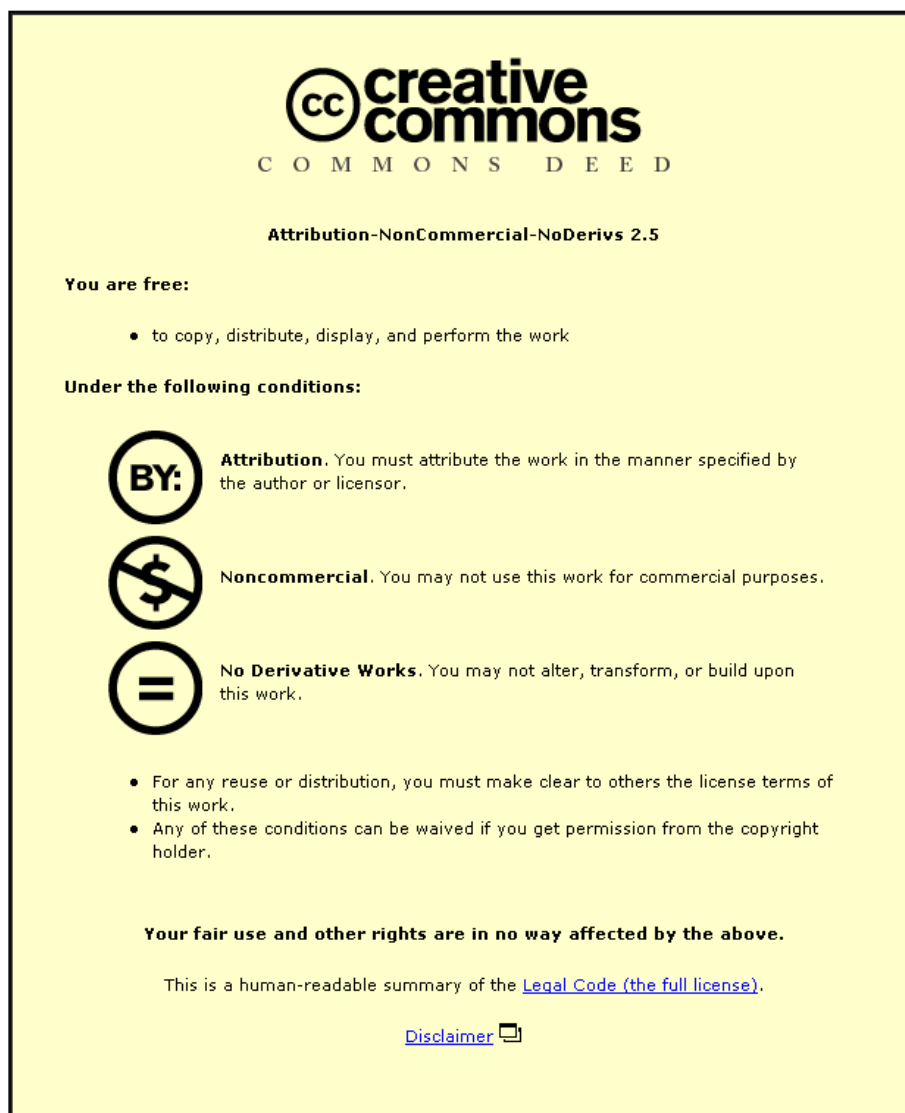




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
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VEILED WOMEN ATHLETES IN THE 2008 BEIJING OLYMPIC GAMES: MEDIA ACCOUNTS.

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If Nawel Moutawekel's Gold Medal in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games is to be regarded as a significant moment for the debate on Arab and Muslim women athletes' participation and performance in the Olympic Games, it could be argued that the (relatively) increasing number of veiled Muslim athletes in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (e.g. the Egyptian fencer Shaimaa El Gammal, the Bahraini sprinter Al Ghasara, the Afghani sprinter Robina Muqimyar and the Iranian rower Homa Hosseini, to name few) represent a significant moment in the discourse on the veil, sport, and Muslim women athletes (religiosity, body and performance) in the Olympics. This form of religious expression among Muslim athletes in the Olympics is taking place in a current historical context described by some as '*clash of civilisations*'¹ '*a time of terror*'² or '*geography of fear*'³. Therefore the aim of this paper is to explore and to compare different international media accounts about the presence of veiled athletes in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. To uncover whether the discourse of clash of cultures, on the one hand, or that of cross-cultural dialogue, on the other, have shaped their position about Islam, Muslim identities, Muslim women, and the Muslim World in general. Furthermore, from the perspective of the media in the Arab and Muslim world, the purpose of the analysis is to explore their responses to international media, and to investigate their positions in relation to the host nation (China), Asian culture, and the Olympics.

The veil (*hijab*) question

Narratives about the veil in general and in sport in particular have been constructed from sociological viewpoint around questions of the body, gender equality/inequality and women's emancipation/oppression, based on feminist, non-feminist and anti-feminist perspectives (western and Arab-Muslim secular, post-colonial, post-structuralist or Islamists' positions), or from a political and legal standpoint, with regards to the questions of freedom of expression, citizenship rights and respect of cultural differences, as framed by nation-state's values and ideologies (secular/non-secular; democratic/non-democratic; liberal/conservative), or from

cultural and philosophical point of views in relation to the discourses on universalism, pluralism and human rights, as shaped by traditional religious, modernist and post-modern thinking⁴.

One could argue that the issue of the veil and Muslim women participation in sport in the West is becoming a key focus at the centre of the debate on integration/assimilation of Muslim communities, in order to measure the level of their de-culturation from their culture of origin, and therefore their acculturation to western values. We can cite for instance the decision by Swiss sport authorities requiring Sura Al-Shawk to either remove her headscarf or stop competing in Basketball⁵. In 2007 a referee ruled that 11-year-old Asmahan Mansour could not wear *hijab* during a game at the Canadian indoor soccer championships held in Montreal. Quebec's soccer federation argued that Asmahan Mansour of Ottawa was given the choice of taking off her *hijab* or not playing in a Sunday tournament in nearby Laval. The reason put forward is that her *hijab* violated a no-headgear rule set down by the sport's governing body for 'safety' reasons. The ejection of Asmahan Mansour reignited, according to the Canadian press, Quebec's debate over 'reasonable accommodation' for minorities⁶. In 2008 the supreme tribunal in Switzerland rejected the demand to exempt boys and girls from Muslim communities from practicing swimming in mixed classes because according to Swiss law it was against the policy for integration and equal rights⁷. In 2009, a French woman (who had converted to Islam 17 years ago) was refused the right to swim in a communal swimming pool in Emerainville in France because she wore an 'Islamic swimming suit' she had bought in Dubai. This incident occurred while the French parliamentary was debating the question of outlawing the *Bourqa* in public places⁸.

It should be mentioned also that the question of the veil in schools, universities, sport, the army and police forces, or even in official documents such as in passport photos, has also been at the centre of political and media debates in the Muslim world. This has taken a different political and ideological turn after the fall of communism in central Asia, and in the Arab world starting from the 1970s in response to the so-called political Islam.⁹

The Olympic Games are also witnessing a relative increase in the number of veiled Muslim women athletes. For some commentators this is a sign of regression in relation to women's struggle for emancipation in sport in general, and in the Olympic Games in particular. For others, this is a positive sign of the increasing cultural plurality of the Games, not only in sporting terms but in organisational terms too. The 2008 Olympic Games, which is the focus of

this paper, is the first Olympics hosted by a non-western country in the new millennium. This has inspired other countries, including Muslim countries e.g. Qatar, to enter the race to host this mega event. The Games witnessed the participation of approximately fourteen women veiled athletes: six from Egypt, three Iranians, an Afghan, an Omani, a Bahraini, an Emirati, and a Yemeni¹⁰. As illustrated in the following table, the total number of women athletes sent by Arab countries alone was seventy nine.

Table 1. Women athletes from Arab countries in the 2008 Summer Olympic Games (from different sources, IOC and NOCs web pages)

| Country | Number | Event |
|--------------|--------|---|
| Algeria | 24 | Volley Ball, Judo, Fencing, Track and Field |
| Bahrain | 4 | Track and Field, Swimming |
| Comoros | 1 | Track and Field |
| Djibouti | 1 | Track and Field |
| | 28 | Archery, Badminton, Fencing, artistic gymnastics, Judo, Modern Pentathlon, Rowing, Shooting, Synchronised swimming, Table tennis, Taekwondo, Weightlifting, Wrestling |
| Iraq | none | |
| Jordan | 3 | Track and field, Table tennis, Swimming, Taekwondo |
| Kuwait | none | |
| Lebanon | 2 | Track and field, Swimming |
| Libya | 2 | Track and field, Swimming |
| Mauritania | 1 | Track and field |
| Morocco | 10 | Track and field, Swimming, Taekwondo |
| Oman | 1 | Track and field |
| Palestine | 2 | Track and field, Swimming |
| Qatar | none | |
| Saudi Arabia | none | |
| Sudan | 4 | Track and field |
| Syria | 2 | Track and field, Swimming |
| Tunisia | 11 | Track and field, Fencing, Judo, Taekwondo, Weightlifting, Wrestling |
| UAE | 1 | Taekwondo |
| Yemen | 1 | Track and field |

Muslim women in the Olympics

Apart from countries with majority Muslim populations under Soviet communist regime, Turkey was the first Muslim country to send female athletes to the Olympic Games in 1936, followed by Iran in 1964. Algeria, Libya and Syria did so in 1980 and Egypt in 1984¹¹. The first Muslim woman to win a gold medal, Nawel Moutawakel¹² in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, announced the beginning of a new era in Muslim women's participation in international sporting events. It is argued that for female athletes in Muslim countries, the international sports arena has become a privileged space where they can regain their status as full citizens and as role models. This is illustrated in the following statement by the Algerian gold Medallist Hassiba Boulmerka:

When I won in Tokyo, I wasn't comfortable with being the centre of attention (...) I like to keep things simple, not to be a star. But I've become a representative of all Algeria, and of young women in particular. I've gotten so many letters wishing me courage. . . . In athletics, on the track, I learned to suffer, to love my country, to concentrate, to take responsibility. I believe you can express yourself in sport maybe better than in other fields. All that, and it brings everyone together, too.¹³

The list of successful Arab and Muslim athletes in the Olympic Games includes: Syrian Ghada Shuaa, Nouria Benida Merah from Algeria, and Nezha Bidouane and Fatma Behassi from Morocco in track and field; Egyptian swimmer Rania Elwani¹⁴; Algerian Judoka Salima Souakri; the Bahraini Ruqaya Al Ghasara in track and field; the Jordanian Princess Haya bint al Hussein in equine sport and Algerian Judoka Souraya Hadad, to name few.

Muslim women's participation in sport has raised the question of conditions for women and the struggle over their bodies in Muslim societies as a dominant research topic¹⁵. Women's participation in sport is being used as an indicator to judge the level of progress and secularisation or conservatism in Muslim societies. Wallichensky goes as far as to state that Qatar and Saudi Arabia should be banned from the Olympic Games due to their systematic policy of having no women participating in their teams in the Olympics. According to Wallichensky, this is

clearly conflicting with the fundamental principles of the Olympic charter that "any form of discrimination with regards to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, and gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement." He continues:

Saudi Arabia has taken part in the Summer Olympics eight times. Until now, 122 Saudi men have competed in the Olympics, but no Saudi women have. Qatar, over a period of 6 Olympics, has sent eighty two men and no women... The obvious question is: Why is the IOC allowing Saudi Arabia and Qatar to violate the Olympic Charter? This year, two Arab countries, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman sent women for the first time after sending men-only teams to the last six Olympics ...As a point of information, Afghanistan and Kuwait entered their first female Olympians in 2004. Iran first allowed women to compete in the Olympics in 1964 and has entered one woman in each of the last three Summer Olympics¹⁶.

Another example can be found in the participation of the seventeen year old Robina Muqimyar from Afghanistan in the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. Her participation was used politically to symbolise the liberation of Afghani women from the Taliban's regime¹⁷. The emancipation of Robina Muqimyar was presented in the Western media by her replacing the traditional *bourqa* "the sign of oppression" with modern sport clothing. Such orientalist notions can be simplistic and culturally imperialist. These ideas portray women in Islam only as passive and oppressed, and condition the emancipation of Muslim women and progress in Muslim societies to women's participation in international competitions (i.e., embracing the Western form of sport practices). Hence, the domination of sporting institutions by the West in the modern world of sport, the adoption of sporting practices which espouse universalism as global sports, as the Olympic movement does, while embracing cultural conduct (commercial values, marketability and fashion) which are not shared by other cultures, is problematic.¹⁸

The following table highlights some of the key dates which represent, at least according to China Daily newspaper, the turning points with regards to Muslim women participation and performance in the Olympics.

Table 2. Muslim women participation and performance in the Olympics (taken from *China Daily*, 2008¹⁹).

| Date | Achievements |
|------|---|
| 1964 | Iran sent its first female athlete to Olympics |
| 1984 | Nawal El Moutawakel of Morocco became the first Arab woman to win a gold medal when she came first in the 400m hurdles at the 1984 Los Angeles Games |
| 1992 | Algeria's Hassiba Boulmerka won a gold medal in the 1,500m race. That same year Susi Susanti from Indonesia became the first Olympic athlete to win a gold medal in badminton for the world's most populous Muslim nation. |
| 2000 | Jordan's Princess Haya, the sister of King Abdullah, became the first female Arab flag-bearer at an Olympic Games, the first and only Arab woman to compete in equestrian events. In 2006, she became the first Arab woman to lead the International Equestrian Federation. |
| 2004 | Women from Iran won medals in pistol shooting. The same year Afghanistan -- which had ended Taliban rule only three years earlier - sent two female athletes to compete. Bahrain sent Roaya Al-Ghasra as their first-ever female competitor. |
| 2008 | Nawal El Moutawakel (right) of Morocco was elected to a seat on the 15-member International Olympic Committee Executive Board, becoming the first woman from a Muslim nation on the rule-making body. |

***Hijab* in the Olympics: media accounts**

The aim of this section is to explore different international media accounts about the presence of veiled athletes in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The thematic analysis deployed in this paper is based on an inductive approach, which seeks to extract themes from media contents around the topic of veiled women participation in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and make sense of them in relation to the ways they were constructed and produced in the text. Furthermore, it seeks to examine the emerging themes in relation to broader (societal) contexts, such as religious versus secular debates in the Olympic Games, politics of identity, as well as the association between style, body and performance.

Denouncing the “passivity” of the IOC, paradoxes of the Olympics, and imprecision of the IOC rules

One noticeable article is published by *laripostelaique.com* (which can be translated as secular resistance). It is a French online source which claims to offer a new militant media space that is more engaged in a secular resistance and the defence of French republican values. The title of the article can be translated as follows: ‘Hide this body so that we can’t see!’²⁰. Although it was centred on the issue of women and sport, the inserted photo in the article was that of three women with a full face cover (the *Niqab* or *Bourqa*)²¹ in black. For allowing veiled women to participate in the Olympic Games (starting from the Atlanta Games), the article accuses the IOC of not respecting the value of political and religious “neutrality” in the Olympics, and of “passive” in the face of the systematic policy in some national Olympic Committees in the Muslim world of excluding women from participation in the Olympics. It denounced the IOC double standard in reprehending any act in the Olympics which is associated with religious or political propaganda. According to the article wearing the veil is not only a cultural or religious custom but it is “a distinctive separatist sign and a form of religious and political propaganda”, particularly when it is requested by Iranian woman athletes, who are representing the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Olympics. The article argues that, on the one hand, the IOC was firm to counter French athletes initiative to wear a badge with a citation from the Olympic charter “for a better world” to mean for “a better China”, but flexible when it comes to dealing with the demands of Iranian athletes, on the other. The IOC’s response to this criticism was that the participation of French athletes was not conditional on wearing the badge whereas for Iranian women athletes, participation in the Olympics was conditioned by wearing the veil²². In the same vein, the Taekwondo International Federation changed its rules in January 2008 to overturn a decision made in 2007 to ban female competitors wearing the *hijab* under protective headgear. This allowed UAE to send a female athlete for the first time to take part in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.²³

For laripostelaique.com accepting veiled women in the Olympics poses three challenges for the participation of women in sport:

- it opens the door to all forms of political and religious manipulation;
- it opens the door to all forms of pressure against women in majority Muslim countries;
- it promotes exclusion of participation in sports that are incompatible with the wearing of the veil

Adopting a similar position, Steven in an article published in the Swiss national newspaper *Le Temps*, emphasised that in the Beijing Olympics, nine out of 205 delegations sent male only athletes, against thirty five in 1992. Six out these nine nations are Muslim countries (Brunei, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE). It should be mentioned here that the correct number as highlighted in table 1, was three (Brunei, Qatar and Saudi Arabia). The article reported the position of *Atlanta Plus*, an association which militates for the promotion of women rights in the Olympics, in relation to the question of the veil. For *Atlanta Plus* accepting the veil in the Olympics is inconceivable for the following reasons:

Not sending women athletes or sending them with the veil is the same. It is evident that a woman who lives in Iran will not allow to be killed because she does not wear the veil. However, here we are talking about the Games. The true question is as follow: do we believe in *universal values* or not? Before athletes such as Nawal el Moutawakel and Hassiba Boulmerka were threatened because they were wearing shorts. If we allow the veil, these will not have another choice; they have to wear it²⁴ (italics added).

It is interesting to notice here that the notion of “belief in universal values” is mentioned while making sense of women wearing the veil in the Muslim world. For *Atlanta Plus* wearing the veil for women cannot be conceived (in universal terms) as a rational choice. Therefore, the veil can only be accepted (universally) as a form of oppression and a threat against women freedom.

According to Steven, the problem is elsewhere. It has to do with the imprecision of the rules. At least the way they have been defined and applied by international sport organisations: “the sport code fixes what the players should wear and not what they should not. With the exception of jewellery and other dangerous accessories”. In other words the question as reported by a coach of a women volley ball team “it is not that it is authorised, the issue is that it is not forbidden”.

For Bramham, in an article for *The Gazette* (Montreal), showing the photo of a veiled Iranian athlete, the flag bearer of Iran in the opening ceremony, the presence of the veil is just another example of the multitude of paradoxes and inconsistencies that exist in the Olympic movement in general in relation to issues of the female body, women's participation, or women's occupation of leadership positions.

The United Nations has its charters and conventions condemning human rights abuses and discrimination. So does the International Olympic Committee. Yet the IOC itself is one of the gravest offenders of its own policy. Only 16 of the 110 IOC members are women. Only two of 35 Olympic sports federations have female presidents. National Olympic committees are scarcely better. Astoundingly, Sweden's Gunilla Lindberg was the first woman to preside over an IOC session two weeks ago, but it was only because President Jacques Rogge had to leave for Belgium's flag-raising ceremony. American Anita DeFrance heads the IOC commission on women and sports. She wants Saudi Arabia and Brunei banned from the 2012 summer Games unless they end their male-only sports policies²⁵.

Empowering or disempowering?

For the Iranian press having more Muslim athletes in the Olympics goes against the western stereotype and it is a positive way to prove that '*hijab* is not an obstacle to excelling in life and sports'. This is stressed in an article published in the *Iranian Daily*, entitled '*Hijab* shines in the Beijing Olympics'²⁶ with the photos in colour of Homa Hosseini holding the Iranian flag at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics and Najmeh Abtin, Iranian archer, in action. The argument put forward is that for veiled women athletes, represented by Bahraini sprinter Ruqaya Al-Ghasara, who made history for Muslim women athletes after winning a gold medal at the 2006 Asian Games, there is not any incompatibility between being a devout Muslim while pursuing high performance in the Olympics. The participation of veiled women in the Olympics should be perceived as the norm, as exemplified by the increasing number of participants from Muslim countries. The Beijing Olympic Games had known according to the article "half a dozen veiled Egyptians, three Iranians, an Afghan and a Yemeni are competing in sprinting, rowing, taekwondo and archery". It should be noted that the expression of 'half dozen' was also repeated

in other articles in western media, this time in a negative term, to describe the invasive nature of the veil in the Olympics.

According to the Iranian Daily article, and in response to secular feminists' position, the *hijab* from Islamic viewpoint is an obligatory code of dress. For athletes who choose to wear the veil, it is a source of empowerment rather than a sign of oppression. The article reported Egyptian fencer Shaimaa El Gammal, a third-timer at the Olympics, wearing the *hijab* for the first time in the Beijing Games, stating that "people see us wearing the scarf and think we ride camels. But Muslim women can do anything they want". As for the Bahraini sprinter Al-Ghasara "we have women who are ambassadors, doctors, pilots. For me it's liberating".

The increasing number of veiled women athletes was not seen as a sign of empowerment by Lloyd who presented herself as a western feminist. It rather provoked in her a sense of uneasiness and incomprehension, particularly when this demand for women to practise sport while wearing the veil is also occurring in the West.

What's fascinating about many of these women athletes is their attempt to fulfil both *fundamentalist dress codes* and their athletic ambitions simultaneously. It's this sort of compromising that makes the uncompromising Western feminist in me unsettled. Earlier this month the "burkini" a full-body swimsuit for women, made a splash in Australia; in New Zealand, some Muslim women have demanded separate swimming pools for women. Maybe there's an argument for Saudi Arabia's embracing burkini and segregated facilities, but Australia and New Zealand? Honestly, it's hard to see how a woman sprinting in a hijab equals progress, when her competitors are presumably clad in *whatever they want*, but maybe this is a short-sighted view (italics added)²⁷.

Roqaya Al Ghasara: "the traditional veil" versus "the aerodynamic and commercialised" veil

Firth in The Daily Mail, described Al-Ghasara's version of the veil, designed by an Australian company, as *Hijood* - or *hijab* combined with a sports hood. "It allows Muslim athletes to compete while still adhering to the strict modesty required of their faith". With this newly designed

fashionable dress, ‘made from breathable, moisture-controlled fabric’, it is not an obstacle for devout Muslim athletes such as Al-Ghasara to perform well, “despite being clothed head to foot”²⁸.

Al-Ghasara’s training suit is usually compared to that of Cathy Freeman during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. However according to French news magazine *le Nouvel Observateur* a distinction should be made between the two athletes:

Other women sprinters adopted the same outfit covering their heads too, namely the Australian Cathy Freeman in 400 meters in the Sydney Games. However, the objective was more aerodynamic, and not religious or cultural.²⁹

The same article in *le Nouvel Observateur* questions the religious dimension of the training suits and Al-Ghasara’s approach, describing it as more commercial than religious: “Roqaya Al-Ghasara adopted two approaches. Her veil is traditional in spirit but the tissue is more flexible and embraces the sponsor’s brand” (translated from French).

According to The *Boston Globe* newspaper in an article entitled ‘Her garb grabs attention’, Al-Ghasara’s approach was to borrow from both: “the headscarf is traditional in spirit, but the fabric is clingy and stretchable and her headwear has included a sponsor's trademark”³⁰.

Ruqaya’s aerodynamic (or not) commercial (or not) veil, designed by an Australian of Lebanese origin, had made unnoticed the participation of two other veiled athletes in the same competition; Bulhaina al-Yaquobi, the first woman to ever compete for Oman, and Afghanistan’s Robina Muqimyar who was participating for the second time in the Olympics.

Islamic religious perspective

Beatty’s article on the *Islaminsights* web page, which is designed by young Muslims follower of the Shi’a *Medhab* (one of the branches of Islam), chooses to discuss the question of the Olympics and the veil from an Islamic theological angle³¹. The rationale to publish the article was in response to an Italian news agency (AKI) which claimed that the leader of the Friday prayer sermon in Mashhad, Sayyid Ahmad Elmalhoda, had strongly criticized the fact that a female was selected to carry the Iranian flag during the Olympic Opening Ceremony. The article claimed that he had argued, based on historical and religious interpretations, that the flag bearing is always a male’s affair, he declared that:

To make a woman march with the flag of the Islamic Republic in Beijing is pure heresy and shows total disobedience of the laws mandated by our spiritual guides. To make this woman march means to openly declare war on our religious values. Whoever is responsible for this unforgivable act, he should know that this gesture constitutes an obstacle for the appearance of al-Mahdi.³²

According to the responses of Shi'a scholars to the questions of commentators in *Islaminsights* forum and other *Shi'a* forums, no objection is to be found in the Islamic teachings to the participation of Iranian women in the Opening Ceremony. The argument put forward is that their participation had been approved in advance by authorities in Iran, taking into account that the supreme religious authority in the Islamic republic of Iran is Ali Khamenei, the Guardianship of the Jurist (*vilayat-e faqih*). Their *Hijab* was judged from an Islamic point of view to be appropriate and a woman carrying the Iranian flag in this context was permissible.

If a woman being a flag-bearer in a ceremony for the Olympic Games is to be considered an impediment to the return of the Imam, at least according to some religious interpretations, *Islaminsights* goes as far as to question the (true) Olympic values from an Islamic standpoint.

Many people enjoy the games as a peaceful venture of elite competition and goodwill. Reality shows there is a darker side to the Games – a history of violent politics, doping, child abuse, removing people from their homes to build arenas, and much more – all for the idolatry of the medals and what they symbolise in the global arena... The extreme absorption into the sport that is necessary to produce an elite athlete, absent of a purified intention, is possibly a form of *Shirk* (polytheism)³³.

The true difficulty and dilemma to address, according to *Islaminsights*, is that Muslim women all over the world are forced to choose between three courses of action: observing the requirement to wear the *hijab* and not exercising and enjoying sport; or observing the *hijab* requirement while struggling to find ways to be physically active which are not too uncomfortable and impractical, or simply taking off the *hijab* to achieve their athletic potentials and enjoy good physical exercise, on the other.

Views of Chinese media

The emblem of the Games ‘One World, One Dream’ was at the centre of a pre-Olympic article by *China Daily*, which covered the visit of The Queen of Jordan Rania Al Abdullah to the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2007. She asked, according to the article, China to take forward this emblem and to be the bridge between cultures, particularly between the Muslim world and the West. And for the world to take Beijing’s Olympic legacy to instigate a “global dialogue”:

As an Arab, a Muslim and a member of the global community, the schism that worries me most is the growing gulf of fear and misunderstanding between the Muslim world and the West our failure to speak the same language, our failure to find common ground in our conversation, our failure to see eye to eye... Beijing's legacy to the world is more than a wonderful Olympic arena more than words of harmony and hope, but the foundation of a new world team - one that is joined together by mutual respect, common goals and shared understanding³⁴.

Interestingly, the debate around Islam and gender in the Olympics was also directed toward internal debate on religious communities in China, particularly in relation Uygur community, represented by dancer Amudu Kelimu Rena. ‘Uygur dancer ready to step out in style’, stated Shanshan in *China Daily*³⁵. Rena is one of 12 Muslim women who carried the Olympic torch today in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region. Eight of them are Uygur and four belong to the Hui ethnic group. Hence, the article celebrated the mobilisation of all national religious and ethnic communities around the national project of the Beijing Olympic Games. The Uygur community like other national ethnic minorities were represented in the Opening ceremony, which the Chinese authority wanted to mirror Chinese plurality and to be truly representative of the spirit of the Games. Nonetheless, the image of national (multi-ethnic) cohesion in China celebrated during the Games, did not last long. Violent ethnic tensions broke-up in 2009 between Uygur Muslim and Han Chinese communities in the western Chinese region of Xinjiang.

During the Games, *China Daily* choose the title “she did it, wearing hidjab head covering” to report the performance of Al-Ghassra’s phenomenon and her qualification for the 200m semi-final. The article which selected an image that depicts the strength and the explosive speed of the athlete crossing the final line goes on to describe “the guts and the uniqueness” of the Bahraini athlete:

She did it wearing traditional *hijab* head covering... Al-Gassra also wears a full-length body suit, which leaves only her hands and face exposed, and is the only elite performer on the international athletics circuit to don such an outfit.³⁶

The article emphasised the eye catching Australian designed outfit of the athlete which goes hand in hand with the modern design of the Bird's Nest track.

The Arab press

In addition to celebrating the modern style of Al-Ghassra's *hijab* and her notable performance, reporting from other international media and news press agencies³⁷, the Moroccan newspaper Al-Tajdid emphasised BOCOG's inclusive strategy to different religions, exemplified in the building of a 100 square meter mosque for Muslim athletes in the Olympic village which was divided into male and female provision and run by sixteen different Imams who had graduated from Islamic institutions. Furthermore, from the seventy nine existing mosques in Beijing, twelve mosques, including the Niujie Mosque in Beijing's Xuanwu District, the spiritual centre for the 10,000 Muslims living in the vicinity, were selected and refurbished and volunteers from the Muslim community were appointed to cater for Muslims visitors' needs. This was perceived as an example of the Chinese authorities' tolerance to different religious communities³⁸.

Another related article, which is published in the *Al-Riyad* newspaper (from Saudi Arabia) before the Games, is written by Al-Qaniir, a Saudi woman scholar³⁹. In referring to Saudi Arabia's position toward the continuous pressure to ban the country from the Olympics because of its policy of not sending women athletes to major international events, Al-Qaniir highlighted another fundamental debate, which is the general status of women's sport in the Kingdom. She first defended the reformist spirit of Islam and its openness to positive human innovations throughout history. She criticised the selective positions which restrict women's freedom and positive action in society "in order to serve worldly interests of some men in Muslim societies". For the author, the criticism of women participation in sport is not necessarily a product of religious teachings but is a construction of traditions, customs and personal interests. The demand by some sections of Saudi society to integrate the practice of sport into girls' schools, as is the case for male schools, has been confronted by tough opposition and rejection. For Al-Qaniir, in imposing their denial of this demand the authorities have ignored Islamic and human rights for girls to practice sport in a non-gender mixed environment, which is respectful of Islamic values. This goes against human rights and anti discrimination legislation adopted by the

country, stated Al-Qaniir. It contradicts also the vote of the *Shoura* Council in 2007 to allow the establishment of five women's clubs in five regions of the country, as a form of an accepted compromise with the international sport organisations' rules for Saudi Arabia to avoid the IOC's ban from the Olympics if the practice of women in competitive sports was not permitted before the deadline of 2010. According to members of the Council this vote protected the internal control over women's participation in sport. Finally, Al-Qaniir asks why Saudi Arabia should not be more progressive in improving cultural, economic and political conditions of women and not wait, introducing changes only in reaction to external pressure for change, as in the case of the reforms of the educational system after 9/11⁴⁰, or in response to external threat to ban Saudi Arabia from international sports competitions.

Conclusion

Examining the question of the relatively increasing number of veiled women in the 2008 Olympics was an opportunity for certain media to debate internal societal problems such as the increasing demands among Muslim community in the West to accommodate sport practice to Islamic religious principals, or as for the case of Al-Qaniir, to underline the issue of girls' rights to practice sport in schools in Saudi Arabia. In the case of Chinese media, the news of Al-Ghasara's performance, and the mobilisation of Chinese Muslim communities around the Games, was presented to illustrate China's active role to make the Games inclusive to all cultures as symbolised by the adopted motto of the Games 'One World, One Dream', and in by doing so emphasising China's role as a bridge between Eastern and Western civilisations. This was appreciated by some Arab press, which regarded China as providing an alternative model for economic development as exemplified in the staging of the biggest and the most expensive sport competition i.e. the Olympic Games.

For others, discussing this topic was an opportunity to stress the paradoxes and the double standards of the Olympic movement and the IOC toward Muslim countries. Particularly, when it comes to dealing with Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. That is to permit Iran to use the Olympic Games as an opportunity to diffuse its 'propaganda', particularly in relation to the veiling of women, and not taking a tougher position toward Saudi Arabia and Qatar despite their policy of not sending women to major international sport competitions.

For some, the *hijab* in the Olympics is invasive (a threat) and runs counter to the values of women's emancipation and the long history of women's resistance (at least in the West) to male

hegemony. For others the *hijab* in the Olympics should be celebrated as a form of cultural plurality and an example of the IOC's openness toward diversity. While Al-Ghasara's veil was seen as an accepted innovation or compromise, for others her veil served commercial interests and is not necessarily representative of the genuine Islamic *hijab*. For some, wearing the *hijab* while competing in the Olympics is a personal choice, while for others it is imposed either by state ideology (e.g. Iran) or by male domination.

The other debate to highlight is that of secularism and religion in the Olympic Games. Should the IOC take a secular standpoint toward religious practices or tolerate religiosity to be expressed during the Games? How far the IOC should compromise when it comes to *hijab*? Some articles were not sure whether to consider women's *hijab* in the Olympics as a political (ideological) question or a religious (cultural) question. This explains the confusions or tension in some articles between criticising the *hijab* as a religious practice in the Olympics, and criticising the condition of women in Muslim societies, which are two different matters. Performance wise, to qualify for the Olympics is already intensely competitive considering the high level of competition in Olympic sport and other general direct and indirect factors which influence elite sport development such as costs, the culture of sport practice in society, political stability, and social and economic conditions in Muslim countries. Confusing the two matters may turn the emancipatory claim for women rights into another barrier to participation by veiled Muslim athletes in the Olympics.

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Notes

1. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*
2. Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*
3. Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*
4. Henry, *Bridging research traditions and world views*. Henry explores different set of approaches and thinking about ethics which define the debate on gender equity, and the possibility/impossibility to bridge between them for a possible cross-cultural dialogue or moral consensus to take place, hence to enable the promotion of equity (including in sport) in widely varying cultural contexts. These world views include traditional religious universalism, modernist approach or the rational application of universal ethics, postmodern-situational ethics, and ethics of postmodernism based on the principal of 'negotiated consensus'.
5. Dacey, *Muslim angered by "unjust" headscarf sport ban*
6. Wyatt, *Rules forbid hijab, says Quebec Soccer Federation*.
7. TSR info, *Natation à l'école: musulmans pas dispenses*
8. AFP, *Musulmane interdite de piscine pour port du «burkini»*,
9. In relation to sport, the veil and political Islam see Fates, *L'islamisme Algérien et le Sport: Entre Rhétorique et Action*
10. Bremer, *Hijab No Bar to Competition*
11. Aldeeb, *Limites du Sport en Droit Musulmans et Arabe, Confluences Méditerranée*, 93-102
12. Member of the Executive board (2008-); Chairperson of the Evaluation Commission for the Games of the XXX Olympiad in 2012 (2004-2005); Chairperson of the 2016 Evaluation Commission (2008-); member of the following Commissions: Women and Sport (1995-), Doping (working group, 1998), "IOC 2000" (1999), Marketing (2000-), Nominations (2000-), IOC 2000 Reform Follow-up (2002), Coordination for the Games of the XXX Olympiad in London in 2012 (2005-), International Relations (2008-)
13. Moore, *A Scream and Prayer*, 58–61.
14. Egypt's greatest swimmer. She retired from international competition at the age of 23 after deciding to put on the Hijab (Islamic veil). She was selected by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as member of the Athletes Commission (she was nominated in 2002 and elected in 2004) and as a member of the Medical Commission (2003–present). See Abdel-Tawab article in Al-Ahram Weekly online, *Rania Elwani's Love Affair with Water Continues*.
15. Hargreaves, *Heroines of Sport*. Particularly by the adepts of culturalist interpretation, a culturalism which according to J.F. Bayart maintains that a —culture is composed of a stable, closed corpus of representations, beliefs, or symbols that is supposed to have an —affinity with specific opinions, attitudes, or modes of behaviour. Bayart, *Should We Stop Using the Word =Culture?*, 33. Orientalist notions portray women in Islam as —passive, —subservient, and subject to gross inequalities though treatment of women and rights varies across different Muslim (and Western) societies. Such treatment is often legitimated by reference to Islamic tradition or requirements.
16. Wallechinsky, *Should Saudi Arabia be Banned from the Olympics?*
17. Afghanistan was suspended from the Olympic movement in 1999. Robina Muqimyar in athletics and Friba Rezihi in Judo were the first Afghani women to take part in the Olympics. Robina Muqimyar was given the flag of Afghanistan during the

opening ceremony to symbolise the return of Afghanistan to the international community. See also Robbins, Free at Last, Islamic Women Compete With Abandon

18 .Henry, I. et al, *Women, Leadership and the Olympic Movement*

19 .China Daily, *Muslim women make history at the Games*

20. Riposte laïque, «*cachez ces corps que nous ne saurions voir !*»

21. For an illustrative distinction between Hijab, Burqa, Khimar and Niqab, see Walseth and Fasting, *Islam's View on Physical Activity and Sport : Egyptian Women Interpreting Islam, 45-60.*

22. Creffier, *En foulard aux Jeux Olympiques*

23.The World Taekwondo Federation banned the hijab in 2007 event in Beijing after being asked for guidance by the Canadian federation after two Muslim girls were banned from a competition in Quebec. Aljazeera news, Taekwondo allows Muslim headscarves.

24 .Stevan, Le foulard, tenue réglementaire aux JO. It should be noted here that stories about Nawel el- Moutawek and Hassiba Boumerka being physically threatened for wearing short in the Olympics is not always well documented. Hassiba and Morceli were welcomed by thousands (men and women) in a parade at Algiers street to celebrate their victory in the Olympics.

25 .Bramham, *Olympic equality eludes women*

26 .Iran Daily "*Hijab shines in the Beijing Olympics*"

27 .Lloyd, *Running in Hijab*

28. Firth, *Muslim sprinter wins Olympic sprint dressed head to toe in hijab*

29 Nouvel Observateur, *JO-Athlétisme: une sprinteuse en hijab se qualifie pour les demi-finales du 200m* (translated from French)

30 .The Boston Globe, *Her garb grabs attention,*

31 .Beatty, *Olympics and the hijab*

32 .Shi'a Muslims believe that the return of Al-Mahdi (the hidden Imam) will occur shortly before the Final Judgement and the end of history. Imam Mahdi will return at the head of the forces of righteousness and do battle with the forces of evil in one, final, apocalyptic battle. Hooker, The hidden Imam, Washington State University Web page on Worlds Civilisation.

33 Ibid.

34 .Pen, *Queen Rania calls for more understanding*

35 .Shanshan, «*Jygur dancer ready to step out in style*»

36 .China Daily, "She did it, wearing hijab head covering"

37. El Waqt, "*I am proud of my Hijab...*" (title translated from Arabic); Arabian Business, "*an Australian designed Hadjoud...*" (title translated from Arabic by the Author)

38 .Al-Tajdid, "*The Olympics*" (title translated from Arabic)

39 .Al-Qniir, *Women sport* (title translated from Arabic)

40 .The Saudi school system was accused of being one of the causes of radicalism in the region.