

After Surviving Aegean Sea, Syrian Swimmer Hopes For Spot In Olympics

Last summer, Yusra Mardini was swimming through the Aegean ocean in a last-ditch attempt to survive a perilous sea crossing from Turkey to Greece.

This summer, she hopes to swim in the Olympics.

Mardini is one of 43 refugees who are vying for the opportunity to compete at Rio as a part of the first-ever "Refugee Olympic Athletes" team.

In a video released by the International Olympic Committee, the 18-year-old Syrian refugee says it was difficult maintaining her athletic training during Syria's war. Trainings were canceled — or held at pools that were then struck by explosives. She describes looking up at the roof over a pool and seeing the sky through holes blown by bombs.

Mardini fled her home in Damascus with her sister Sarah. The Associated Press describes their journey:

"The sisters left Damascus in early August, joining a wave of Syrian refugees who lost hope of the conflict ending soon. They made their way to Lebanon and then Turkey, where they paid smugglers to take them to Greece.

"Their first attempt was thwarted when Turkish coastguards drove their boat back so they tried again, boarding a small inflatable dinghy at dusk. There were 20 people crowded onto the boat, all but three of whom couldn't swim. Within half an hour, the boat was taking on water.

"All the passengers' bags were thrown overboard in an effort to stay afloat as wind churned up the Aegean Sea. But it wasn't enough. As a last resort, Yusra, Sarah and another strong swimmer jumped into the water to give the boat more buoyancy."

They spent 3 1/2 hours in the water before reaching Lesbos. It was awful, Yusra Mardini says, and left her with a hatred for the open sea.

But it didn't destroy her love of swimming.

Mardini and her sister traveled through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Austria before reaching Germany. There, the two of them were connected with a local swimming club.

Mardini has been training for the past five months, hoping to qualify for the Olympics.

In the video released by the IOC, Mardini says she didn't want to sit around and cry.

"It's tough. It was really hard, for everyone, and I don't blame anyone if they cried. But sometimes you just have to move on," she says.

She's proud to be a refugee, she says: "My sister, when she wants to encourage me, says, 'Show them the refugee, what she will do.' "

But she's more focused on being an athlete.

"In the water," she says, "there is no difference if you are a refugee or a Syrian or German."

All told, 43 athletes are aiming for a spot on the refugee team. The IOC has identified Mardini and two others: Raheleh Asemani, an Iranian taekwondo fighter living in Belgium, and Popole Misenga, a judo competitor from Congo training in Brazil. You can read about all three in [The Guardian](#).