

# He Coułda Been A Contendeħ, If He Hadn't Been Iranian

by Hugh Fitzgerald



[Here is yet another story](#), this one from last September, of the kind of thing the Iranian regime forces its people to do, and against which they are now protesting in large numbers.

*An Iranian judo star, who fled his home country after criticizing Tehran for pressuring him to throw matches to avoid competing against an Israeli opponent, has congratulated the Israeli on winning a gold medal.*

*The extraordinary social media exchange between Iranian and Israeli athletes came after Saeid Mollaei, the defending under-81 kilogram class world champion, fled to Berlin after last week's World Championships in Tokyo, where he was hoping to secure a place at the 2020 Olympic games.*

*He said Sunday that he was afraid to return home after exposing and criticizing his government's pressure on him to deliberately lose in the semifinals to avoid a potential bout against Israel's Sagi Muki.*

*"Congratulation champion," Mollaei replied to an Instagram*

*post by Muki, who won a gold medal in the tournament, becoming Israel's first-ever male judo world champion. Mollaei added emojis of a gold medal and a championship cup.*

*"Thank you," Muki responded. "You are an inspiration as a human being and as an athlete."*

It appears that on their own, the Iranian and the Israeli can get along quite well; this must infuriate the Iranian mullahs. All that drilling into Iranian skulls that Israelis are satanic, and what is the result? Mollaei instagrams "Congratulation champion" to the Israeli judoka. A very bad pupil indeed.

*Mollaei has said he was coerced into losing his semifinal bout so as not to risk facing Muki in the Tokyo final. The International Judo Federation (IJF) said Mollaei had been pressured to lose by Iranian deputy sports minister Davar Zani. Mollaei was also reportedly pressured to bow out by Iranian Olympic Committee president Reza Salehi Amiri, who told him minutes before his semifinal match last Wednesday that Iranian security services were at his parents' house in Tehran.*

All that pressure to lose the semifinal match, coming from high above – the Deputy Sports Minister and the President of Iran's Olympic Committee. Clearly this was a matter of great importance to the fanatics who run the Islamic Republic of Iran. Scariest of all must have been the sinister appearance of Iranian security services – secret police? – at the home of Mollaei's parents. What threats, unstated, and what shivers of fear Mollaei must have experienced when he learned of that visit, intended to intimidate, to his parents' home. It's one thing to risk your own well-being, quite another to risk the well-being of your elderly parents. Better to do as the bully-boys command.

*"I could have been the world champion," he said in an interview published by the International Judo Federation on Sunday. "I fought and won against an Olympic champion, an Olympics bronze-medalist and other opponents. I beat all of them. I even dreamed of the championship title."*

*The IJF said an official from the Iranian embassy in Tokyo pretending to be a coach gained access to a restricted area to coerce the 27-year-old Tehran native to lose the match as he warmed up on the sidelines.*

It was obviously not enough for Iranian security men to pay a threatening visit to Mollaei's parents, and for the deputy sports minister to call him in Tokyo and let him know about that visit only minutes before he was to take part in a semifinal match.

It was decided that a visit, up close and personal, by a threatening thug from the Iranian Embassy in Tokyo, would be just the ticket. Pretending to be a coach, he gained access to "a restricted area" where Mollaei was warming up; like the others, he pressured the Iranian judoka, the world champion, to throw the match he was just about to start because, had he won it, the Iranian judoka would have likely faced the Israeli in the finals. And that, of course, would never do.

It was too much: the phone calls from officials in Tehran demanding that he either bow out of matches, or throw them; the terrifying news that his parents' home had been invaded by security officials, with the clear implication that they might suffer if he failed to collaborate; the face-to-face encounter with the man from the Iranian embassy who had managed to insinuate himself into a "restricted area" in order to threaten Mollaei, demonstrating that he could never feel secure. So he gave in, and threw the semifinal match with the Belgian Matthias Casse in order not to face Sagi Muki. Given the threats he had endured, especially those involving his

parents, can one blame him?

*“Mollaei, who was on track to face Muki in the finals of the men’s under-81 kilogram class, told the IJF that he bowed to the pressure and deliberately lost to Belgium’s Matthias Casse in the semifinals to avoid having to face the Israeli athlete.*

*“Because of the law in my country... I was obliged not to fight against my Israeli opponent,” Mollaei told the IJF in an interview published its website. “They said: ‘This is the law, and those who do not comply with it will certainly have problems.’”*

*“I need help. Even if the authorities of my country told me that I can go back without any problems, I am afraid,” he told the IJF. “I am afraid of what might happen to my family and to myself.”*

Of course he’s afraid. He’s dealing with thuggish fanatics, who are so filled with inculcated hatred for the Zionist enemy that they would rather have their athletes lose their matches than have them compete directly against an Israeli.

*“For the bronze” – where Mollaei lost again, and therefore did not share the podium with Muki when the Israeli national anthem played – “I gave it only 10% so that I would comply with the law,” Mollaei said, adding, “I want to compete wherever I can. I live in a country whose law does not permit me to. We have no choice, all athletes must comply with it.*

*Mollaei had to throw matches so that he would not possibly have to fight against any Israeli. But even that was not enough for his Iranian masters. He had to throw matches so that he would not be on the podium, as a bronze winner, at the same time as an Israeli judoka would be receiving the silver or gold. A very likely winner of the gold, if he had been allowed to compete fairly – he was, after all, the*

*reigning world champion – he came away with no medals at all. He gave it, he said, “10%” of what he could. And this is to be his fate in every international competition where there is an Israeli athlete who must be avoided at all costs. His own government now insists that he throw matches, the very matches for which he has been training to win his entire life, in order to achieve what? What have the Iranians done in avoiding Israeli athletes? Whom are they hurting? They are shooting themselves not in the foot, but in the head.*

*“The International Judo Federation has thrown its support behind Mollaei, and has vowed to help him reach the summer 2020 Olympic games in Tokyo.*

*“IJF president Marius Vizer told AFP he would convene an emergency meeting to discuss the threats against Mollaei and his family and to decide whether to punish the Iranian judo federation.*

*“It is our mission to protect our athletes – that’s clear,” Vizer told AFP, saying that Mollaei may be allowed compete in the Tokyo Olympics under a different flag.*

What can the IJF do? In October, it prevented the Iranians from competing in any international judo competition. So the Iranians don't want to compete against Israelis? Then prevent them from competing against anyone else, unless and until they change their ludicrous and maddening behavior, in which individual athletes become pawns of the state, and are forced to lose what they were trained to win.

*“We will do our best that he will compete in the Olympic Games. Later we will see in which team – there are different options, but one of them will be applied for the Olympics,” he said.*

*Mollaei on Sunday fled to Berlin where he was thought to be seeking asylum, but he later denied that claim, saying he had*

*already obtained a visa to live in Germany.*

*On Monday, Vizer said procedures were underway for the IJF to sanction the Iranian judo federation in some way, but did not specify what the disciplinary measures would be.*

*Vizer also said that an emergency meeting would be convened to investigate the reports of threats against Mollaei's family.*

*Iran's Fars news agency accused Mollaei of pre-planning his defection, quoting Iran's judo head coach, Majed Zarian, as saying: "Everything was set in advance – someone in Iran must have helped him."*

*There have been previous examples of Iranian athletes being told to lose to avoid facing Israeli opponents, most notably wrestler Alireza Karimi, whose coach was caught yelling "Alireza you must lose, the Israeli won" in a video that went viral in 2017.*

*Karimi was suspended for six months for throwing his bout, while his coach was banned for two years.*

Mollaei already has been granted asylum in Germany. And now efforts are being made so that he may compete, in the 2020 Olympics, as a member of the IOC Refugee Team. Imagine if Mollaei were to again become world judo champion. And suppose an Iranian were to win the silver or bronze. Would the Iranian government allow its athletes to stand on the podium next to Mollaei, who they now regard as a traitor?

And there are so many other problems that might arise. Suppose an Iranian soccer team is playing, say, a team from Europe, which might have some Israeli nationals playing for it. What's the poor Iranian team to do? Would the whole team have to throw the match, so as not to be on the field, with members of the Iranian team possibly in physical contact with

one of those Israelis?

What if the competition involves no physical contact, such as, for example, weight-lifting or the high jump? For some sports, even without that contact, there is always the possibility of an Israeli winning the bronze, silver, or gold, and standing on the podium next to – horrible dictum – an Iranian athlete. Should the Iranian government allow its athletes to compete, and even to win, if the result might be that he, or she, just might mount that selfsame podium with an Israeli? And since the chant all over Iran is “Death to America! Death to Israel!” to be consistent shouldn’t Iranian athletes be commanded not to compete with Americans?

How many Iranian athletes could be forced to throw matches, or not give a competition their all, or refuse to compete altogether, to satisfy the lunacy of their rulers?

Give a thought to those athletes, who have spent their lives training to win these competitions, only to discover that some of them are being commanded to lose: “You must lose, the Israeli won.”

The Islamic Republic of Iran has many things to its discredit. It hangs homosexuals from cranes. That’ll teach them! It sentences Nasrin Soutoudeh, a lady lawyer, to 38 years in jail and 148 lashes for doing her job as a lawyer, defending other women accused of the high crime of removing their hijabs. That’ll teach her! And let’s not forget, to the Islamic Republic’s undying discredit, its insistence that its best athletes lose, rather than win, international competitions if that is the only way to keep them from coming into contact with Israeli athletes. Despite the country’s somber horrors (“There is no fun in Islam,” declared the unsmiling Khomeini), it is this policy, more than any other, that has made the Islamic Republic of Iran what it cannot bear to be, the laughing-stock of countries.

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