to jump in to start moving in that way. Were you, at all, nervous? When your friends are here at this reggae fest, did you really just kind of jumped in or that takes some encouragement?

Tarek Alsaleh:

I think it depends when you, for example, me, it was easy to jump in because they're my friends, right? Basically, it's like a new situation for you, you've never been there before then, of course, like a big step into the middle of the circle, everybody's watching you and it's the kicks and doing the curves and you don't look foolish and so forth but, let's say, for myself, because I knew the people, I don't really care. You just go in. you're a part of it. you don't have a lot, you're basically really relaxed about it and once, you're part of the circle, you have friends, you do stuff with them. Again, over, not just Capoeira, go for a drink, whatever, you don't really care if you look clumsy or whatever. You're just enjoying it and I think, let's say in Capoeira, one thing which takes Capoeira apart from many other martial art, if you say so, because in Capoeira, there are no winners and there are no losers. If I hit you, you know it's my fault, right? So, all those rituals that creating a circle and everybody sees each other, you give your energy, you sing, you play music. Everybody choose their own level of participation and if you're in the middle and you don't have the stress anymore that somebody hits you very hard or something in Capoeira especially as a beginner, then you're basically getting also more relaxed because I would trust you not to hit me and I think this is something you learn over time in Capoeira but when you're just saying people going into the circle, I think it's really important to voice more especially in Capoeira because it's so hard to get into the sport Capoeira because there's not a lot of beginner class because they think, oh, that looks great, maybe next life, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, and you hit on something that I just want to underscore for the listeners because I think it's, at least from my perspective, the biggest difference between Capoeira and every other martial art that I'm aware of and have practiced and that's what you said: if I hit you, it's my fault. The way we talk about other martial arts, if I hit you, whether we say it jokingly or seriously, you failed to block, you failed to avoid that but in Capoeira, just because of the way it was practiced, the responsibility is on the person throwing the technique to be sure that they are not throwing something that is beyond their control.



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Tarek Alsaleh:

Yes, you're right and this is something really beautiful in Capoeira. If you're a beginner and it's like the older, the elderly is taking care of the newcomers. The strong is taking care of the weak. Those values is part of Capoeira. It's really a part of, of course, you have sometimes people, rivals, they're the same level, strength, whatever and they're fighting with one another and yeah, people are getting hit and so forth but this is...that's not so common basically. It happens, of course, but after the play, things stay in the game and then there's also outside the gym. I think also, in Capoeira, because you're in the middle, let's just say and I mentioned it before, Capoeira and the organization Capoeira4Refugees which I founded long time before the war in Syria started, we're working with, at that point, with street children, in prisons, in women shelters, with Iraqi and Palestinian refugees, basically through Capoeira, those kids, they got a lot of confidence going into the circle, again, gives them a lot of confidence. If you live on the street or in prison, you don't really get a lot of attention so people are attention-seeking especially if you grow up. I have 2 kids and they have so much attention all the time, they're so cute. If they want something, you listen, otherwise, they just keep doing it. Basically, you grow up with getting a lot of attention and then, when we're getting older and older, we get less and less so I think everyone needs some sort of attention and then, basically, in Capoeira, you can express yourself and release your anger and frustration in a healthy way. Again, without really needing to hit somebody and learning at the same time as well because, at the end of the day, you're friends. You have to play with one another and not against one another.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And I've always liked that very: play. Because, again, it's the only martial art, that I'm aware of, that you use that verb. If I tell someone, hey, I heard you play Karate, they'll be offended but if I tell someone, I heard that you play Capoeira, there won't be any offense taken because that is kind of, for those who haven't seen it, who haven't participated; that really is the best verb. There's an element of fun and light-heartedness that comes through in a game of Capoeira. You have people who are jokesters and will play tricks on people and I've always enjoyed that quality of it. If we go back, here you are, reggae festival and you jump in because your friends are doing it and, you just mentioned you've set up a foundation, an organization, Capoeira4Refugees, but obviously, a lot of stuff happened in the middle. You don't just go, hey, this seems like a neat thing to do with my friends to dedicating so much of your life to it so what was it about Capoeira that you found so compelling?

Tarek Alsaleh:

It's a combination, I would say, with music, singing, playing instruments, building instruments. Capoeira, the instruments look pretty cool because you have this thing which looks like a bow. You can use it as a bow. It makes some really nice sounds that you hear [00:12:56] is really something special. The berimbau, of course, and you have drums and you have this agogô, which looks like you're playing on two coconuts. Basically, it's something, I feel, which draw me really into Capoeira is the energy you hear



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being part of something. Not only the movement, it's also the whole thing. The combination of singing, playing music, call and response, there's so much energy basically happening in Capoeira which, I think, draws me and a lot of other people into Capoeira, first of all, because it's also nice. For example, when we're going back to Germany, Cologne, in Capoeira, you find a lot of people, different nationalities from all over the world. It's also very special in Capoeira. Lots of women and girls also play Capoeira from, probably, half of it as well, so it also brings masculinity out of the competition and the testosterone which you find in so many martial arts, a bit odd of it, so it's also something why I really like because Capoeira is a bit more relaxed. Basically, the winner in Capoeira is who has the most fun. That's the winner in Capoeira and this is something what I teach my kids as well and I think everybody should teach it to somebody else as well because it's not about winning. It's not about losing. You know the sports, what it brings us. Competition is all about winning. Everybody has to win. Competition, of course, drives you. You give everything and you go more. That's also fine but I think there's also the other side of it which, like I said, having fun and this is something which is the most important in Capoeira. Like I said, this is something why I feel Capoeira, for me, is the sport which I like, if you want to call it, whatever, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There is a great word to describe martial art. We call it sport or pursuit or hobby and none of those things can fully encompass all the different elements. For me, it's a way of life and, I suspect, for you and most of the listeners is a way of life, if not their entire life. Certainly a big portion, not just in what they do but in the way they think.

Tarek Alsaleh:

I agree, definitely. Like I said, I can't keep on talking about this topic. It's basically the, yeah, try to do those healthy lifestyle, basically, this is also part of it. You get used to it and you can't live without it anymore and your friends suddenly doing the same thing and so on. That's, basically, what happened to me while I was practicing Capoeira back that day on this reggae festival ages ago. That's, I feel for me, and for people, lots of other things. The things that they're also into it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, I'm curious...you mentioned this organization that you've put together but, from what I know of people that start organizations like this, that usually comes out of some personal story, personal need sometimes. What was it from your life that caused you to start Capoeira4Refugees?

Tarek Alsaleh:

Okay, yeah, you're right. There was a couple of things that was coming together and, for example, in Germany, I was running a gym in Germany, in Cologne and was totally overworked. A lot to do, basically, my girlfriend left for Brazil. The weather was crap and basically, I was just working and I got shingles in



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my 20's which was very early. Shingles, you get when you're very stressed and a bit older, usually. I wasn't allowed to work anymore. I was totally a workaholic so I moved to Syria just to have a break, first of all, for 3 months and ended up in a small room in Damascus with Britney Spears inside the posters on the wall. They charged me a nice bit of rupee because I'm half Syrian, I can't speak Arabic. They charged me lots of money but I love the country. I really love that I have the other side to sit with a dude in the bazaar and playing chess and drinking tea the whole day. I love it. this was something that was really missing in my life. I loved, first of all, the country a lot but what really started or what helped me, basically, let's say this experience of living in that small room and basically, paying a lot for my rent, I started a real estate agency [00:18:20] which gives me, let's say, the financial freedom to do and to risk more or a lot because I'm pretty sure a lot of people want to do something with their passion and their sport but it's often really difficult to go hunting, let's say, you just want to sit by the fire and do what you want and hunt for things all the time. I was in that luxury position back in 2006 in Syria and then, I just kept practicing Capoeira and Syria is a very young country. I don't know how where you live but in Germany, it's almost like quality is you basically have lots of old people, like me, in Germany. In Syria, it goes like 60 so you have kids everywhere, 24 hours, it's a really young city and, of course, the energy is totally different. We have children everywhere so I was practicing on the streets of Damascus, playing, singing, kids came all the time. I couldn't really practice and I said, okay, guys, let me practice, I'll rent a place and this is where we can practice together. This is where we really started in a beautiful Arabic house. Kids came and they brought their friends, they brought their parents and yeah, like I said before, we worked with refugees, street children and so on so basically, developed as a grassroots initiative back that day but going back to Germany, because I had shingles, because I had a really comfortable life, earning money, having a car, all of those things that, basically, which most of the people think are important but for me, it wasn't really important. For me it was what's next? Syria, basically, gave me this missing part. I could really do what I felt right. Not easy, I was doing the right thing and running an organization like a grassroots initiative is extremely time-consuming, very hard and you have to deal with people, trainers, we also work with UNICEF and Save the Children, all those things, international organizations, so you're basically getting a lot of red tape, paperwork, bureaucracy and when you, let's say what I'm really passionate about, Capoeira and teaching Capoeira, I'm teaching in Germany again Capoeira because I spent the last 10 years, I spent a lot of time behind a computer filling in lock frames, indicators, outputs, basically, trying to please, let's say, those big money systems to make sure I fulfill my contractual obligations, basically, and this is, basically, really what is your soul so this is how I basically started the Capoeira4Refugees because of, if I just felt...it just felt right. You get a lot of energy from it while you're teaching. Every teacher knows that but running an organization is something else.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Everyone out there who's ever instructed, especially everyone who's ran a school knows that a martial arts instructor, regardless of the style, takes a lot of weight on their shoulders. We become responsible for the upbringing, not just in class often, but outside the class, the personal wellbeing and I know many martial arts instructors who have a hard time sleeping because somebody, somewhere, in their school is



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having a challenge. You're talking about working specifically with a population that has a little bit of extra stuff to deal with, a little bit of extra responsibility on you to care for these people. Does that weigh on you?

Tarek Alsaleh:

Yes and no. You have to be the right type of person. For me, for example, we're dealing with a lot of children who have a lot of mental health issues with really, really low attention span. If you're talking right in Syria in refugee camps where we work and those kids, for them, it's the highlight of their day or their month when they see Capoeira, basically. You are always the poster project so you give them a lot of fun, they're having... you give them an instrument, next week they play better than you. You see all the struggle they're going through as well because we not just teach Capoeira, you also [00:23:24] it wouldn't work otherwise. Getting their friends and families involved. You hear a lot of really heartbreaking stories but I feel like you also have to toughen up because if you let this get into you, then you cannot do your job anymore. Your job is there to bring happiness and stay very positive and give a lot of hope and happiness, basically, to the children. For example, we have a lot of volunteers coming to us, coming to work with us as well, it's really difficult to work sometimes because, like I said, if you have one kid who stop trying in a refugee camp then you also have to take care of them. Even really good teachers, really good teachers, if this is not made for you then it probably not something you should pursue at all but I say weight on me, I never really felt that so much because I also saw that what we're doing is truly the right thing and this is all I can give, basically, and, like I said, you have to be positive in who you are and take care of yourself before helping somebody else. That's a little bit of route that I would take.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure. Martial arts instructors, no matter where they are, who they're teaching, always end up with great stories. I have stories that make people surprised, I have stories that would gross you out, I have stories that only another martial arts instructor would say yeah, I've seen that. When you think of your time playing Capoeira, travelling, working with new students, old students, what's your favorite story? What's the best one that you can tell us?

Tarek Alsaleh:

It really depends on how much time you have. So many good stories.

Jeremy Lesniak:

As much time as you need.

Tarek Alsaleh:



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Let's say, this is the story I like which, basically, visualized the power of music plays so much. It was around 2009, it was a project in Jeddah Amanah, south of Damascus in a UN School so basically, UN asked us if we could, basically, run a project for them integrating Iraqi children into society and training them Capoeira. We were 4 teachers in a very sunny day, half an hour bus ride going south of Damascus, basically, a lot of kids on the playground in the school and the bell rang and the kids went inside so half of our group, there were 2 trainers, basically 3 trainers, we were trained around 20 Iraqi refugees and the girls trained separately inside because it was very conservative, we couldn't really mix them so we played Capoeira, had a really good time, music and so on but suddenly started to rain rocks and stone on us from over the wall so we had a run for it and we were hiding and I was asking the kids what's going on here? The Iraqi children, yeah, that's the Syrian kids. They're stupid, they're dirty and so forth and okay, so I went to the Principal and same story but I was like yeah, there is enough space. They can join us. Is it okay for you and the teachers basically say they hate each other. They will never play with one another but what has happened was, basically, Iraqi refugees came to Syria and UN built a school but in a very poor neighborhood. You can really see the difference as well. The Iraqi kids, they got school uniform, they got activities, the Syrians have nothing, basically. They were jealous of the Iraqi kids and the activities and so on so there was this fight. 4 years already, so I said okay and we came back next week and we managed to get 2 of the Syrian kids to join the class but they didn't really want to play with the Iraqi children but they like the instruments. They like the music. They were watching over the wall and one was playing an agogo and that looks like a coconut and the other one wanted to play the pandeiro, which is the tambourine, and basically, they made the music for the Iraqi kids and, by the end of the class, we built this game, we played some music together and everybody went home. No stones. The third time we came, the Syrian kids had brought their friends. They still didn't want to play with one another but Capoeira doesn't work like that. you shake hands, you change your partner, new exercise, you change your partner, you change your partner until you end up playing with everyone and after the first class, the Syrians and the Iraqis, they were already practicing together and before we came to the class and the teachers couldn't believe their eyes but, I mean, for me, you, I don't know who practiced Capoeira, it's something natural. Music, sport, playing, are essential. We need this to live. We need this to express ourselves. It is the basic right ingredients to create a really good environment, a healthy environment to solve problems, as well. For example, this is this one story which really describe the power of sport, music, play in such difficult circumstances.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's a great story. How is the organization changed? Here we are now, we're talking about where it's at. Clearly, there's a website, there's a mission but if you'll look back to the early days, maybe before you've even named it, how has Capoeira4Refugees changed?

Tarek Alsaleh:

We went through lots of changes. I mean, in the beginning of Capoeira, it was sitting around a fire, wanting to do more helping and we have the structure and the mission and all of these bureaucracy,



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basically. I think while we were in Syria, we created hundreds of jobs and over 70,000 children affected by war and conflict. I had to leave Syria in 2011 and the war started in 2010 so I was basically almost a year, as well, still in Syria. We had to find way the people are supported. Our ways, I mean, we live in a world which is global and local and technology basically made it possible for us to connect still with the Syrian trainers we trained and helping them but it is, of course, something else if you sit on your computer and trying to help somebody in a different space. We had to do a lot of evaluation and we have to get qualitative data, quantitative data one at a time, financial data and so on and so on and it was a lot of bureaucracy, basically, more bureaucracy basically came on us. We opened an office in Palestine, as well, where there were already Capoeira and really good trainers already but I think we've managed to sensitize a lot of trainers to work with children in refugee camps as well because people would love to do that but we basically supported this whole infrastructure and I think one big achievement of Capoeira4Refugees was to put Capoeira as a whole [00:32:22] map, basically. It wasn't really used a project in conflict so there's a lot of tiny projects here and there and they're doing amazing work but never really recognized and I feel what we have achieves in Capoeira4Refugees is to stand the advocacy part we're doing. We're working with tons of international organizations,[00:32:50] with UN organizations, with Brazil and the [00:32:57], the ministry in Brazil, so we have done a lot advocacy basically for using Capoeira in people in conflict as a tool for psychosocial support, mental health, building communities for the poor. We always close our office after three years in every country. In Jordan, we have an office that we closed recently so I just moved to Berlin 1 and a half years ago before I was in Jordan where we were running a Capoeira project for refugees and also for communities for the poor. What we always have was a passionate teachers but it's a lot of work for the teachers because it's a lot of traveling involved. There's all the bureaucracy around it. The pay is really bad and not secure so how long can you do what we really want then you have lots of short term funding and so forth. To keep the whole thing together and alive, basically, works like weighing you down because in the aid sector, each organization is competing with each other for money, for visibility, for paying their employees' salaries and local initiative are struggling to survive day by day. They're basically worn down by bureaucracy and only large organizations are able to handle the bureaucracy and they are have access to money but not the small organizations. We are a small organization in comparison so, let's say, when we're looking again how Capoeira4Refugees change, we have always a lot of good intention, 24 hours, no weekends, no salaries and so on and so on but we are basically, got really frustrated with the whole sector, the charity sector, because we want, we know, what Capoeira, what difference that it make and to market it is a different job. It has nothing to do with Capoeira. It's marketing or fundraising so you need a lot of different hats all the time on and if you only run with a lot of volunteers so it's really very difficult and I think over the last couple of years, I think what I think we did really well was really trying to hand over the project that we've created. We started with our partnerships and the local trainers, they kept on working with this organization and we're happy about that. We love and we're still supporting many of those organizations which were originally started with Capoeira4Refugees but it was closed and then, the local organizations and then, they're basically working with refugee camps or relief international, GIZ, IRC, Save the Children and so forth and we are still supporting that which we can do



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quite good now being based in Berlin because here you can do more networking, now you can do more fundraising and quite partnership and so on. This is basically what I'm doing in Berlin since I moved here, trying to change the system of aid, basically. The challenges the local organizations', basically, I don't know if you know this but basically, there is less than 1% of aid money, international aid money goes to local organization. 99% of those go to large organizations, not to local organizations, and this is what Capoeira4Refugees had to face with and that's what thousands, hundreds of other thousands other really great project, basically, are facing and this is something that I'm basically trying to change here in Berlin.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I just want to go back, just for personal reasons, you mentioned ISC, Institute for Sustainable Communities, is that who you...

Tarek Alsaleh:

IRC is, oh my god, International Relief...International American NGO, international relief agency, I think, they're called. Basically, those large international organizations. We can name any of them pretty much operating the same.

Jeremy Lesniak:

The reason I ask if it's the ISC, if that's who you mean by ISC...

Tarek Alsaleh:

International Rescue Committee, here we go.

Jeremy Lesniak:

ISC is based in the town I live in. So, I was just curious there. They're one of the organizations that the philanthropic side of whistlekick, we've given them some money. I was hoping that some of that money flowed through you and I can say that I was very happy to hear that but I guess not. We'll have to do something a little more direct next time.

Tarek Alsaleh:

The rule of thumb is, basically, don't trust any organization over hundred employees. I think this one you can, basically, measure with.

Jeremy Lesniak:

One of the things that we've gotten better at...I don't know what's going on there, are you okay?

Tarek Alsaleh:



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Yeah, yeah, I'm sorry. The door opened. I'm working in a very nice, vegan café and we have the whole shared office space. Yeah. Really nice food and cakes and we have also kids coming in sometimes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sounded like a monkey. Here in the United States, we have organizations that will publish what percentage of donations ultimately go towards the mission so we've gotten better at being aware of that here in the United States so hopefully that starts to spread as well because it's important. It's important to know where is that your money go and what it is used for.

Tarek Alsaleh:

Yeah, numbers, you can say it's the direct project cost because I really need it for running my project or not. It's basically totally different. There's not really, it's not really defined well enough. There are initiatives which are great, which for example is the [00:39:41] initiative where large humanitarian organizations came together, the UN organizations and over 20 governments changed that figure from under 1% goes to local organizations to 25% by 2020 which is next year. We're far away from, I think, that happened. There is a lot of goodwill and a lot of aligned long term goals but everyone has a different short term goal.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure. I understand. One of the things that we talk about here on this show is who you would like to train with? This idea that martial artists of different types all over the world, we've talked before we started our recording that we have a lot in common. Maybe, it would be through Capoeira4Refugees, maybe not, but if you have the opportunity to travel, to train with someone that you looked up to, who would that be?

Tarek Alsaleh:

That's a really difficult question because, like I said, the Capoeira thing is more like a tool rather than physical fitness and so forth so for me, I would like to train with somebody who has a really nice energy. Could be somebody who plays very well, music, singing, can that person be dead or alive, does it matter?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Doesn't matter.

Tarek Alsaleh:

Yeah, I would definitely play with having Bob Marley as part of the roda, singing.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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That's a great answer! You're the first person to mention him on this show.

Tarek Alsaleh:

He was a good football player, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I couldn't speak to that but it wouldn't surprise me.

Tarek Alsaleh:

He has a really good energy and this is somebody I really would love to be in the same room and basically, doing training with, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

He certainly had rhythm and if you have rhythm, you can figure out Capoeira.

Tarek Alsaleh:

Exactly. Exactly, that's what it takes, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's always been my most difficult part when I play.

Tarek Alsaleh:

Capoeira, yeah, yeah, it's like learning a language, right, no. Getting the letters together, then you can build sentences and then you talk at the end of the day.

Jeremy Lesniak:

When you're not playing, when you're not running this organization, what are you doing? What else is part of your life?

Tarek Alsaleh:

What I'm doing? I started teaching [00:42:16] classes here in Germany with Capoeira, sports, twice a week. I was so frustrated with running of many things but I really missed working with children directly so just what I'm doing is I have two kids, 2 and 4, what else, I'm doing? Yeah, I'm setting up this new company, Frontline Aid, which is basically a lot of tech related things to help other projects run more efficient. Make our desire to have more efficiently, this is something where I'm spending quite a lot of time with and I'm doing a lot of advocacy for localization of aid project so that support goes to local organizations and not the bigger ones. Keeping the back of my wife's research, she's writing a book about [00:43:20] which will be released early 2020. It talks about the whole sector on the story of



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Capoeira4Refugees basically, going through different countries and trying to help, basically, as many other grassroots organizations and what sort of difficulties we had to face in the system that works as a bit of a cartel structure and like I mentioned before, only large organizations know the right people, they can handle the red tape but not the smaller, local organizations so I'm doing this as well but I'm also I'm doing... yeah, I think that's probably it. I'm still quite busy. I think I'm more focused because I think I don't have the luxury anymore to try this and try that and having just a few projects and helping and volunteering here and there as well. That's where my time goes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's a great place for sure. Let's switch gears a little bit. Let's talk about the future. We've talked about where you started. We've talked about where you are. Where are you hoping to go? I don't mean just you personally but also the organization, let's talk about both sides of that.

Tarek Alsaleh:

Where we go as for me and the organization is I mean, what we're trying to do, let's say, through our work, for example, we've worked in Syria and Al Raqqa which is the North of Syria like the ISIS headquarters for a very long time so we started a Capoeira project there before ISIS came and then ISIS came, we were not allowed to play music anymore. They would chop your head off. It was forbidden. In Capoeira, you can also send us to fight so it was fine. Now, ISIS left and it got totally bombed so this is the project which was really close to our heart and my heart, especially, but for the organization because we know a lot of people. We have created a really amazing network. We've brought up a really great, amazing network, renovated the whole school. First day, more than a hundred kids came to class, Mamas, Papas and basically, it was the place to be and so, this is something which I would really like to see rebuilding as well, let's say, through Capoeira. Supporting them and lots of other projects, basically, depending on needs and outcome-based resources so to make, basically, the support we give accessible and fair which require for us to do investment in technology, basically, and show that you, everybody who want to help can lock in, basically, and create personal connections on the ground and supporting them directly. This is basically where we are hitting in the organization but also we want this to make it replicable, not only in Capoeira, we would like to use the same methodology which works really well in the context of war and conflict for us and other projects, basically, use that sort of methodology but the bottom line, basically, is we want to change the system, how aid delivery works and cut out the middleman in the development sector and building trust, transparency between supporters like you, me, with actual changemakers on the ground. This is something where I spend a lot of time with and I think this is also where the organization is more and more hitting towards trying to make sure local organizations become more supported.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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That's great and if people want to find you on the web? Social media, website, things like that, where would they go?

Tarek Alsaleh:

There's tons of thing. Through my name, you'll see definitely videos of me talking in conferences, I don't know, I was on TED [00:48:04] and different things. There's a lot of things basically and they have some blocks of networks. If you just google my name, LinkedIn, you can also, of course, look at capoiera4refugees.org or frontlineaid.org, there you also see stuff that I'm doing and I'm always happy if like-minded people have support and just reach out to me. This is basically where you can...there's not too many Tarek Alsalehs here so it's fairly easy to find me online.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Of course, folks, we will have links to social media and websites and everything over in the show notes page in whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. I appreciate you being here today and this has been great and this is, as we often do, we went in a direction that I hadn't expected so I thank you for your willingness to do that and it's clear how passionate you and I appreciate you being open with that passion but I want to ask for one more thing. Listeners know what this is and what parting words, what wisdom or advice or however you want to term it, would you offer to the people listening today?

Tarek Alsaleh:

Are we talking about people who are practicing a lot of martial arts, basically, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, I'd say 99% of the people practice.

Tarek Alsaleh:

A good word of advice if you can inspire people in your own community. You don't need to travel to Palestine or Syria to help. I also feel, let's say, when I started back in Syria, I wasn't a Capoeira master or something far away from that but I think, if you have the right energy, you can work with children and you have a...especially if you practice, I think you're some sort of person who don't have problems to stand and teach those other people. I think it would be great if more people would be inspired to start their own tiny project in their own community. I feel this is something which you can really give back to your own community and I feel that's something I always did that wherever I was and yeah, it's beautiful to be a part of the community especially for the people not part of the community, make them part of the community so I hope more people, basically, starting their own project wherever they live and also have time to [00:50:53] and basically, creating more positive communities.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Starting and running a martial arts school isn't easy. Starting an international martial arts organization has to be so much harder and we got some glimpses into that today. Everyone has a place in martial arts. Some people have a place to participate, some have a place of sharing, others have a place of spreading and I think it's pretty clear that today's guest is doing exactly what he is supposed to be doing. I appreciate all of the work that you're doing to spread martial arts to some people who, otherwise, may not experience it. Thank you so much for coming on the show today. If you want to check out everything we talked about today, from photos, social media links, website links and a bunch more, head on over to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. This is episode 404. If you go to whistlekick.com, you're going to find the products that we make, the other projects we've got going on. You can sign up for the newsletter. You can hear about a ton of stuff. it's our online hub for everything that we're engaged in all for you, the traditional martial artist. Don't forget the code PODCAST15 that can you 15% off anything at whistlekick.com. Find us on social media. If you don't follow us, you're missing out because we put out some great stuff and I'm not just saying that because I'm actually not the one that makes it. We are @whistlekick on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and a bunch of other places. Just search whistlekick and you'll find us. If you want to email me directly, jeremey@whistlekick.com. Nobody else reads that. Just me. I hope you have an absolutely amazing day and until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!