

The Greatest Muslim Athletes in Modern History

MWL-TBI Agreement Statement

Olympics and the Power of Islam

Olympic Champions: Muslim Women Medalists



THE POWER OF SPORTS






Muslims have been competing since the dawn of the faith. Prophet Muhammad exhorted the faithful to engage in athletics and stay fit, to honor and care for the physical body that God gave us."



Contents


Volume 50 | Issue 8

1. Activities in Review	
Key Events for the Muslim World League	4
2. Letter from the Editor	7
3. Editorial Leader	
The Greatest Muslim Athletes in Modern History	8
4. Feature Essays	
MWL-TBI Agreement Statement	11
Olympics and the Power of Islam	14
Muslims Adapt to Pray at the Tokyo Olympics	17
5. Historical Essays	
The Continuing Legacy of Ibhaj Muhammad	20
Olympic Champions: Muslim Women Medalists	23
6. Cultural Essays	
Ramadan and Sports: What it's like to Fast as a Professional Athlete	27
The Future for Muslim Footballers	31





P.O. Box 537
Makkah, Saudi Arabia
Tel: 0096 66 (012)560 0919
Email: mwljournal@themwl.org


Follow Us on Social Media:

 @mwlorg_en | @mwlorg |
@mwlorg_fr | @mwlorg_ur

 /mwlorg.en | /mwlorg

 @mwlorg_en

 /themwlog

 mwlorg

Muslim World League

Recent Activities in Review



Dr. Al-Issa speaks with President Macky Sall of Senegal via telephone. The President praised the MWL for its efforts in the service of Islam and said he supported the organization in its efforts to represent Muslims globally.

At the United Nations in Geneva, the University for Peace awards Dr. Al-Issa an honorary doctorate with members of the European Parliament in attendance in recognition of his efforts to combat hatred and promote diplomacy, peace and understanding.



Dr. Al-Issa visits the Cathedral of St. Mary and St. Reparata in the southern French city of Nice to honor the victims of the terrorist attack there in October 2020. He reiterates that terrorism has no place in any religion or tolerant society.





Dr. Al-Issa is welcomed to the Swiss Federal Assembly by Andreas Aebi, President of the National Council.

Dr. Al-Issa meets with Mr. António Vitorino, the Director-General of the International Organization for Migration. They discuss ways to consolidate the partnership between the two organizations and explore avenues of cooperation on issues related to immigration.



Dr. Al-Issa meets with former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair to inaugurate a partnership between the Muslim World League and the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.



Dr. Al-Issa meets with Wolfgang Schäuble, President of the Bundestag, at the seat of Parliament in Berlin.

Dr. Al-Issa addresses the opening session of the Gulf Research Center Forum, stating that "Research centers are in need of analysis that is driven by expertise, precision and honesty, something that is lacking in many such centers around the world."



Dr. Al-Issa meets with Speaker of the Icelandic Parliament Steingrímur Jóhann Sigfússon and other members of parliament at the Althing in the city of Reykjavík. Discussion during the meeting focuses on expanding cultural ties between the East and West.





Athletics have long been a vehicle for building understanding among people, whether they are from different places, different backgrounds, different races or different faiths. We marvel at the athletic feats we see at the Olympic Games, and it is easy to forget for a moment that the purpose of the games is not just to promote excellence. From the first modern games more than 100 years ago, the larger purpose has been to create international understanding.

When athletes compete, everything is stripped away except for their sheer ability, ability that has been developed and honed through hard work, dedication and a great deal of sacrifice. Through competition, athletes learn from each other. They respect each other for their talents, and they share the experience of giving up many of the things most of us associate with a normal life in order to be the best at their sport. They all compete every day with the hopes and aspirations of a family, a community, and even a nation weighing on, and still they perform. They have a solidarity among themselves that is born of that common experience.

In this issue we raise the subject of athletics in Islam and athletics among Muslims. We don't normally associate Islam with sports, largely because we compete as individuals and members of a national team, not as members of a faith. Yet faith often intercedes in athletic competition.

The 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* told the story of two British athletes in the 1924 Olympics. Eric Liddell was a devout Scottish Christian who ran for the glory of God and passed up an almost certain medal because he refused to race on the Sabbath. The other runner, Harold Abrahams, was an English Jew who ran to overcome prejudice. More recently, the great American pitcher Sandy Koufax refused to start Game 1 of the 1965 World Series for the Los Angeles Dodgers because it fell on Yom Kippur. Worldwide, athletes can be seen praying together or alone for guidance and strength before a match. So faith is forever with us in sports.

We don't often associate Islam with athletics, but of course, Muslims have been competing since the dawn of the faith. Prophet Muhammad exhorted the faithful to engage in athletics and stay fit, to honor and care for the physical body that God gave us. Athletes from Muslim countries have won a fair share of Olympic medals over the years, but we generally have appreciated them only in terms of the flag they represented and the anthem we heard played as they stood on the medal platform and saw their national flag raised.

Today, athletics—both amateur and professional—are more international than ever. Coupled with that, the Islamic diaspora over the last half-century or more has created more Islamic citizens of traditionally non-Islamic countries than ever before. This has created challenges similar to those faced by Eric Liddell and Sandy Koufax: How can a Muslim athlete remain true to Islamic practice in a non-Islamic environment? What happens when the traditional demands or ceremony of a sport clash with Islamic practice?

The answer is found in three words: understanding, tolerance and accommodation. Athletic teams and organizers have found ways to ensure that Muslim women can compete in modest garb or to adapt schedules, training regimes and meals to the need for fasting during Ramadan. All of this has come as Muslims became more common and better known in Western athletic leagues, and accommodations that once may have seemed unthinkable emerged as making common sense.

The Muslim World League must salute the athletic world as it finds ways to create understanding, empathy and respect in its own way—league by league, community by community, and competition by competition. It appears that we are all in the same game.

- The Editors



Mo Farah

The Greatest Muslim Athletes in Modern History

Islam and the Muslim world were on full display within the walls of Olympic Stadium during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics Opening Ceremony. The athletic feats of Muslim athletes and the images of excellence continue to inspire people from Muslim countries to strive for the highest level of human achievement in sports.

In honor of this summer's Olympic Games, The Muslim World League is profiling some of the most prominent Muslim athletes, individuals who have made a mark on global culture while bringing positive change through sports.

Roqaya Al-Gassra

Al-Gassra shattered the glass ceiling as the first Muslim athlete to win an Olympic Medal in a hijab at the 2004 Olympics. She won a gold medal in the 200m sprint and a bronze in the 100m at the 2006 Asian Games in Doha. She has also won medals at the Asian Indoor and Arabian championships and was the flag bearer for Bahrain at the 2008 Olympics. Al-Gassra has already made a huge difference in her country and the region. Since her success, Bahrain has seen scores of girls taking up athletics.

Mo Salah

Football has long influenced culture and been a force for societal change and tolerance. Salah has not simply been a goal-scoring wizard, master playmaker and tireless hard worker for Liverpool, he has been an unexpected sociological meteorite in English football. Exhibiting a persona that warrants as much respect as his footballing talent does; humble, incredibly charitable and a calming presence – Mohamed Salah is a fine ambassador not just for football, but for Islam as well. His arrival in the Premier League could not have come sooner. Salah has been an unexpected uniting force, an unlikely champion of Islam in these challenging times, revolutionizing our perceptions of Islam with his graceful presence.

Ibtihaj Muhammad

Ibtihaj Muhammad is an entrepreneur, activist, speaker, and Olympic medalist in fencing. A 2016 Olympic bronze medalist, 5-time Senior World medalist and World Champion. In 2016, Ibtihaj became the first American woman to compete in the Olympics in a hijab. Muhammad also serves on the council for the U.S. Department of State's Empowering Women and Girls Through Sport Initiative, which encourages girls across the globe to reach their potential.

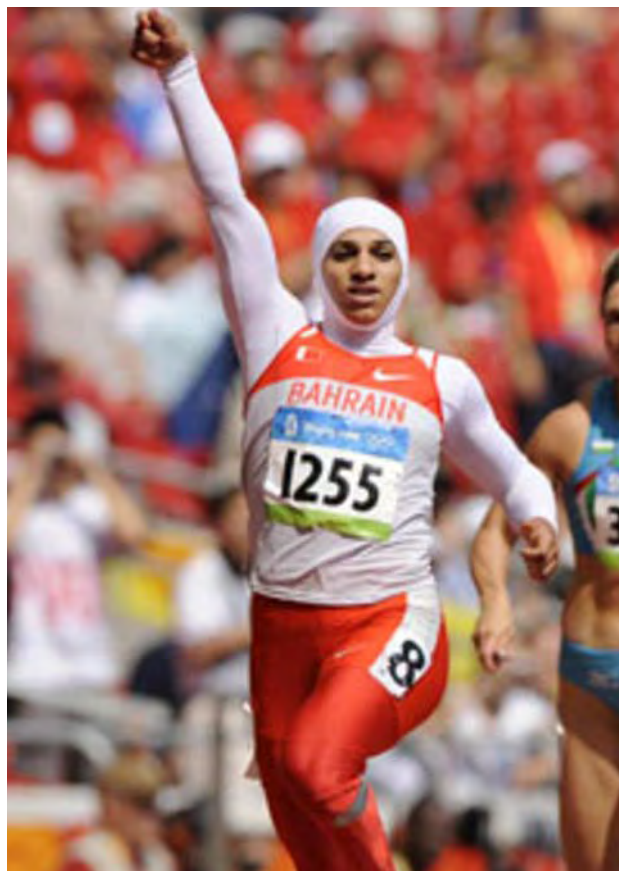
Mo Farah

Sir Mo Farah, CBE, is a multiple Olympic, World and European Champion athlete. For many, he is Britain's greatest-ever athlete, having accumulated 10 global titles including the "double double" of gold medals in the 5,000m and 10,000m runs at both the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games. He holds numerous European and British Records and has the World Bests for 2 miles indoors (8:03.40) and the One Hour Run 21,330m). Mo lives and trains in South-west London with his wife and their four chil-

dren and has famously dedicated each of his four Olympic gold medals to his four children. Mo secured his legacy as one of the greatest distance runners of all time at the 2016 Rio Olympics. By winning both the 5,000m and 10,000m gold medals, Mo became just the second athlete to complete the long distance double-double. Mo was knighted in the Queen's New Year Honors list for services to athletics.

Imran Khan

Imran Khan is regarded as one of the greatest all-around cricketers of all-time. He was a member of Pakistan's 1992 World Cup championship team and was elected to the International Cricket Council's (ICC) Hall of Fame, and was ICC Player of the Year three times. He, Khan's best qualities were his bowling and



Ruqaya Al Ghasara

leadership. One of cricket's fastest bowlers, he led the Pakistani National Team to its only World Cup championship in 1992. Imran hand-picked that team, including future stars Waqar Younis, Wasim Akram, Inzamam-ul-haq, and Mushtaq Ahmed. After his retirement, Khan started his own political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

Zinadine Zidane

Zinedine Zidane is one of the most famous French football players of all time, widely regarded as a master of the fundamentals and techniques of the game. He is known for his excellent control and dribbling skills, his magic ball touch, his focused vision, and his outstanding leadership traits. During his active soccer years, no player could surpass the way he controlled and received the ball. He scored 31 goals in his 108 international outings. Since his retirement, Zidane has actively participated in his beloved game as a manager. In his active years, he was celebrated as the France's top player. His mastery of football has earned Zidane some coveted awards, including the FIFA World Player of the Year three times and the Ballon D'Or, awarded to the top player in Europe, once.

Muhammad Ali

Muhammad Ali is easily the most prominent Muslim sports figure in recent history and one of the greatest and most famous athletes of all time. Ali burst onto the scene as Cassius Clay, the 1960 Light Heavyweight Olympic Gold Medalist. He turned professional soon afterward, becoming World Heavyweight Champion for the first time in 1964. He won the championship three times and reigned as World Heavyweight Champion for a total of 11 years. Ali's cultural significance goes far beyond his athletic career. A convert to Muslim, he changed his name and then famously declared himself a conscientious objector and refused to be inducted into the United States Army. He went on to make a transition from a brash boxing champion to a beloved figure worldwide and champion of humanitarian causes. In his last years, he brought attention to the suffering of people with Parkinson's disease. He was the titular bearer of the Olympic flag at the 2012 London Olympic Games, but he was unable to carry the flag into the stadium, and his wife had to help him stand before it because of his weakened condition due to Parkinson's. He died in 2016 at the age of 74.



Real Madrid head coach Zinedine Zidane



Tony Blair and Dr. Al-Issa

Muslim World League and Tony Blair Institute Agreement Statement

- The agreement between the Muslim World League and Tony Blair Institute for Global Change bridges a huge gap for meeting the challenges facing 1.8 billion young people in today's world.
- Together, the two organizations are launching a global educational program to train more than 100,000 young people in more than 18 countries.
- They will leverage a network of schools and education partners around the world to train thousands of teachers in dialogue skills.
- The program will build understanding and tolerance between young people and their communities, and break down cultural and religious barriers.

The Muslim World League (MWL) and Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI) are launching a new partnership to provide young people around the world with training in critical thinking and dialogue training needed to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

The initiative is designed to bridge a huge gap in skill sets among the 1.8 billion young people globally as they look to advance themselves and their communities. Challenges include traditional ones such as poverty, violence and exclusion, along with newer hurdles like access to information, intercultural dialogue, critical thinking, active listening and global communication.

“As leaders, we must provide the next generation with the tools they need to be good citizens of their societies and valued participants in the global conversations that will define our future,” said Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa, Secretary

General of the Muslim World League. “Young people need to learn how to listen and express themselves, to learn and to educate, and to operate with empathy and humanity to shape a better world.”

Over the next three years, the MWL and TBI will work together to deliver a global education program to provide these essential skills to more than 100,000 young people aged 13-17 in more than 18 countries.

In addition, the program will work through networks of schools and education partners around the world to train more than 2,400 teachers in dialogue skills and in how to transfer these capabilities to their students.

The program will contribute to building greater mutual understanding, tolerance and trust between young people and their communities, as well as breaking cultural and religious barriers.



Tony Blair and Dr. Al-Issa discussing the agreement statement.

A broader interfaith and intercultural dialogue forms a pillar of this initiative's unique approach. It addresses and builds necessary empathy and understanding among young people for those who live differently from them, their families and their communities. Young people will learn to appreciate these differences and embrace diversity.

The tremendous global crisis of the last year makes this special partnership more important poignant than ever. In countries around the world, the pandemic greatly hindered young people's access to education and limited their opportunities for developing their dialogue skills through regular and multilayered communicative experiences.

As the world rebuilds, it is vital to ensure the ability of young people to communi-



“As leaders, we must provide the next generation with the tools they need to be good citizens of their societies and valued participants in the global conversations that will define our future.”

- Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa

cate effectively so that they can build bridges of understanding and tolerance through an acceptance of difference, and combat the flood of misinformation to which all are regularly exposed.



Tony Blair and Dr. Al-Issa.



Mo Farah at the 2008 European Cross-Country Championships.

Olympics and the Power of Islam

Muslim men and women athletes develop skills and discipline through religious practice that serve them well in athletics. As they win laurels, they also break down negative stereotypes about Islam.

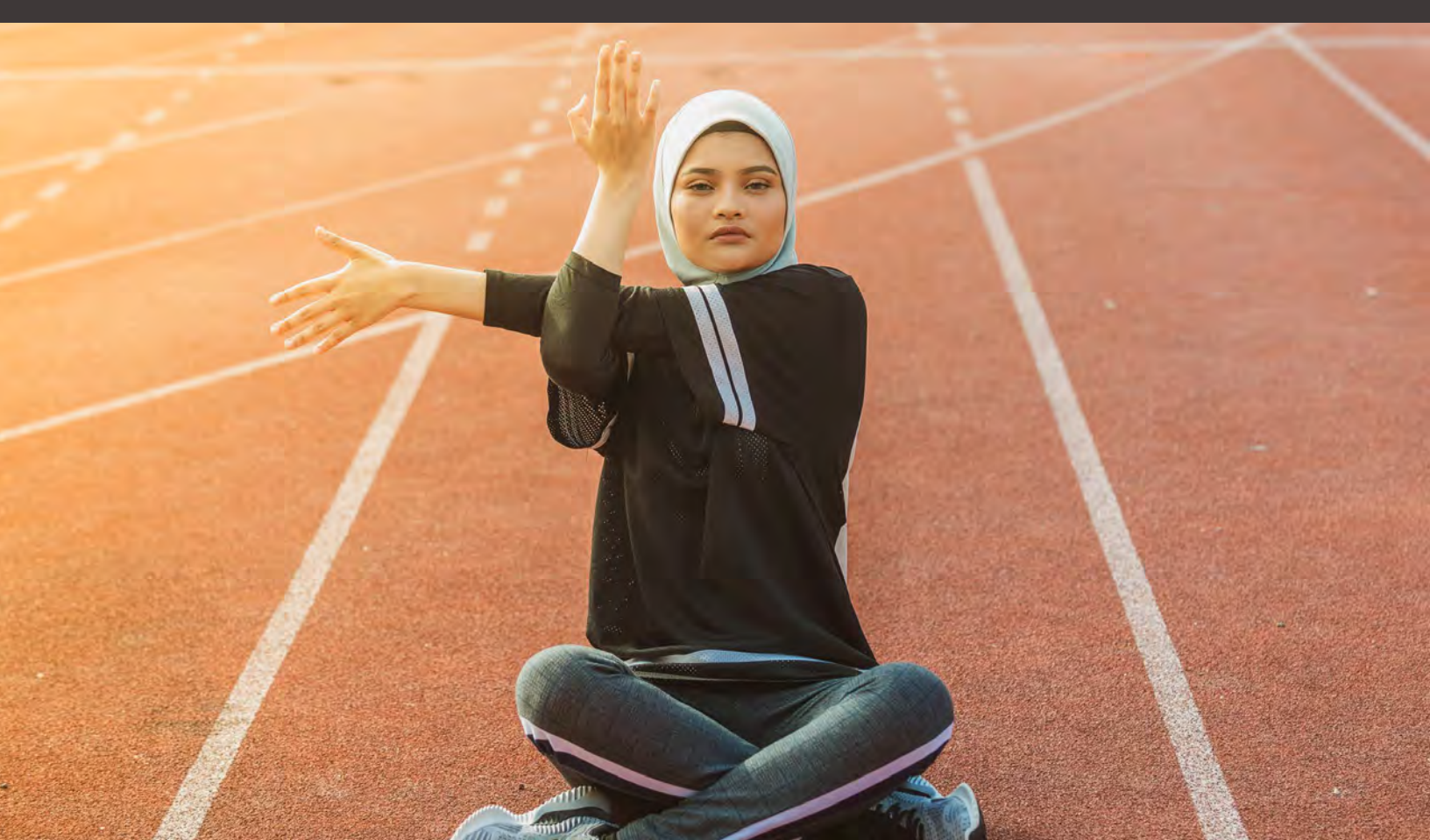
Sport and Religion

What do sport and religion have in common? The two share more parallels than one might think. Although the first pertains to the spheres of life and the other to the sacred, they both bring communities together and share similar values, including dedication, faith, commitment, and sacrifice.

According to Islam, human beings consist of body and spirit, and it is the duty of each Mus-

lim to protect the body and keep it strong and healthy. Sport provides some of the best ways to strengthen the immune system and protect the body from diseases. Therefore, physical activities have been a vital element in Islamic cultures since the beginnings of the religion.

The Olympics originated in ancient Greece, and during the times of the Alexander the Great Empire, the Greek Islands and lands of Asia Minor, which are now the territory of Turkey, began producing a large number of Olympic athletes. One of the most famous of them was Marcus Aurelius Demonstratos Damas, a champion in wrestling and boxing. These and other athletic disciplines were adopted by Islamic culture upon the religion's flourishing in Asia Minor.



Muslim woman athlete.

Following Prophet Muhammad

Wrestling and other sport disciplines were well known to Prophet Muhammad, and archery and other sports had an important role in early Islam. Athletic achievements were prestigious, and great athletes were admired and rewarded. In urging his followers to be physically fit, Prophet Muhammad said, "The strong (active) believer is better and more beloved to Allah than the weak believer, while there is good in both." Prophet Muhammad was an amateur athlete and eagerly practiced himself, engaging in swimming, running and horseback riding. He encouraged others, especially children and their parents, to embrace physical activity.

Double Effort of Muslims at Modern Olympics

Today, Muslim athletes can be counted

among the greatest Olympic champions. A strong work ethic, persistence, perfectionism, and peaceful competition are only a few features common for successful athlete and exemplary followers of Islam. Those virtues undoubtedly has helped these athletes climb the Olympic podium. However, Islamic athletes do not only win medals; they also help change negative stereotypes about their culture on a global scale.

In 2016, Time magazine published a story about Muslim Olympic athletes demonstrating a positive image of Islam. The article discussed the case of Somali-British long-distance runner Mo Farah, who fell on the track in the middle of the race. Farah not only got up and rejoined the race but claimed gold. After that, he fell on the ground one more time, but intentionally, to pray. "I normally pray before a race. I read du'aa, think about

how hard I've worked and just go for it," he said after the race.

Another historic moment occurred during the Tokyo Olympics 2020, when Mohamed Sbihi, the gold-medal-winning rower, became the first Muslim athlete to carry the British flag at the opening ceremony.

Probably no one knows more about breaking stereotypes in sports than Muslim women athletes. Contrary to popular belief, sports are allowed to women in Islam. Even Prophet Muhammad's wife, Aisha, was said to practice running and compete with her husband—and even outplay him. Nevertheless, Muslim women athletes find that they still must face their competitors while at the same time facing down harmful stereotypes.


In 2016, Ibtihaj Muhammad was the first Muslim-American woman to wear a hijab while competing for the United States in the Olympics. She won a bronze in sabre fencing to accompany her two national championships and 25 world medals. However, according to Time, she championed something else – “a cause long-ignored by non-Muslims and Muslims alike: the distinct experience of African-Ameri-

can Muslims and the distinct perils often created by intersecting racism and Islamophobia.”

She paved the way for other talented and hard-working Muslim women athletes, like the weightlifter Sara Ahmed, representing Egypt in the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. She won the bronze medal in the 69kg weight class. Having lifted a combined weight of 255kg (562lbs), she was the first Arab woman to win an Olympic medal in this discipline. Her achievement was a voice against the misconception about the hijab being an oppressive tool limiting Muslim women.

Most recently, Tarek Hamdi, won the silver medal for Saudi Arabia during the Men's Karate Kumite +75kg final at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Before Tokyo, Hamdy won first place finishes at four tournaments in the 75 kg category. He shined at the Asian Championship in Indonesia, the World Cup in Croatia, the U23 Asian Championship and the Asian Senior Championships. These exemplary accomplishments got him the title of world most promising karate athlete for the year.

With a thriving sports tradition in Islamic culture, Muslims have pursued excellence in many Olympic disciplines. The rules they follow as professional athletes, together with the values of the believers of Islam, help them strive for excellence. While they also win respect for their culture and religion on the global stage.



Today, Muslim athletes can be counted among the greatest Olympic champions. A strong work ethic, persistence, perfectionism, and peaceful competition are only a few features common for successful athlete and exemplary followers of Islam.”





The Mobile Mosque on wheels easily moves between Olympic venues.

Mobile Mosques: Muslims Adapt to the Tokyo Olympics

During the Tokyo Olympics, Muslims adapted their religious practice by visiting new, inventive mobile mosques for their daily worship. Japan does not have a large population of Muslims, and there are only a reported 105 mosques spread out throughout the country.

In fact, there are only an estimated 230,000 Muslims in all of Japan, although the population has roughly doubled in the last ten years and continues to trend upward. The Yasu Project, led by a Japanese firm, has engineered an innovative solution to welcome Muslims to the Olympic Games and foster inter-faith harmony. It supplies mosques on wheels to help make

prayer convenient for Muslims visiting Japan from around the world, people who might not otherwise be able to find a suitable place to pray. This is in line with extending the Japanese concept of hospitality, or *omotenashi*.

The new Mobile Mosque is a modified truck that opens to create a 48-square meter prayer room to allow worshippers to enter, while also featuring Arabic language signs and offering pre-prayer cleansing facilities. The prayer room can accommodate fifty people, and the mobile mosque was set up around venues throughout the Games.



The innovative Mobile Mosque expands on location to welcome the faithful.

As Muslims from around the world have descended on Japan in the spirit of international competition and engagement, they are coping with an environment foreign to them by making use of this unique solution and meeting their daily prayer schedules despite the unfamiliar surroundings.

The Muslim World League is grateful for our partnership with the Japan Halal Foundation, and finds the Japanese also made great strides to ensure the availability of halal cuisine for visiting Muslims during the Games. Noticing increased tourism from countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as countries in the Gulf, some guesthouses in Japan are now beginning to provide Qibla indications within the rooms for guest prayer in the direction of Makkah.

The robust participation of Muslim athletes in the Tokyo Olympics will strengthen the longstanding ties between the Muslim world and Japan. In the first recorded reference to Japan in the Muslim world, noted geographer Ibn Khordadbeh, in the *Book of Roads and Kingdoms*, referenced trade routes between Japan and the Muslim world. In furthering this tradition of longstanding peaceful engagement and commerce between Muslim states and nations around the world, solutions such as the mobile mosque demonstrate an intercultural understanding and a willingness to engage across continents and languages for closer relations between the Japanese and Muslims globally.

Compared to the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, where regrettably the plans to



Muslims in Japan praying inside the Mobile Mosque.

build designated prayer spaces for Muslims were cancelled, the Olympic Games this year in Tokyo appear to be accommodating visiting Muslims with a warm embrace, which will serve to spur increased tourism and connections between borders.

Muslims also celebrated a reserved Eid al-Adha thousands of miles from home in Tokyo. It's an occasion normally marked by large family feasts, but Muslims attending the Games made the most of the special occasion by sharing prayers and wishes with their loved ones back home online and adapting to the various pandemic measures in place to ensure everyone's safety.

Between historic firsts this year such as Egyptian Sarah Gamal refereeing basketball games

in the Olympics wearing a hijab, and Japan bringing its spirit of hospitality and creative engineering to welcome Muslims with inventive mosques on wheels, the Tokyo Olympics are set to strengthen bonds across borders between visitors and Japanese, and between Muslims and all People of the Book.

Continuing in this tradition, Muslims are peaceably adapting to the challenges of competing and praying in a foreign country, while integrating with international athletes, hosts, and guests. We are proud the grace shown by our brothers and sisters in balancing their principal prayer responsibilities with participation in such an important global sporting tradition in Japan, where they represented the best of their nations and faith on the international stage.



Ibtihaj Muhammad winning a fencing match at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

The Continuing Legacy of Ibtihaj Muhammad

Breaking one Olympic record is remarkable, but breaking two, and at the exact same time, is legendary. Ibtihaj Muhammad achieved this honor at the 2016 Rio Olympics, where she became the first U.S. Olympic athlete to compete wearing a hijab in addition to becoming the first Muslim-American woman to earn a medal.

Muhammad was born in 1985 in New Jersey. Her fencing training began at age 13, when

she discovered the sport that allowed her to compete athletically while keeping her body covered to honor her religion. After learning the three fencing disciplines, she settled on the sabre, considered the fastest and most forceful. Muhammad's career was launched at the Peter Westbrook Foundation, which provides training for underprivileged inner-city youth in New York City. She trained in their Elite Athletic Program under Westbrook, the founder, who is a six-time



Ibtihaj Muhammad competes in the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Olympian and the first Black fencer to win an Olympic medal, in 1984. Muhammed is also a graduate of Duke University, where she earned a dual degree in international relations and African studies with a minor in Arabic—and was a three-time All American.

From 2010 to 2017, Muhammad competed as a member of the United States National Fencing Team, earning five-time Senior World medalist titles and in 2012, being named Muslim Sportswoman of the Year. In addition to her athletic pursuits, Muhammad launched the online boutique Louella with her siblings in 2014 to provide modest but modern fashion for Muslim women. As a socially conscious business owner, Muhammad

ensures that all the pieces are made in Los Angeles and New York and that the company only partners with female manufacturers.

In 2016, USA Fencing won the bronze medal in the team sabre competition, earning Muhammad the Olympic medal she deserved. Muhammad and teammates Dagmara Wozniak, Mariel Zagunis and Monica Ak-samit defeated the Italian team 45–30 in the third-place match for the win.

Muhammad's path to victory as a Black Muslim-American woman at the Olympics wasn't easy, even after her many awards and accomplishments. In her memoir *"Proud: My Fight for an Unlikely American Dream"*, Muhammad



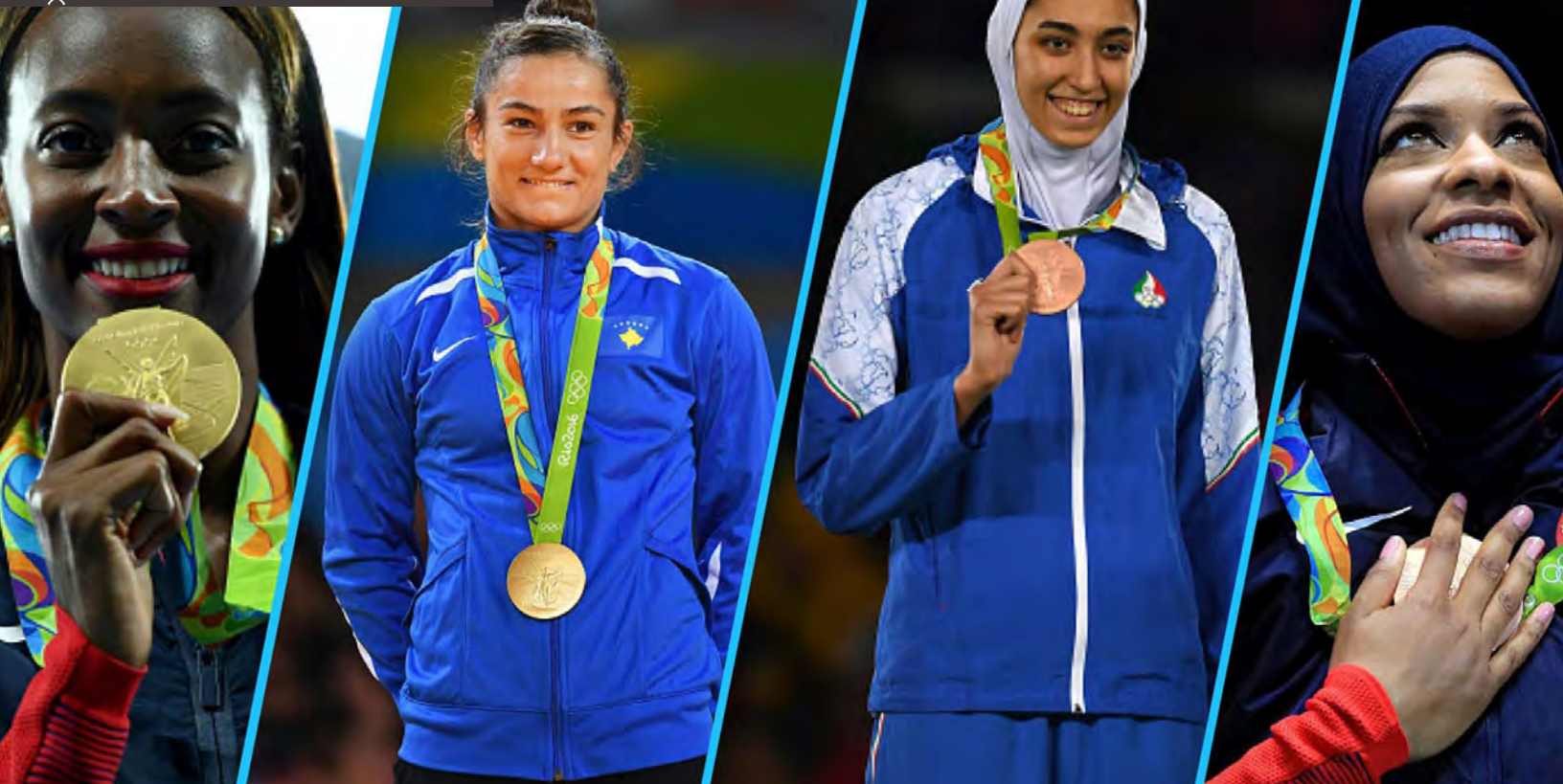
Ibtihaj Muhammad waves with her bronze medal earned in team sabre.

describes the micro-aggressions she experienced from her Team USA teammates and coach, Ed Korfanty. She also recounts receiving death threats before she participated in the games that neither the United States Fencing Association nor the United States Olympic Committee took seriously, adding to the pressure of competing in an already intimidating environment. She has been quoted saying that qualifying for the Olympics was the hardest thing she has ever done in her life.

Muhammad has also been open about her struggles with anxiety and the pressure placed on her to compete perfectly. After winning the World Championship in 2014, she began to suffer from performance anxiety and reached out for help from a sports psychologist. She has described fencing as a very individual sport that breeds a hyper-competitive environment.

After the 2016 Olympic Games, Muhammad has continued to serve as a voice for Muslim-American women around the world, from becoming the face for Nike's first-ever athletic hijab, the Nike Pro Hijab, to the creation of the first hijab-wearing Barbie by Mattel. She has written both a memoir, published in 2018, and a children's book, *The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family*, which was named a New York Times Best Seller in 2019.

Today, she is a sports ambassador serving on the U.S. Department of State's Empowering Women and Girls Through Sport Initiative. She has become a symbol for women and girls everywhere – a reminder that records, and sometimes cultural norms, are meant to be broken.



Muslim Women on the Podium at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

Olympic Champions:

Muslim Women Medalists

Often in Olympic media coverage, conversation about female Muslim athletes has centered on their clothing rather than their capabilities, in particular when it comes to the hijab as a sign of oppression. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, there were numerous achievements by Muslim women, including those who wear a hijab. The following champions defied stereotypes and served as a reminder that Muslim women are capable competitive athletes. They have become champions and heroes for their nations and all Arab women.

Dalilah Muhammad, USA, Track and Field, GOLD - Dalilah Muhammad of the United States led from start to finish to take the Olympic gold medal in the 400-meter hurdles,

becoming the first American woman to win an Olympic gold in the event. She recorded three of the five best times in the world in 2016. Muhammad hails from Queens, New York, and in an interview with news website NY1, her parents Nadirah and Askia Muhammad said their daughter's Muslim faith, discipline and talent had taken her all the way to Rio.

Majlinda Kelmendi, Kosovo, Judo, GOLD - After turning down a fortune to represent another country, perseverance and hard work paid off for Kelmendi. The 25-year-old at the time won an Olympic gold in judo in the 52-kilogram weight class at the Rio Games, making history as the first athlete from Kosovo to win an Olympic medal.

Aliya Mustafina, Russia, Gymnastics, GOLD, SILVER, BRONZE - The 21-year-old won three medals at the Rio Games: A gold in women's uneven bars, silver in team all-around and bronze in the individual all-around event. According to BuzzFeed, Mustafina is of Muslim descent through her father, who also won an Olympic medal in Greco-Roman wrestling in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal.

Mariya Stadnik, Azerbaijan, Wrestling, SILVER – At 28, Stadnik won a silver medal in the 48-kilogram weight class for women's freestyle wrestling in Rio.

Zhazira Zhapparkul, Kazakhstan, Weightlifting, SILVER - In the women's 69kg final event, 22-year old Zhazira picked up a silver medal. After she won, her father said, "We are ecstatic that she won! She is not only our daughter now, but the daughter of the entire nation."

Sri Wahyuni Agustiani, Indonesia, Weightlifting, SILVER - Indonesia's Sri Wahyuni Agustiani, 22, competing in the women's 48kg weightlifting competition, won a silver medal for her nation.

Ibtihaj Muhammad, USA, Fencing, BRONZE - Ibtihaj Muhammad, at 30, became a



Sara Ahmed.



At the 2016 Rio Olympics, there were numerous achievements by Muslim women, including those who wear a hijab.”

bronze-medalist sabre fencer and the first American woman to compete in a hijab at the Olympic Games. After winning, she told CNN: “What I love about my experience here as a minority member of Team USA is that I’m able to encourage other youth to pursue their dreams, to not let other people dictate their journey for them.”

Sara Ahmed, Egypt, Weightlifting, BRONZE

- Egyptian weightlifter Sara Ahmed said she had blazed a trail for women athletes after becoming the first female from her country to stand on the Olympic podium with weightlifting bronze in her 69-kilogram weight class at Rio. Ahmed is the first Arab woman to win an Olympic weightlifting medal.

Kimia Alizadeh Zenooin, Iran, Taekwondo, BRONZE

- 18-year-old Kimia Alizadeh became the first Iranian woman to win an Olympic medal when she placed with a bronze medal in the 57-kilogram weight class. “I am so happy for Iranian girls because it is the first medal and I hope at the next Olympics we will get a gold,” she said.

Hedaya Wahba, Egypt, Taekwondo, BRONZE

- The 23-year-old Egyptian won a bronze medal in taekwondo’s 57-kilogram weight class, tying with Alizadeh. Wahba won Egypt’s third medal of the Games, only the second-ever won by an Egyptian woman. By the final day of the Olympics, more Egyptian women than men had won medals in Rio.

Patimat Abakarova, Azerbaijan, Taekwondo, BRONZE

- Abakarova won the bronze medal in the 49-kilogram weight class in taekwondo.

Ines Boubakri, Tunisia, Fencing, BRONZE

- Boubakri became the first woman of an African nation to win an Olympic medal in women’s sabre fencing. She dedicated her bronze medal to all Arab women. After winning, the 27-year-old said, “This medal, it’s historic for Tunisia. It’s incredible. I hope that this will be a message for all Tunisians, especially our youth, all Tunisian women, the Arab woman. A message which says that you must believe that women exist and they have their place in society.”

Marwa Amri, Tunisia, Wrestling, BRONZE

- Marwa Amri, 27, became the first Tunisian woman to win an Olympic medal in wrestling when she won the bronze medal for the 58-kilogram weight class.

Nur Tatar, Turkey, Taekwondo, BRONZE

- Nur Tatar had already won a silver medal in the 2012 London Olympic Games for 57-67 kilogram weight class in taekwondo. The 24-year-old won an Olympic medal again in Rio when she earned bronze in the 67-kilogram weight division.



The Universal Language:

Sports in Islam

Whether it's the Olympics in Ancient Greece or professional football in Europe, sports always inhabit an exalted space in the culture at large. This is to be expected, of course, as the joys and importance of sports and athletics in general are universal.

Islamic culture is no different. Prophet Muhammad exhorted Muslims to practice sports in several hadiths. For example, as narrated by Muslim and Bukhari, Prophet Muhammad said, "Teach your children swimming and archery and tell them to jump on horses." He did so for several reasons.

First there was the practical consideration centered on the safety of the Muslim people. By ensuring that they practiced these sports, the Muslim people would be more ready when the time came to defend themselves from those

who would do them harm. Additionally, Prophet Muhammad placed great emphasis on the health benefits that sports provide. This included both the physical benefits and benefits to a person's mental wellbeing.

This is emphasized by Prophet in a hadith in which he stated, as narrated by Bukhari, "Your body has a right upon you, your eyes have a right upon you." Beyond the health benefits associated with sports, there was also a recognition of the leisurely aspect of practicing sports, Prophet Muhammad practiced running with his wife Asiah.

So, whether it's for practical reasons like maintaining good health or just plain having fun, sports have a prominent place in lives of Muslims and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.



A group of men playing cricket outside of the local mosque.



Enes Kanter, who fasted all throughout the 2019 playoffs, grabs a rebound versus the Golden State Warriors in the 2019 Western Conference Finals.

Ramadan and Sports: When Elite Athletes Fast

Ramadan is a holiday practiced by Muslims worldwide that takes place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. According to Muslim belief, the Ramadan month is when God revealed the Quran, and in observance of that, the Muslims practice fasting. By fasting, they abstain from food, drink, smoking, and intimate relations from sunrise until sundown. At sunset, family and friends gather to break their fasts.

There are exceptions for those who are sick, elderly, pregnant, or otherwise in physical difficulty, but one group of people who aren't exempt from this are elite athletes. Observing Ramadan can be very tricky for professional athletes, as they constantly need food, water and other nutrients to replenish their bodies. While it may seem difficult for athletes to do so, there are many elite athletes who are able to perform at a high level in their respective sports while also observing the Ramadan fast.



Hakeem Olajuwon (right) blocks a shot attempt by Reggie Lewis. Olajuwon was a big inspiration for other athletes to practice fasting for Ramadan.

One athlete who has been outspoken about his fasting during Ramadan while performing is basketball legend Hakeem Olajuwon. Olajuwon played for the Houston Rockets and Toronto Raptors, and would fast on game days if Ramadan fell during the season.

In an interview with Marc J Spears of *The Undeclared*, Olajuwon said, "As for fasting, it is a spiritual mindset that gives you the stamina required to play. Through Allah's mercy, I always felt stronger and more energetic during Ramadan." Fasting during game days wasn't something Olajuwon always did. Before the 1993 NBA season, he said to reporters, "I cannot do it on game days. So what I have to do is make up for the days I miss after the season."

Eventually, however, he found that fasting on game days actually helped him. With less food in his body, he said, he would experience less back pain.

He also mentioned that as a result of fasting, he would avoid ordering room service before games on the road, and so he felt lighter and more energetic after a small snack to break the fast before tipoff for night games. That Olajuwon felt better was evident in his performance as well.

One game that stands out was on February 2, 1995, against the Utah Jazz. The Jazz were a great team as well, and this game was the day after Olajuwon's first game-day fast. He scored

41 points and led the Rockets to a win. The way Olajuwon fasted on game day and held to the Ramadan observances was inspiring to other athletes as well. One NBA player who was inspired by Olajuwon was Enes Kanter, who plays for the Portland Trail Blazers.

Enes Kanter's story about fasting during the 2019 NBA playoffs quickly made waves throughout the NBA media and was highly commended. Ramadan fell between May 5 and June 3, 2019, which was right in the middle of the NBA playoffs. The Trail Blazers that year made a deep run in the playoffs, and Kanter was a key player on that team. In an opinion article he wrote for *The Washington Post*, he discussed some of the challenges of fasting during the playoffs, including exhausting training sessions and physical therapy sessions for his shoulder. For Kanter, it was easier for him because he had teammates who were also observing Ramadan.

Teammates Rondae Hollis-Jefferson and Jusuf Nurkic were also observing Ramadan and fasting along with Enes. Having teammates who were also fasting was a great help for Enes. "I think just having players like (Nurkic), having players like Rondae, it's like one of your buddies fasting with you," he said, "And I feel like it makes it easier because obviously they know your religion, they know your culture." In order to help him navigate the fast, Kanter stressed the importance of staying hydrated and getting proper rest.

Olajuwon and Kanter are two of many Muslim athletes who practiced fasting while performing their sport. Husain Abdullah is a former safety for the Kansas City Chiefs and Minnesota Vikings who also fasted during the season. He said in an interview with BuzzFeed News, "While I was playing in the NFL, I had to adjust

my diet, workouts, and sleep schedule. It took a lot of preparation, but Allah guided me through."

Tarik Elrich is a soccer player in Australia who plays for Adelaide football club. He has been fasting and playing soccer since he was in grade school. To navigate his fast, he gets up early so he can hydrate and eat plenty of dates. Hajra Khan is the captain of Pakistan women's team and the first Pakistani female player to play professional soccer abroad. While match days are difficult, she developed "personal coping strategies over time to avoid letting physical exhaustion become detrimental to her game."



As for fasting, it is a spiritual mindset that gives you the stamina required to play. Through Allah's mercy, I always felt stronger and more energetic during Ramadan "

- Hakeem Olajuwon

Overall, these athletes, along with countless others, were able to perform at a high level in their sport while also making the same commitment to fasting during Ramadan. It seems difficult at first, but these athletes were able to get used to it quickly and showed that Ramadan is more than just fasting. It is a way to get in touch with your spiritual side.

Treatment of Muslim Athletes:

Good, Bad, and everything in between



Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first American to compete with a Hijab, celebrates her Bronze Medal at the 2016 Olympics in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil.

The experiences of Muslim athletes are unique, to say the least. In the past, Muslim athletes were often targets of negative stereotypes and discrimination when performing their sport. We have seen at all levels, from high school to college, professional and international. One athlete who suffered from negative stereotyping was Bilqis Abdul-Qadir, a female basketball player for Indiana State University. She was a great player who broke many scoring records but was prohibited from wearing a hijab, ostensibly out of fear of injury to other players. That same reason was given to many other athletes in prohibiting the wearing of a hijab while competing. This often put these athletes in the difficult position of choosing between their sport and their faith.

Change, however, has come and is growing. Leagues in many different sports, at all levels, are becoming more tolerant of athletes wearing a hijab during competition and more willing to accommodate Muslim practices generally.

In 2017, the International Basketball Federation reversed a ban on hijabs and other head coverings. In addition, the practice has led to a sense of normalization. As more Muslim women athletes compete in hijabs, the hijab has become more accepted. What once seemed out of place to non-Muslim spectators and athletes is now barely noticed, and more and more non-Muslim athletes are tolerant and even supportive of their fellow athletes wearing the hijab. Evidence of this was clear in a women's soccer game in 2019, when an athlete in a hijab was surrounded by the opposing team so she could adjust her hijab on the field.



Paul Pogba, recently converted Muslim, is seen here completing the Hajj. He has credited the Islamic faith for making him a better person and player.

The Future for Muslim Footballers

The culture surrounding European football, and more specifically British football, has historically been one of religious incomprehension. For many Western fans and top-tier teams, religion plays no real role in football, but this attitude presents obstacles for Muslim athletes, including the need to play through Ramadan fasts, avoid the alcoholic culture surrounding the sport, and finding areas to pray properly.

Islam is the second-largest and fastest-growing religion in the UK, with 250 players in the top four leagues of British football, some of whom are among the best in the Premier League, so

religious accommodations have been in order for Muslim players. Stars like Paul Pogba, Mohamed Salah, N’Golo Kante and Sadio Mane spend their careers in the spotlight on the top teams in the world, yet still run into difficulties due to their faith. This is exactly what CEO of Nujum Sports Ebadur Rahman is trying to address with his company’s July 2021 “Charter for Muslim Athletes.”

Nujum Sports has been supporting British Muslim athletes since its inception in 2020. Once Rahman began getting calls from clubs that were trying to support their own Muslim athletes more effectively, he realized that these



Mohamed Salah is pictured here celebrating on the pitch. Salah is one of the premier Muslim athletes in the world.

clubs had a difficult time finding places to seek guidance. Nujum Sports started by educating clubs on ways to properly accommodate the Muslim faith. They have also individually supported Muslim footballers by sending over 200 Ramadan gift baskets, including ZamZam water and halal food, to Muslim players across the UK during their first year.

The July 2021 Charter is the next step in Nujum's overarching goal "to promote a culture of educational excellence for the Muslim athletes, from within a caring and secure Islamic environment enriched with the values of discipline, mutual care and respect which extends beyond and in to the wider community." Rahman points to incidents such as Paul Pogba's asking to have a beer bottle removed from his press conference table as prime examples of the need for deeper education in the sport.

The charter proposes a 10-point process of religious inclusion for football's Muslim athletes to every club that signs on. This includes the non-consumption of alcohol in team-sponsored settings, the availability of prayer areas at both the stadium as well as the training facilities for players, the provision of halal food, permitting the players to visit mosques on Fridays when not in competition, and allowing the athletes to fast during the holy month of Ramadan. The charter also calls for prayer spaces, halal food, and alcohol-free zones in the stadiums and other public football areas.

So far, the charter has received nothing but support, a trajectory Nujum hopes to maintain as it speaks with representatives of more athletic programs. Currently, five Premier League teams and 15 second-division English Championship League teams have signed up for Nujum's supportive plan for Muslim athletes. The charter has even reached Swedish Football's sixth division and is being proposed to the England and Wales Cricket Board, where they expect to receive a warm welcome. As each

week passes, more and more teams pledge their support for the charter.

The Muslim Athletes Charter has already found tangible success with steps being put in place for the winners of the FA Cup and League Cup (Carabao Cup) to be presented with non-alcoholic champagne following the final in accordance with Islamic principles. Additionally, Muslim players are recognizing the support coming from the charter as their clubs take bigger steps to accommodate the practices of their faith. West Ham midfielder Hawa Cissoko

had felt loved by her club before but now feels stronger and more empowered. "Now I have a community that supports me. I don't feel alone," she said.

It is not enough for clubs to care about their Muslim athletes. They need to empower them and help bring about widespread religious understanding. Sports are a powerful tool for bringing people together who may not see eye to eye off the field, but share a love for the game and depend on each other on the field. Nujum's charter is an early step on this long path.

Hijab Start-up for Sports

Finding the proper modest sportswear has been a huge obstacle for Muslim women competing in sports. Many young Muslim women have been dissuaded from trying a sport due to the lack of culturally appropriate clothing options. One group that is trying to empower women around the globe to compete in more sports is ASIYA. This start-up brand took flight out of the University of Minnesota, where Somali-American Fatimah Hussein and her friend saw the lack of breathable modest sportswear available for Muslim athletes and decided to take action. ASIYA offers a variety of modest products for every sport imaginable. From modest basketball jerseys to swim hijabs, ASIYA gives Muslim women the tools to participate effectively and faithfully in any sport.

Hussein also saw that female Muslim athletes often lack financial support from a young age. In response, ASIYA offers shoppers the ability to sponsor a young Muslim girl and help her get started on her athletic journey.

Sports are for everyone, and ASIYA is making it their goal to give everyone a chance to play. The company's motto is, "By Muslim Females

for Muslim Females, everywhere." With continued innovation and a growing number of female Muslim entrepreneurs, the gender obstacles facing Muslim women are becoming less challenging to overcome.



Asiya is driving a new generation of female Muslim athletes.

THE
**MUSLIM
WORLD
LEAGUE**
JOURNAL