

When Sport Conquers Iranian Politics

In 2016, Kimia Alizadeh won an Olympic medal, the first in history for an Iranian woman.

On Saturday she announced she is defecting to the West.

Alizadeh publicized her decision in an Instagram post, [reports NPR](#). While the post makes no mention of where she has gone, the Iranian Students News Agency reports the Netherlands is her new refuge.

Iran's loss is an unfortunate one. Alizadeh's history-making Olympic win in Taekwondo comes in addition to her successful record in other major international tournaments.

But Iran's loss of Alizadeh also stings. Her rebuke of their oppressive regime is stark and pointed: "They took me wherever they wanted. I wore whatever they said," NPR's translation of Alizadeh's post says. "Every sentence they ordered me to say, I repeated."

Competing ideologies on the world stage have seen a steady stream of individuals making their break from various countries – Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Cuba to name a few. Iran is simply another country on the list and Alizadeh the latest in a trio of prominent Iranian defections, made over objections to odious politics.

Saeid Mollaei, the 2018 world champion in Judo's 81-kilogram weight class, was ordered by Iranian authorities to forfeit his semi-final match in the 2019 world championships. This was to prevent him from potentially being matched against Sagi Muki, an Israeli athlete who won the championship that year. Iran was [banned indefinitely](#) from future Judo competitions as a result.

He was granted Mongolian citizenship and will compete under their flag from now on.

Sixteen-year-old Alireza Firouzja made a similarly brave move last year when Iran tried to stop its chess players from competing against Israelis during the World Rapid & Blitz Chess Championship. Firouzja, who now lives in France with his father, decided to [abandon representing Iran](#). Instead, the 27th ranked [player in the world](#) competed under FIDE's (chess' world governing organization) flag. This cost Iran Firouzja's silver medal in the Rapid portion of the championship.

Iranian Chess Federation President Mehrdad Pahlavanzadeh has [speculated](#) Firouzja may compete for France or the United States in the future.

These Iranian athletes, and many more of their countrymen, are breaking with their government. With the digital age allowing the quick spread of information and organization, it will be very interesting to watch how an informed public creating unrest affects the tyranny that has haunted Iran for more than 40 years.

Who knows? Maybe someday we will look back on the actions of these three athletes, and say they helped lead the way in standing against tyranny.

—

[Image Credits (left to right): Wikimedia Commons-Tasnim News Agency (Mohammad Hassanzadeh), [CC BY 4.0](#). Wikimedia Commons-Fars News Agency (Amir Hosseini), [CC BY 4.0](#). Wikimedia Commons-Leonid Fleischman, [CC BY 4.0](#).]