

London Olympics: Reversal of Saudi Ban on Women Athletes is a Veil for Western Imperialism

By [Finian Cunningham](#)

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As the 2012 Olympics got under way in London the grand ceremonial parade of nations can claim an historic first. For the first time in over a century of the modern Games, women athletes will be representing all 204 participating nations.

The historic landmark is down to a last-minute U-turn by one country – Saudi Arabia.

The kingdom has up to now never permitted its women to participate in the Olympics because of its draconian application of Islamic Sharia law, which forbids women to be present in public gatherings of both sexes. But the real issue is not the Saudi rulers' desire to cover up their women – it's the need for the Western powers and their Arab proxies to cover up ongoing imperialist aggression in the Middle East.

Only in the last few weeks – before the 9 July deadline – did the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee rescind its decades-long moratorium on sending female athletes to the Olympics – a ban that has been in force ever since the kingdom first began participating in the Games in 1972.

As a result, some Western mainstream media are now talking up the occasion in glowing terms as a “breakthrough for women’s rights”.

But a more pressing question not being asked is: how can a country in the 21st century even have a policy of barring women from the world’s foremost sports event?



Saudi Women Athletes

Moreover, the royal rulers of the House of Saud only relented on the female ban after sustained pressure from the Swiss-based International Olympic Committee, which reportedly threatened to exclude the entire Saudi team if the country did not comply with the Olympic Charter of racial and gender equality.

Another factor was that the other Persian Gulf Arab monarchy, Qatar, and the obscure Southeast Asian kingdom of Brunei had earlier lifted their ban on women participating in London 2012. Along with Saudi Arabia, these were the only three countries in the world that had maintained a prohibition on female athletes partaking in the Games. It is likely that the Qatari rulers realised that they needed to abandon that position owing to their ambitions to turn the emirate into a sporting hub of the Middle East and to expedite the holding of the 2022 Football World Cup.

Saudi Arabia, therefore, was facing the invidious title of being the only nation in the world to bar women from the globe's premier sporting celebration. Given the symbolism of common humanity that the four-yearly event is supposed to represent, the Western-backed kingdom would have been in the spotlight as a backward, feudal pariah.

The anachronistic position of Saudi Arabia is made all the more glaring when the timeline of women's participation in the Olympics is considered. The progressive rise in female involvement in the Games can be viewed as a correlation with the general worldwide increase in women's rights over the past century.

In the 1908 Games, the International Olympic Committee recorded that women represented a mere 1.8 per cent of all competitors. By 1948, female participation increased to 9.5 per cent; and by the last 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the ratio had risen to more than 42 per cent.

Given this rising tide of women athletes over the decades, the Saudi rulers would have been exposed as an utter discrepancy in the eyes of the world.

But this is about much more than sport and women's rights.

There are high geopolitical stakes at play. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have emerged as the pivotal Arab states promoting the Western powers' neo-imperialist agenda in the Middle East. This agenda has been unfolding over at least the past decade, but it has come into sharper focus over the last year with regard to Libya, Syria and Iran.

The agenda of regime change towards Libya, Syria and Iran has been cloaked with a cynical, disingenuous concern by Western governments for democratic reform and protection of human rights. The espousal of noble, lofty rhetoric by Washington, London, Paris and Germany has facilitated outright, criminal military interference in Libya that resulted in the overthrow and murder of Muammar Gaddafi as well as the deaths of up to 50,000 Libyans from seven months of NATO aerial bombing.

The same Western deception of concern for democracy, human rights and international law, is being replicated for the destabilisation of the Syrian government of Bashar Al Assad, and for justifying the relentless military aggression towards Iran.

In all this geopolitical manoeuvring, the monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have provided a crucial semblance of indigenous Middle Eastern support for the Western powers in their policies towards Libya, Syria and Iran - policies that would otherwise be quite rightly seen as naked imperialism.

But a fatal flaw in this Western-Arab "coalition for democracy" is the appalling and barely concealable track record of the Arab monarchies. The absolute monarchy of Saudi Arabia in particular is, according to several criteria, perhaps the most repressive regime in the world. The House of Saud, ruled by the ageing King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz ibn Saud, has zero tolerance for any political dissent. It has cracked down brutally on the pro-democracy movement in Bahrain over the past 17 months causing dozens of deaths and thousands of illegal detentions. In recent weeks, the Saudi military has intensified repression against its own popular protests for democratic reforms, which has resulted in several deaths from live fire, as well as mass arrests. Currently, there are some 30,000 political prisoners being held in the kingdom under unknown conditions.

Despite a virtual Western media blackout on the widespread Saudi violations, nevertheless the Western public is aware, even if just vaguely, of the kingdom's despotism, in particular, the suppression of women's rights.

It is compulsory for Saudi women to cover their bodies with the black abaya dress; they are forbidden from driving cars; and they must be accompanied at all times by a male guardian who is also required to give permission for travel, medical attention, opening a bank account, or if even if the woman wants to leave the house on a mundane errand. The obscurantism of the kingdom towards women's rights takes on even more sinister meaning with the omnipresence of the Mutaween – the so-called religious police – who have powers to arrest women if they are not attired to the satisfaction of the police. The Mutaween are also empowered to administer physical punishment and are known to abuse their powers for their own gratification – invariably with impunity.

Some court cases underscore the plight of Saudi women. In one case where a woman was caught driving a car in the Red Sea city of Jeddah she was sentenced to receive 10 lashes with a whip. A more disturbing case in 2006 was that of a teenage girl who was kidnapped and gang raped by seven men. She was sentenced to six months in prison with 100 lashes – because the judge ruled that the girl should not have been outside her home alone in the first place.

The contradiction of Saudi Arabia and the other absolute Gulf monarchs championing democratic reforms and human rights in other Middle Eastern countries on behalf of the Western powers is, of course, an absurdity. And because of that, Western media and political leaders have no doubt striven to keep that gross anomaly out of public view, because if it were dwelt on by the Western public then the propaganda cover for Arab-backed Western regime change in the Middle East – purportedly on the basis of promoting democracy and human rights – would be completely blown away.

At this critical juncture in the Middle East's political affairs when Washington, London, Paris and Berlin are desperately trying to force regime change in Syria, it is even more imperative that the propaganda offensive – based on spurious concerns for human rights – is shored up with credibility.

In this context, the abrupt and reluctant acquiescence by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to permit female participation in the London 2012 Olympics takes on its real significance. This is not, unfortunately, a long-overdue triumph for women's international rights. It is more a cynical and temporary sop to cover for Western imperialism and its despotic Arab conduits in the Middle East.

Another indicator of the political influence on the Saudi and Qatari team selection is that the female athletes from both countries are being waived in under the International Olympic Committee's discretionary rules. The two Saudi females and three Qataris are being allowed to participate even though those individuals did not qualify according to the normal Olympic standards governing their respective sports that applied to the other 10,500 athletes.

Furthermore, the mere admission of the Saudi and Qatari female athletes – while a tribute to the individuals concerned – does not cancel out a culture in both kingdoms where women's sports are discouraged and even banned. It is telling that the two Saudi female athletes – one in judo, the other in track and field – have resided and trained outside the country for several years. In Saudi Arabia, women's sports are banned outright. There are no public

facilities or sporting bodies for women. Even in schools, females are forbidden from partaking in athletics because it is deemed “immodest” by the authorities. There has also been a vicious backlash in the kingdom against the two women entering the London Games with some commentators on Saudi social media denouncing them as “Olympic prostitutes”.

In other words, the mere extemporary reversal of official Saudi and Qatari policy towards women in the Olympics does not herald any thing like the necessary sea change in institutional and cultural practice.

Finally, it may be noted that the two countries in the Middle East which Western governments are tacitly designating for regime change – Syria and Iran – are sending mixed gender teams, as they have done for decades. While both these countries have certain deficits in terms of women’s rights, they are nonetheless in a different league by comparison with the Arab monarchies.

Iran has eight sportswomen among its team of 53, while Syria is sending four female athletes among its total of 10. Both countries have a history of active female participation in sports. Syria’s only Olympic Gold Medal victory ever, for example, was won by the legendary Ghala Shouaa in the women’s heptathlon in the 1996 Atlanta Games. The high profile of women in Syrian and Iranian sports reflects their prominence generally in public life over many decades, including education, arts and professions.

Which is another reason why the Western-sponsored Arab monarchies had to be dragged out of the Dark Ages – at least for the occasion of the London 2012 Olympics. That contradiction would have won a Gold Medal for hypocrisy.

Finian Cunningham is Global Research’s Middle East and East Africa Correspondent

cunninghamfinian@gmail.com

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Articles by: [Finian Cunningham](#)

About the author:

Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website [Globalresearch.ca](#). He is a Master’s graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge,

England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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