

The Refugee Olympic Team at Rio 2016: rallying around which flag?

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Faye Donnelly and Natasha Saunders

As the euphoria surrounding the inclusion of the Refugee Olympic Team at 2016 Rio fizzles out it is time that we look beyond the waving of flags.



Some of the members of Team Refugee Olympic Athletes. Andy Miah/Flickr. (CC 2.0 by-nc)

The 2016 Rio Olympics captured global headlines and imaginations for a plethora of reasons. Memorable moments ranged from [green water](#) appearing in the diving pool to [feigned robberies](#) at petrol stations and Doaa Elghobashy [wearing a hijab](#) whilst competing on Egypt's women's beach volleyball team. The creation of the [Team Refugee Olympic Athletes](#) (Team ROA), by the International Olympics Committee (IOC) also took centre stage. This gesture is without precedent in the entire history of the Olympic Games.

What does the creation of the Olympic Refugee Team mean, and whom does this team actually represent?

As the euphoria surrounding the inclusion of these ten athletes from Ethiopia, South Sudan, Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo fizzles out, several questions linger. What does the creation of Team ROA mean, and whom does this team actually represent? What are the legacies of this move?

We argue that the creation of Team ROA should be celebrated as a call for more awareness of the world's refugees. Symbolic gestures such as this one, however, prompt us to think more generally about how refugees are being represented and protected. They also encourage us to think carefully about several tensions created by framing this team as a symbol of hope for all the refugees in the world.

Waving the Olympic flag for Team ROA

Since their inception the Olympic Games have been heralded as a universal stage to welcome solidarity, peace and tolerance. The IOC also has a long history of cultivating bridges between sport and peace. Thus on the surface it is

easy to explain why Thomas Bach, the IOC president, announced the participation of Team ROA in the 2016 Rio Games.

Confronted with the number of forced migrants in the world today – the UN estimates around 65 million – Bach [argued that](#) “at present none of these athletes would have the chance to participate in the Olympic Games even if qualified from the sports point of view because, with their refugee status, they are left without a home country and National Olympic Committee to represent”.

He went further, stating that “having no national team to belong to, having no flag to march behind, having no national anthem to be played, these refugee athletes will be welcomed to the Olympic Games with the Olympic flag and with the Olympic anthem”. Ten months on from the announcement, Rose Nathike Lokonyen, an 800 metre runner originally from South Sudan, led her nine teammates into the Maracana Stadium for the opening ceremony carrying the Olympic flag.

The refugee nation flag

Upon hearing of the IOC decision to represent Team ROA with the Olympic flag and anthem, two Brazilians living in New York, Artur Liporu and Caro Rebello, started [The Refugee Nation](#) – a symbolic nation dreamt for 65 million displaced people to stand for the refugees’ right to a home. Desirous to give the refugee athletes the trappings of a nation, they commissioned Yara Said, a Syrian refugee living in Amsterdam, to design a flag, and Moutaz Arian, a Syrian refugee living in Istanbul, to compose a national anthem.

The flag, a bright orange banner crossed by a single black stripe, evokes the life-jackets worn by asylum seekers attempting to cross the Mediterranean to seek safety in Europe. Explaining the thought behind her design, [Said stated](#) that the flag is “a symbol of solidarity with all these brave souls that have to wear life vests to cross the sea looking for safety in a new country, life vests I had to wear also”. This second flag was not sanctioned for use by Team ROA, but The Refugee Nation sent thousands of flags to Rio, which they hoped spectators would wave as a gesture of solidarity with all displaced people worldwide.

The presence of multiple flags is symbolic, we believe, of a number of tensions concerning the representation of refugees and questions of belonging in international politics.

Rallying around which flag?

While the athletes of Team ROA are all united by their shared legal status – ‘refugee’ – whether by accident or design the team was evenly split in such a way as to mirror two different but interconnected aspects of the global refugee problem. Five of the athletes (from Syria, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo) had fled their home countries and had sought, and received, asylum abroad (in Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and Brazil). The other five athletes, all from South Sudan, had sought refuge just over the border in Kenya and were specially selected from the Kakuma refugee camp.

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The first group arguably reflects the predominant context of the global north – the spontaneous arrival of asylum seekers – while the second mimics the situation found in many parts of the global south – protracted refugee situations and enforced encampment. The first group of athletes had, after many hardships, found new homes in new countries. The second group had spent years living in one of the largest and overcrowded refugee camps in the world with little to no prospect of making Kenya, or any other state, ‘home’.

This realisation perhaps troubles the assertion of The Refugee Nation that their flag represents ‘the refugee experience’, or a refugee ‘identity’. The life-jacket flag speaks to a certain refugee experience that resonates in the

global north, and with refugees such as Yara. Yet to what extent would such a symbol resonate with the majority of displaced persons who remain in the global south, many of whom live in situations more akin to those of the South Sudanese in Kakuma?

Likewise, the colours chosen for this flag represent a certain – but hardly all encompassing – refugee experience. Yara Said deliberately used orange and black to signify the life jackets worn by refugees crossing treacherous seas to reach safety, but her stated intention was more broad, to speak to and on behalf of all those who had lost someone.

But if we look beyond the current and western-centric refugee crisis it becomes immediately apparent that this colour choice does not represent all the diverse types of refugees in the world. Furthermore, the colours chosen might also evoke different reactions among different people. There is a real danger that refugees who have lost loved ones at sea and carry traumatic experiences with them will not link this life jacket with safety, shelter or security, but rather with danger, threats and loss.

Refugees are not a new phenomenon, so what is it about the very recent past that has prompted this show of solidarity?

This connects with a second consideration – the use of flags as a representation of identity. In a contest between nations, it perhaps makes sense that The Refugee Nation would design a ‘national’ flag to be waved alongside the national flags of others. But the need the founders felt to ‘give’ the refugees new ‘national’ symbols raises two important issues: the problem of identity being another’s to give to the refugees (and the inherent notions of power and privilege this implies), and of the supremacy of “national” identity over and above all other possible identities. Both points imply that refugees have ‘lost’ their own identities. Challenging such standpoints in an interview before competing in her first event, swimmer Yusra Mardini explained that “all of us in the water, you will forget who you are...and which country you are from. You are a swimmer, and whoever is next to you is a swimmer also” (cited in *The Atlantic*, 2016: 10 August).

For the reasons stated above, perhaps the IOC’s decision to represent Team ROA with its own ‘nationless’ flag and anthem was more appropriate after all. The interlaced motif was designed to “show the universality of Olympism and the meeting of athletes of the world during the Olympic Games” (The Olympic Museum, 2007: 3). As a symbol that simultaneously represents all peoples rather than any nation in particular, the Olympic flag appears to be a more powerful representation of solidarity that does not appropriate, simplify, or ignore multiple and differing identities.

Although the IOC attaches great importance to the ‘universality’ of its logo, there is more to the original rings design than immediately meets the eye. Standing on their own the six colours – blue, yellow, black, green and red on a white background – are not problematic for the representation of Team ROA. On closer inspection, however, these colours were selected for their appearance on all national flags around the world at that point in time. While the nation-centric nature of this colour branding is often omitted from the more familiar Olympic logo, it potentially sits very uneasily with suggestions that this flag is the best emblem for representing refugees around the world. On the contrary, acknowledging these structures of meaning reinforces the inherent difficulties of branding the IOC flag as ‘nationless’.

Conclusions

Taking stock of the competing flags use to represent Team ROA prompts several questions for further consideration. First, the fact that Team ROA only came into being last year makes us question the extent of IOC’s solidarity with those forcibly displaced throughout the world. Refugees are not a new phenomenon, after all, so what is it about the very recent past that has prompted this show of solidarity? Why was there no Team ROA at London 2012? Or at the Sochi 2014 Winter Games? Furthermore, has the solidarity expressed by IOC and the world leaders in attendance been sustained beyond the closing ceremony in any way?

Indeed, it is hard to reconcile the displays of admiration exhibited by world leaders toward Team ROA during the opening ceremonies in 5 August with events just one short month later. On 19 September the United Nations held a high level meeting in New York that, rather than ending with the announcement of global compacts on migrants and refugees as expected, resulted in a declaration that was strong on ideals but weak on concrete obligations. Former US President Barack Obama's Leaders' Summit the following day was been billed by refugee advocates and human rights groups as a failure of leadership.

These failures were acutely demonstrated on 21 September – exactly one month after the Olympics ended – when a boat carrying migrants and asylum seekers sank in the Mediterranean, [resulting in the loss of almost 200 lives](#). Taking stock of this tragedy reminds us not to lose sight of the real stakes involved when it comes to protecting refugees. It also places greater onus on the international community to continue to rally behind *all* refugees and show solidarity beyond the waving of flags.



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