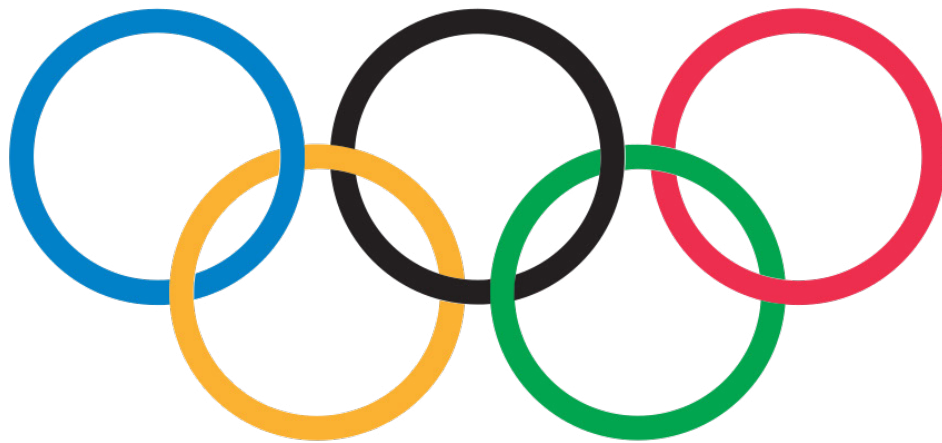


# National Migration Week **Spotlight:**

2021

**Refugee Olympic  
Team**

# TOKYO 2020



## The Refugee Olympic Team

This Friday, the Olympic games in Tokyo will commence. As the athletes march in, waving the flags of their countries, one team will be walking under the flag of the International Olympics Committee. This is the [Equipe Olympique des Réfugiés](#) (EOR), a team composed of world-class athletes whose refugee status has left them without a national team to compete under. Twenty-nine athletes from 11 countries of origin and 13 host countries will compete in 12 different events, including swimming, running, various martial arts, cycling, and more.

Among them is [Yusra Mardini](#), set to compete in the 100m butterfly this Saturday. Six years ago, however, Yusra was swimming under very different circumstances. While making the desperate journey across the Mediterranean with 20 other Syrian refugees, the engine of their flimsy boat died, leaving them stranded off the coast of Turkey. Yusra and her older sister jumped into the chilly water and began to swim, pushing the boat for hours. Thanks to their heroic efforts, the boat safely reached Greece without losing a single passenger. After [Yusra](#) and her sister arrived in Germany, she was able to resume her training. Less than a year later, at just 18 years old, she was one of 10 athletes chosen to compete in the 2016 Rio Olympics as part of the first refugee team in Olympic history. Today, not only will Yusra be swimming for the EOR in Tokyo, the 23-year-old is a bestselling author and an ambassador for UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency.

Also marching under the Olympic flag is taekwondo champion [Kimia Alizadeh Zenozi](#). In 2016, Kimia competed in Rio for her native country of Iran and won the bronze medal, making her the first female Iranian medalist

in history. At the time, the 18-year-old expressed her dream for the future: “I hope that in the next Olympic Games we [Iranian women] will obtain the gold one.” In January 2020, however, those [dreams](#) for Tokyo were put in jeopardy. Facing oppression as a woman, Kimia fled Iran and traveled to Germany with her husband. After speaking out against Iran on social media, she was denounced by the government and began receiving threats. For a moment, it looked as if Kimia’s new life as a “free woman” would come at the cost of her life as an Olympic athlete. Earlier this year, however, she was granted [refugee status](#) in Germany and earned a place on the EOR, keeping her dreams of gold alive.

The team has been championed from the beginning by Tegla Loroupe, a Kenyan runner and UN peace ambassador. After she petitioned the International Olympics Committee, they approved the creation of a Refugee Olympic Team for the first time in history. Loroupe has led the team since 2016 and is called a “mother to the motherless” by the athletes.

Ahead of the [2016 Games](#), the EOR received messages of support from around the world, including a personal letter from [Pope Francis](#). “Through you may humanity understand that peace is possible, and that with peace everything is a triumph; while with war everything is a loss,” he wrote.

Unlike national teams, the refugee team may not share a homeland, language, or culture. Even so, they represent the 26.4 million people around the globe who have been forced to flee their home country and serve as a symbol of hope and perseverance in the face of insurmountable odds.



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