

Opinion

Editorial

The Arab world at the Rio Olympics

More than 400 athletes from 20 Arab countries are participating in the Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro. The games are a showcase of the Arab world's evolving realities. The Rio Olympics also highlight the progress achieved by Arab women. Such progress cannot be assessed on the basis of the attire of the Arab women athletes, as some are inclined to believe. A number of the female competitors come from conservative Arab societies where participation in athletic activity would be unthinkable in conventional sportswear.

Arab women have made great strides since the 1984 Summer Olympics when Morocco's Nawal El Moutawakel was the first Arab woman athlete to win a gold medal, finishing first in the 400m hurdles. At Rio, Arab delegations include women athletes.

Among them, Tunisian fencer Ines Boubakri who dedicated her bronze medal to "Tunisian women and Arab women... who have their place in society".

There was also Egyptian weightlifter Sara Ahmed, a bronze medalist.

She, like other female athletes from the Arab world's conservative societies, would not have been able to compete had it not been for international sports bodies easing restrictions on dress codes in recent years.

The participation of a six-member Palestinian team also reminded the world of the plight of their countrymen and women. Participation by itself is an impressive feat considering the predicament of the Palestinian people.

The participation of an Olympic refugee team also helped build awareness of displaced people everywhere. Team member Yusra Mardini from Syria was an eloquent spokeswoman. As she said, the team did "send a message to the world".

By Day 8 of the games, three Arab countries had earned medals. There is reason of course to cheer every medal earned. All winning athletes constitute much-needed role models in an Arab region where such positive icons are sorely missing.

More Arab athletes, from all countries of the region, are participating and more Arab countries are winning in the Olympics. Egypt, Morocco and Algeria have won the most medals for Arab countries to date. In the current games, Kuwaiti and Emirati athletes have won medals showing the Arab Gulf nations are quickly catching up.

But despite the medals earned in Rio, Arab athletic performance at Olympic games remains below expectations.

In 1912, Egypt was the first Arab country to take part in the Olympics. Since then, Olympians from the entire Arab world have earned 98 medals. That is less than relatively small countries such as Romania or Greece.

Sports performance on the world scene is closely related to the *per capita* income and the population of each country. Better international sports results also depend on the place of athletic activities in schools and on the level of human development in society.

If they are ever to catch up with the level of global athletic competition, Arab countries need more adequate budgets and policies. They need to develop awareness of the benefits of fitness programmes at a time when many Arab countries are plagued by obesity-related diseases.

One final observation: The Rio games should also remind the Arab world that close to 10 million Brazilians, including the country's interim head of state, are of Arab origin. They could provide a precious bridge between the Arab world and Latin America even when the games are over.



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Putin's miscalculations in the battle for Aleppo



Khairallah Khairallah

The balance of power in the Middle East and beyond has been changed by the Syrian civil war, particularly following the internationalisation of this crisis and the increasing presence of Russia and Iran in the conflict.

With the Syrian rebels on the front foot, now is the perfect time to ask just what Russia's ongoing, and evidently failing, military intervention has achieved in the country and why Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pursued this dangerous course.

Aleppo is simply not a city that can be easily occupied and quelled, whether by the Syrian Army, Russian air strikes or Iran-backed militias such as Hezbollah, which are participating in the war against the Syrian people.

Moscow had hoped its air power would be enough to tip the scales in Aleppo but the besieged Syrian rebels in the city have endured. The destruction and civilian casualties caused by the siege have failed to demoralise the people of Aleppo and have strengthened their resolve.

Following news that the rebels' advance could be traced to outside help, particularly arms and equipment from Turkey, it is clear that Moscow underestimated the geo-strategic importance that Aleppo – less than 50km from the Turkish border – holds for Ankara.

This is a political reality, regardless of who is in power in Turkey or the balance of power in the region. If Turkey finds itself under threat from Syrian territory, and particularly Aleppo, it has no choice but to respond.

The other important factor that Putin overlooked is that, after more than five years of war, the Syrian people and particularly those remaining in the besieged city of Aleppo are more prepared than before to make sacrifices and suffer to the last man, woman or child. After all this death and destruction, they know that they cannot simply yield.

Prior to the failed coup in Turkey, relations were strained between Turkey and Russia. Ankara and Moscow now appear on the road to rapprochement following

a meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Putin in St Petersburg. It remains unclear how this will affect Syria and the battle for Aleppo, if at all.

Whatever the case, Moscow made a mistake in believing that it could prove the decisive factor in the battle for Aleppo. The thousands of armed rebels in Aleppo are prepared to fight to the death. Russia and Iran failed to understand that after all this death the people of Aleppo will never bow their heads to the Assad regime, which has carried out a series of massacres against them since the 1970s. They know that they have no choice but to hold on.

Russia will not succeed in its mission through air power alone. Iran will not succeed with its militias where the regime failed with its army and thugs. The battle for Aleppo has been raging virtually since the start of the Syrian revolution in March 2011 and the people of Aleppo have learnt from the experiences.

“Aleppo is simply not a city that can be easily occupied and quelled.”

Why did Moscow make this dangerous gamble? The answer is simple: Putin was suckered into playing a stronger role than he otherwise might have, seeking to make gains on US President Barack Obama's more hands-off approach to the region. This is a foreign policy that has seen Iraq fall under almost complete Iranian influence thanks to a resurgent Tehran following the controversial Iran nuclear deal.

Obama, set to leave office in January 2017, acknowledged that many of his grey hairs have been caused by the Syrian crisis that has spiralled out of control on his watch. As for Putin, his grey hairs might be less obvious but the Syrian conflict remains a key part of his foreign policy towards the region.

One question remains: What will the Russian president do when Obama leaves office and the next president, whether Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, takes a markedly different approach on Syria?

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