

PAIRED TEXTS
stories that share a
topic or theme



**One teen's
incredible journey
from war-torn
Syria to the
Olympic Games**

BY KRISTIN LEWIS

Swimming for Her Life

Yusra Mardini, 18, was neck and neck with four of the world's best swimmers. As she powered through the water, the crowd cheered wildly. Suddenly, she pulled ahead. It was the last leg of the race, and victory seemed near.

This was the dramatic scene playing out last August at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. For athletes, competing in the Olympics—the most prestigious sporting event in the world—is the **culmination** of years of hard work and sacrifice.

For Yusra, competing in the Olympics was even more than that. Yusra is a **refugee**, and she had overcome extraordinary hardships to be at the Games. Only a year earlier, while her competitors were spending hours and hours training every day, Yusra was not training at all.

She was fleeing for her life.

A War Zone

Yusra grew up in Damascus, Syria. From a young age, she and her older sister Sarah showed incredible talent in the pool. Both sisters dreamed of swimming in the Olympics one day. Their futures seemed bright.

Then, when Yusra was 13, civil war broke out. The conflict, which continues to this day, has created one of the worst **humanitarian** crises in recent history. Hundreds of thousands have died. Entire neighborhoods have been bombed

to rubble. In some parts of Syria, food and medicine have become dangerously scarce.

Yusra and Sarah's home was destroyed in 2012. So was the swimming facility where they trained. Their neighborhood became a war zone. And the sisters' dreams for the future—like the dreams of so many Syrians—vanished.

That is, until the summer of 2015, when Yusra and Sarah decided to flee.

"Maybe I'm Going to Die"

The decision to leave one's home is never an easy one, but for many Syrians, there wasn't really a choice: Staying meant risking death.

To date, nearly 11 million Syrians have fled the violence. Some have found refuge in other parts of Syria. Many have escaped to neighboring countries, including Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Others have gone to Europe.

The life of a refugee can be difficult. They may have to deal with language barriers and the challenges

of finding work and housing in a new country. They may face **discrimination** from locals who see them as a drain on resources and on the government's money. And all the while, they must cope with the **magnitude** of what they have lost.

Yet Yusra and Sarah knew they had to leave Syria if they were going to have any future at all. Their plan was to go to Germany, one of the few countries that have opened their doors to Syrian refugees.

The sisters knew the journey would be extremely dangerous, but that did not **deter** them. "Maybe I'm going to die on the way," Yusra said, "but I'm almost dead in my country. I can't do anything."

Dangerous Journey

Yusra and Sarah, along with a friend and two of their father's cousins, left Syria and made their way to Turkey. From there, they joined a group of about 30 other refugees and hired armed **smugglers** to help them get



ALEXANDER HASSENSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES FOR IOC (YUSRA); AMMAR EL BUSHY/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES (RUINS)



COST OF WAR
The conflict in Syria has left much of the country in ruins.

to Greece. It is against the law to enter another country without official permission, so they had to be careful not to get caught by local authorities.

The smugglers arranged for the refugees to cross the Aegean Sea, an arm of the Mediterranean (see map). The boat was flimsy and small, designed to carry six people. The sisters crammed on board along with 18 others.

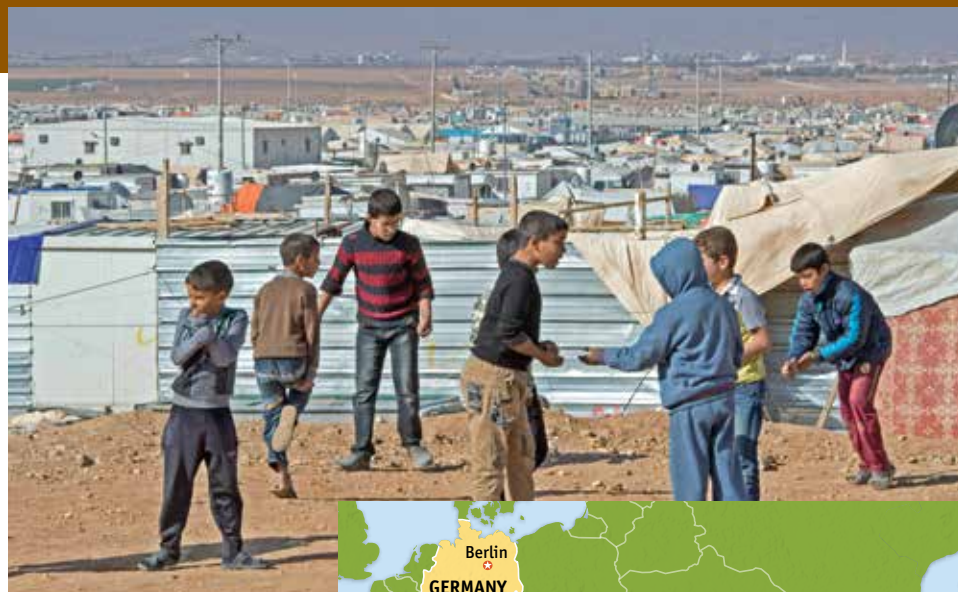
About 20 minutes into the trip, the motor stopped. Then water started filling the boat. It was getting dark, and the sea was cold and rough. Worst of all, most of the passengers didn't know how to swim.

The situation was grim.

So Yusra and Sarah did the unthinkable: They jumped into the frigid water and started to push the boat through the choppy sea.

"At first, no one wanted us to jump in the water because we are girls," Yusra said in an interview with ESPN. "When we get in the water, the guys from Somalia were like, 'My god, you are brave.' I was like, 'Shut up now. Please shut up. Don't tell me I'm courageous. When we arrive safely, then say whatever you want.'"

But courageous is exactly what the sisters were. They swam for



WHERE DO SYRIAN REFUGEES GO?

Eighty thousand now live in the Zaatari refugee camp (above) in Jordan. Others are in Turkey, Lebanon, and parts of Europe, including Germany, which made headlines last year when it welcomed more than 1 million Syrians. The U.S. and Canada have also taken in some Syrian refugees.



3.5 hours, their muscles aching, their wet clothes weighing them down. Saltwater stung their eyes. Waves pummeled them. Yusra lost her shoes somewhere along the way. At one point, two of the other refugees jumped in the water to help, but they soon grew too tired to continue.

And so the sisters pressed on. Finally, they felt firm ground under their feet.

Yusra and Sarah had saved 18 souls.

Daring to Dream Again

From Greece, Yusra and Sarah still had a long journey ahead. For

days and days, they walked and rode buses. They slept in fields and churches. They had money, but some businesses refused to sell them food. Many people had grown weary of helping refugees; some had even grown suspicious of them.

At last—after 1,000 miles and 25 days—the sisters arrived in Germany.

Yusra and Sarah were sent to a **refugee camp** in Berlin, where they secured special permission from the government to be there. They could go to school again and move through their lives without fear of guns and bombs.

A Big Deal

After arriving in Germany, Yusra had the chance to try out for a swim coach named Sven Spannekrebs. He immediately recognized her talent. (Sarah had injured her shoulder in the Aegean Sea and couldn't swim.)

Then he heard something amazing. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was putting together the first-ever team of refugees for the 2016 Games in Rio. This was a big deal: There are more than 60 million refugees in the world—roughly the populations of Texas and California combined. But because Olympic teams are organized by country, refugees, who are basically nationless, have always been shut out of the Games.

Making the team would be highly competitive though: There were only 10 spots.

Yusra got one of them.

A Victory

Every athlete at the Olympic Games has a story. To compete at such an elite level, these fierce competitors make incredible sacrifices. They

trade afternoon movies with friends for the balance beam or the diving board. Instead of going on family vacations, they attend clinics and workshops. They give up after-school activities to train.

Even after years of hard work, discipline, and dedication, there are no guarantees: For these athletes, a fraction of a second or a tenth of a point can mean the difference between representing their country



A Bright Future

Yusra has her sights set on the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.

WRITING CONTEST

Explain what Langston Hughes is saying about dreams in his poem. Would Yusra agree or disagree? Use details from both texts to support your ideas in a well-organized essay. Send it to **YUSRA CONTEST**. Five winners will each get *Return to Sender* by Julia Alvarez.

GET THIS ACTIVITY ONLINE

Poem

Dreams

BY LANGSTON HUGHES

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

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at the Olympics—an opportunity that comes along only once every four years—or watching the Games from home.

In the end, Yusra's time wasn't fast enough to advance to the semi-finals. But for her, simply being at the Olympics was a victory—and a chance to shine a light on the plight of the world's refugees.

"I want everyone to think refugees are normal people who had their homelands and lost them—not because they wanted to run away and be refugees," says Yusra, "but because they have dreams in their lives and they had to go." ●