

Syria Shows Its Mettle - Olympians Ghada Shouaa to Hend Zaza

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Global Research, July 30, 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Congratulations to Syrian table tennis Olympian Hend Zaza. Most press attention to Zaza’s Tokyo presence is her age. Not only has she won qualifying competitions essential for entry into the Olympic rank. At 12, she’s [the youngest performer](#) in this year’s games.

Perhaps African Americans—although enduring harsh and humiliating [Jim Crow racist-conditions across the USA](#)—when watching their champion athletes excel, experience what Syrians feel today when their achievements are globally recognized.

News of this promising and ardent Syrian, Hend Zaza —an Arab woman too, let’s not forget— invites a dialogue on related issues: first, the pride that this athlete bestows on all Syrians, also on Arab women worldwide; second, her place as successor to the overlooked [Ghada Shouaa](#), Syria’s Olympic gold medalist; third, her outstanding accomplishment in a land smitten by ongoing deprivations of war and sanctions (see below).

Beyond the joy Ms. Zaza will doubtless bring to her family and her coach is national pride for Syrians everywhere, but especially vital in the homeland. Given how little the world knows about real Syrian women and men, this girl’s place in the 2021 Olympics is a window into Syrian’s steadfast and robust character. No champion emerges in a vacuum. Like any athlete [Zaza would have had an active career at home](#) before passing a series of qualifiers internationally. This suggests that within Syria healthy competition still endures. Hend is one of countless youths somehow managing to achieve a dream—in any field.

Image on the right: Hend Zaza



Hend Zaza's athletic prowess might lead some enterprising journalist to [Ghada Shouaa](#), her worthy Olympian predecessor. Shouaa was more than just another Syrian Olympian. She was a gold medalist, achieved for her outstanding [heptathlon victory](#) at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. (When American [Jackie-Joyner-Kersey won gold](#) at an earlier Olympics, she was celebrated as an 'all-time greatest of athletes', the heptathlon being the most stringent and demanding of all sports).

Shouaa's 1996 "Olympic Gold" received fleeting mention in the U.S.; even then Syria was treated as a pariah state; its citizen's achievements were largely hidden from the public. Today too, it's not easy to learn about this champion. (Although a Wikipedia editor managed to attach to Shouaa's listing, a superfluous 2013 civil war entry gratuitously linking her to the Syrian military.)

What is especially noteworthy about Ghada Shouaa is her mettle. (Her athletic potential was spotted at an early age!) The available notes about her career review how, from 1991, within five years, she climbed from a low ranking to victories at regional and global competitions to the summit- an Olympic Gold Medalist. It's possible that Hend Zaza too is on a similar path to Olympic gold.

International competitions allow us to identify individuals, in this case, athletes, who are otherwise hidden from history.

The rise of these two women cannot be detached from the character of Syrian people. One does not have to reach into ancient Syrian history to recognize the country's accomplishments. After the nation [jettisoned from the USSR's economic domain in 1989](#), unlike many former Soviet satellites, with little foreign help—it was denied access to World Bank funds- Syria became economically self-sufficient. It opened the economy to some private enterprise. Within a decade its graduates ranked among the region's most sought-after professionals. Syria soon became food independent, and by 2005 its new Arabic language film and television industry rivaled that of Egypt (don't expect proof in internet searches). Syria's TV-series became a major export, along with agricultural produce, chemicals and textiles. These are just a few of its past assets.

Since the 2011 uprisings that led to civil war and destabilized the entire region, Syria is unrecognizable. Internal rebellion was aided by outside powers, with Islamic extremism exacerbating strife. The nation's economy and social fabric were shredded. Reports by journalists [Tim Anderson](#), [Eva Bartlett](#) and [Mark Taliano](#) provide a picture at odds with biased mainstream media coverage of Syria, but are hard to come by. American troops occupy regions of the country; Turkey controls a strategic northern strip. Added to this is a severe embargo: [starting in 1979](#), expanded in [December 2020](#), imposed and policed by Washington, it intensifies human suffering, makes rebuilding impossible and electricity scarce, lowers food production and spurs young people to flee. Sanctions constitute a well-tested, malicious war strategy to advance the American and Israeli long-term goal of destroying Syria, at any cost.

Tokyo's spotlight on athlete Hend Zaza may meanwhile offer outsiders the incentive to learn about her country's early successes, why it is demonized, and why others found its achievements and independent position intolerable.

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N Aziz whose anthropological research has focused on the peoples of the Himalayas is the author of the newly published ["Yogmaya and Durga Devi: Rebel Women of Nepal"](#), available on Amazon.

Author Aziz was a correspondent in Syria on many occasions from 1990 to 2012.

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Featured image: ATLANTA, UNITED STATES: Ghada Shouaa from Syria celebrates at the end of the 800m, the final event of the women's heptathlon in the Olympic athletics competition at the Olympic Stadium in Atlanta, Georgia, 28 July. Shouaa gave Syria its first Olympic title when she won the event with 5,893 pts. (FOR EDITORIAL USE ONLY) AFP-IOPP/Georges GOBET (Photo credit should read ROMEO GACAD/AFP via Getty Images)

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