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## Muslim American weightlifter 'presses' on in fight to compete

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American Muslim Kulsoom Abdullah is quite possibly the only woman in the world to compete in weightlifting tournaments while wearing the hijab.

By ANGELA SIMAAN AND RICHARD BURCHFIELD

Al Arabiya Washington

She is 35 years old. She has a Ph.D. in electrical computer engineering. She has a black belt in taekwondo. And she can “deadlift” 110 kilos and “snatch” just over 47.

American Muslim Kulsoom Abdullah is quite possibly the only woman in the world to compete in weightlifting tournaments while wearing the hijab – and now she refuses to be strong-armed by regulations prohibiting her from participating because of her loose clothing.

Ms. Abdullah was told she could not compete in the American Open last year because her long sleeves and pants prevented the judges from ensuring her elbows and knees were fully extended, which judges said could be unsafe or give her an edge over others wearing a regulation singlet, the short, skintight traditional uniform.

“When I qualified for the American Open, my coaches told me everyone wears a singlet, but we could ask if I could wear something else to accommodate [the hijab]. That’s when I encountered my first ‘no.’ I was told I wouldn’t even be allowed to walk out on the platform to lift if I didn’t wear a singlet,” Ms. Abdullah told Al Arabiya on Monday.

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So, backed by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, she appealed to the International Weightlifters Federation, putting together a 44-page packet illustrating an alternate dress code that allows her to compete fairly without compromising her faith.

The US Olympic Committee says it will present the case during the Federation's annual meeting, which began on Sunday in Malaysia.

Ms. Abdullah's disqualification is the latest in a growing number of disputes over female Muslim athletes' attire and sports regulations. Earlier this month, the Iranian women's soccer team was barred from playing in the World Cup when FIFA officials ruled their headscarves posed a threat of strangulation. In 2007, a designer in Canada created the now ubiquitous "Burqini" to give Muslim women a modest alternative for water sports and leisure.

The Women's Sports Foundation, a nonprofit group that advocates for female athletes, has kept tabs on the controversies surrounding the hijab. Nancy Hogshead-Maker, senior director of advocacy with WSF, says she is hopeful that the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the highest governing body for sports, will resolve the weightlifting dispute and future disputes in favor of inclusion.

"The IOC talks a lot about how sports bring people together. There are all kinds of interfaith efforts, and in heavy conflict areas, they bring in sports programming as a way of reconciliation, for people to see their common bonds," said Ms. Hogshead-Maker. "I'm very optimistic this will be resolved favorably. I think reasonable minds can look at core safety standards to guide their decision making."

Religion and sports have made uneasy compromises in the past. Last year Minnesota Vikings defensive back Husain Abdullah caused a stir by fasting for Ramadan during intense pre-season training despite doctors' warnings. Famous American baseball player Sandy Koufax refused to pitch in the first game of the 1965 World Series because it coincided with Jewish holiday Yom Kippur. In 1995, Jewish high school basketball players in the US resorted to using Scotch tape on their yarmulkes after being asked to remove them because the bobby pins typically used to keep them secured could harm others during play.

Ms. Abdullah expects to have a decision from the IWF in the next day or two. In the meantime, she continues to work out nearly every day at her home gym in Atlanta, Georgia, prompted on by coaches and fellow lifters.

"I'm hoping to encourage, not discourage," said Ms. Abdullah. "Other weightlifters don't care how I dress. They've been generally supportive – they mostly wonder if I'm hot, but I tell them I'd be hot anyway because it's summer and we don't have air condition in the gym."

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