

Iran and the 2012 Olympics

By [Kourosh Ziabari](#)

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For the Iranian people, the 2012 Olympic Games in London which wrapped up earlier on August 12 was thoroughly different from the previous editions of the summer Olympics. This year's games came on the heels of a set of biting sanctions by the United States and European Union against Iran's banking, insurance, transportation and oil sector which have dramatically crippled Iran's economy and severely affected the innocent civilians.

While Israel, Iran's traditional arch foe, has been intensively lobbying to convince the U.S. Congress to adopt more backbreaking economic sanctions on Iran and further isolate it over its nuclear program, the successful and unprecedented performance of Iranian athletes in London effectively appeased the country's innumerable excruciating wounds.

The Iranian delegation to the 2012 Olympics snatched 12 medals, including 4 golds, in weightlifting, wrestling, taekwondo and athletics and came 17th in the medal table among some 204 participating nations, recording Iran's best all-time performance in the Olympic Games.

For Iranians, every medal in such an important and defining event like Olympics means a hoisting of the country's flag before the eyes of millions of international viewers and most importantly, every gold medal means that the people around the world will respectfully listen to your national anthem. In the time that the Western diplomats avoid hosting their Iranian counterparts and shun them in different meetings and spare no efforts to make sure that Iran is an isolated nation, they're the athletes who bear the burden of promoting the name of their country and making their people proud and cheerful.

Zahra Kazemi Aliabad, a postgraduate student of English literature and a freelance journalist believes that the Iranian athletes performed in the 2012 Olympics brilliantly and brought glory and credit to the country: "I'm really proud that I'm an Iranian citizen. The Iranian sportsmen showed a fantastic performance. If you look at the Olympics medal table, you will find out that we stand above many prosperous and economically progressive nations such as Spain, Brazil, South Africa, Denmark, Turkey, Switzerland and Canada."

"The U.S. and Israeli politicians are going through fire and water to convince the world leaders to boycott the upcoming Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran. They already succeeded in dissuading Ban Ki Moon from attending. Their sole objective is to bring Iran to isolation. If they had the choice, they would even bar the Iranian athletes from international sports events, but Iranians' glorious success in Olympics really disappointed them," she added.

The 22-year-old blogger Mohammad Hossein Nikzad wrote a post on his weblog Aghalliyat (the minority) before the games started and called Olympics a precious opportunity for

“cultural diplomacy.”

“Olympic is a platform and a free tribune for introducing Iranian culture [to the world]. More than 10 thousand athletes from different countries take part and the whole world is paying attention to the event. The country that performs in the games better can surely promote its culture more effectively and gain international prestige and credibility,” he wrote.

“Our responsibility is to categorically support our athletes and promote and talk about their successes in the mass media... of course we can not surpass a country like China which is a sports stronghold, but we can at least outperform weaker countries which usually grab numerous medals in the Olympic Games and make their people feel honored,” he added.

Following the conclusion of the games and once the Iranian delegation returned from London, the society was tremendously filled with joy and a communal feeling of delight. The mass media gave extensive coverage to the 12 medalists and invited them for interviews on different radio, TV stations and newspapers. The vivacious Persian blogosphere was also happy with the news that Iranian caravan finished 17th among the 204 participating nations, especially given the huge economic, political pressures which the country has been withstanding for a long time.

Hamid Sourian, Iran’s 55-kg Greco-roman wrestler and five-time world champion who clutched the first gold medal in the games for Iran updated his newly-established blog from London on July 6, expressing his satisfaction with the victory which ended his disappointing Olympics medal drought.

In his blog post titled “semi-declaration,” which received 1165 comments from the visitors, Sourian wrote, “I was flooded by your invaluable kindness. Had it not been your prayers and good wishes, it would have not been possible for me to make the achievement. I should make sure that this medal would not make me arrogant so that I might forget the Almighty God and the people who always stand shoulder by shoulder with me.”

The world wrestling giant wrote that he personally moderates all the comments he receives and even though he cannot personally reply to all of them, he reads them one by one and is always “thankful to the committed people for the compassion they show to him.”

Abolghasem Bayyenat, an Iranian political commentator and Ph.D candidate of political science at Maxwell School of Syracuse University also believes that the 2012 Olympics was an auspicious event for the Iranians: “The recent Olympic games fostered national cohesion in Iran in two important ways. First, international sports events in general have the function of raising national consciousness. The broader the contexts in which individuals find themselves the broader the scope of their in-group identification would be.”

“Sub-national group identifications, such as ethnic, sectarian and partisan identities, become less salient in an international context while national identities gain increased salience. It is in this line that during the recent Olympic Games Iranians, more than any other time in recent months or years, identified themselves along national lines rather than sub-national ones. The people of Iran thought of themselves more as Iranians rather than as Azeris, Kurds, Persians, Turkmans, Baluchs or other ethnicities,” he added.

“Second, people tend to identify more with groups which provide them with higher levels of honor and relative worth, if they have a choice. Iranian athletes

performed far better in the recent Olympics games than any other neighboring country which share the same ethnicity with Iranian ethnic groups," he wrote. "Being Iranian served as a source of pride for the nationals of Iran as, in overall terms, the Iranian team outperformed all Iran's neighboring countries as well as many developed countries by a wide margin in the recent Olympic games. Thus, regardless of their political, ethnic and sectarian affiliations, Iranians felt proud to be Iranian as their national identity provided them with more honor than their sub-national identities."

All in all, the 2012 Olympics was a dramatic scene for the Iranian people to regain their sense of dignity and honor in view of the increasing pressure on their country over its nuclear program. While the country's politicians face a daunting job in resisting the mounting economic and political pressures, the Iranian athletes performed fantastically, proving that it's not too easy to take Iran off the international equations.

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