

Refugee Olympic Team helps debunk myths



Rashmee Roshan Lall

The Refugee Olympic Team is an inspired gimmick and, like any novelty item, it is likely to become less interesting the longer it hangs around. Would #Team-Refugee offer the same frisson – of shock and awe at human suffering and strength – in Tokyo 2020? Will the refugee team be considered as interesting a story at the end of Rio 2016 as it was on the Games' opening day?

Probably not. And yet, the refugee team is a simply remarkable construct. In representing the world's displaced and dispossessed, it underlines the magnitude of the refugee crisis, estimated to be running at 60 million people.

The team's composition – five of the ten members have found refuge in Kenya and two in Brazil – debunks one of the chief myths propagated in and about the Western world.

Europe, the United States and Australia are often led to believe that they are the main destination for asylum seekers. In fact, less developed countries receive more than 80% of the world's refugees. Most of the planet's poor and harried people may want the chance of a prosperous settled life in the West but the majority does not get there.

According to the UN refugee agency, as of mid-2015, Turkey hosted the most refugees (1.84 million) on its territory, Pakistan was second with 1.5 million

refugees and Lebanon third with 1.2 million.

Bureaucracies are not noted for having epiphanies but the refugee team's creation is one of them. It must have been

an inspired moment when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) came up with the plan four months ago, creating a \$2 million

training fund and shortlisting dozens of refugee athletes.

The refugees on the team, IOC President Thomas Bach said, "have no home, no team, no flag, no national anthem. We will offer them a home in the Olympic Village together with all the athletes of the world". He added that the team was "a signal to the international community that refugees are our fellow human beings and are an enrichment to society".

This would be a fine statement of humane purpose if it truly represented global unity on a fraught issue but it does not. The world is anything but united on the question of refugees. This profound disharmony goes much beyond the inflammatory rhetoric employed by populist politicians such as American presidential hopeful Donald Trump, France's Marine Le Pen and Australia's Pauline Hanson against refugees, especially those of the Muslim faith.

Sixty-five years after the UN Refugee Convention was approved, responsibility is shared patchily and petulantly, without a proper plan or purposeful worldwide strategy. Refugees – the majority of whom flee Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and South Sudan, in that order – are unable to access meaningful protection without resorting to people traffickers, asylum shopping and dangerous and illegal journeys towards safety. Destination countries, meanwhile, are unable to keep refugee resettlement numbers in line with their own security concerns.

This allows the Trumps and Hansons of the Western world to describe refugees in poisonous terms, a narrative that is picked up and disseminated elsewhere. Just days ago, Trump said Somali-Americans, mainly in Minnesota and Maine, were "a rich pool of potential recruiting targets for Islamist terror groups". Hanson, who became one of Australia's most powerful politicians with



Refugee Olympic Team member Yusra Mardini (C) attends a welcome ceremony held at the Olympic village ahead of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, on August 3rd.

her election to the Senate and that of three other members of her One Nation party, has compared Muslims to "pit bull terriers... a danger to our society".

This sort of burn-them, flog-them, hang-them flow of invective will not cease while the 1951 Refugee Convention remains a partial principle rather than a shared practice. So what is to be done?

One of the world's leading authorities on international refugee law, Michigan Law School Professor James Hathaway, recently presented a paper on how to fix the system. Citing five years of efforts by a team of lawyers, social scientists, non-governmental activists and governmental and intergovernmental officials drawn from all parts of the world, he suggested a new approach to "implementing" the convention, as opposed to simply suffering it.

This included requiring all countries to sign on and

for a revitalised UN High Commissioner for Refugees to administer refugee quotas, with the authority to allocate funds and refugees. Hathaway argued for a common international refugee status determination system. This would mean an offer of asylum wherever there is room at the time and not according to the country-of-first-arrival norm.

If, as Hathaway said, there is "no necessary connection between the place where a refugee arrives and the state in which protection for duration of risk will occur", it would snap the link between smuggling routes and asylum claims.

A complete reassessment of the Refugee Convention is an Olympian task. Would that the Refugee Olympic Team inspire it.

Rashmee Roshan Lall is a columnist for The Arab Weekly. Her blog can be found at www.rashmee.com and she is on Twitter: @rashmeerl.

The International Olympic Committee came up with the plan four months ago.

Jolani's sleight of hand in rebranding al-Nusra



Sami Moubayed

When US secretary of State James Baker invited Palestinian politicians to attend a peace conference in Madrid in 1991, he had clear instructions to bypass members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), punishing its chairman for his warm embrace of Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Baker knew that peace would never materialise in the Middle East without the PLO. He decided to meet them as Palestinian nationalists rather than members of a militant organisation.

One of them remarked: "Mr Baker, as you know every Palestinian by birth is a member of the PLO." Baker cannily replied: "Please don't say anything else. As far as I'm concerned, I'm not sitting with the PLO."

Ultimately, the PLO went to Madrid but everybody at the talks, Baker included, treated its members as part of the Jordanian delegation rather than members of the PLO.

The same analogy applies, 25 years later, to Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda branch in Syria, which on July 28th announced its separation from the terrorist organisation

and rebranded itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham – the Front for the Conquest of Syria.

The move was more organisational than ideological, signed off by al-Qaeda's Egyptian commander, Ayman al-Zawahiri, six hours before it was announced by al-Nusra.

Al-Nusra's leaders hope that the West will now talk to them or even fund and work with them, pretending that they are no longer affiliated with al-Qaeda – just as Baker pretended that the Palestinian representatives in Madrid were not members of the PLO.

The leaders of al-Nusra never hid their deep admiration for Osama bin Laden, although most of its members were too young to remember his active years in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

They were influenced by bin Laden's right-hand-man, Abu Musaab al-Suri, who instructed his followers to organise along semi-conventional military lines, with units divided into brigades, regiments and battalions with full autonomy on the battlefield.

Al-Nusra commanders were authorised to take hands-on decisions in battle without awaiting instructions from higher command. They could invade, plunder and shoot at whomever they perceived as an obstacle to the group's ultimate victory.

All targets were valid, civilians included. Lone-wolf attacks were legitimate. All Syrian soil was jihadist land. No need to wait for orders. It was the military strategy of Suri coming to life: *nizam la tanzim* – order not organisation.

It was the religious duty of every individual to strike on his own without waiting for orders. In

other words: Centralisation of thought and decentralisation of execution.

This would be the only path that would lead to the creation of an Islamic state.

Mirroring his commitment to bin Laden, al-Nusra commander Abu Mohammad al-Jolani appeared with a new outfit on July 28th – green fatigues and a long white turban, just like the one worn by the deceased al-Qaeda leader, unlike the black turban used by Jolani's former friend turned nemesis, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-styled caliph of the Islamic State (ISIS).

This was supposedly designed to replicate bin Laden's 2001 video from a secret hideout in Afghanistan in which he took responsibility for the 9/11 attacks.

Just to make the point, seated next to Jolani were two al-Qaeda members; including Ahmad Salameh Mabrouk, founder of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, al-Qaeda's branch in the Sinai peninsula.

It is clear that Jolani was pulling off a major public relations stunt, regardless of how credible it was. Nothing has changed for al-Nusra in terms of ideology; it remains as dangerous, lethal and radical as ever.

Jolani's strategy is twofold – seeking to fool the West on one hand and, on the other, attract young Syrian recruits, especially secret admirers who dared voice support for a group aligned with al-Qaeda, fearing US sanctions and Russian bombs.

His hope seems to be that the move will give him greater room

to manoeuvre and, perhaps, entitle him to Gulf arms, Turkish support and even the approval of the Americans.

Ever since Jolani pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in April 2013, Syrian supporters have been worried. Many saw promise in Jolani, a Syrian like them, unlike Baghdadi, an Iraqi. The leader of ISIS was more committed to creating an Islamic state in Iraq while Jolani wanted one in Syria. He has no ambitions in faraway territories such as Egypt, Gaza or Europe.

Many are probably relieved by the announcement, giving them reason and courage to join the new front. They need al-Nusra. In military terms, it is the only fighting force that has inflicted heavy losses on both ISIS and the Syrian Army.

Many hope the new front will merge with other less powerful players on the Syrian battlefield, such as the Turkish-backed Ahrar al-Sham and the Salafi Jaysh al-Fateh, which are based in rural parts of north-western Syria.

Fighting alone, these groups may well be exterminated by Russian air power, but if they team up with al-Nusra – regardless of its name or affiliation – then their fortunes could turn. They can either follow Jolani or face isolation and extermination on the battlefield.

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and author of *Under the Black Flag* (IB Taurus, 2015). He is a founding director of the Damascus History Foundation.

Al-Nusra's leaders hope that the West will now talk to them or even fund and work with them.