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and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Vitas Rafael Carosella



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Abstract

Football as Soft Power: The Political Use of Football in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Vitas Rafael Carosella

Since the early 2000s Gulf state-sponsored investment has entered football. In November 2022 it will reach its zenith when Qatar hosts the first Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup. This study seeks to understand the use of football as a political tool in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, through the lens of Joseph Nye's theory of soft power. Based on culture, values and policies, soft power is power through attraction as opposed to coercion. The stronger one player's values, culture and policies are, the more soft power that player has. Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, traditional fossil fuel-based states, suffer from a lack of attraction. As the world transitions away from fossil fuels, the traditional power base of these nations' wanes. By investing in football, each nation hopes to project a new image and ensure future relevance. Football is the ideal tool because it is a universally loved sport, with cross cultural appeal and an established set of values shared by its participants. By hosting football tournaments and owning and sponsoring clubs, these nations attach their identities to football to appear more attractive. This work shows that Qatar is using football to increase its standing in the international community, ensuring its own protection in case of any regional disputes. Meanwhile the UAE is using football to convert itself into an international travel and business centre, while Saudi Arabia is investing in football to project a progressive image of itself to the world and ensure regime security.

Keywords: Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Soft Power, Soft Disempowerment, Sportswashing, Attraction, Coercion

Glossary

ADUG: Private Investment Abu Dhabi United Group

AFC: Asian Football Confederation

BeIn Sports: sports broadcasting subsidiary of Al Jazeera, Qatar's state-run news network

CFG: City Football Group. Formed in 2008, a branch of ADUG, used to purchase Manchester City and then create a portfolio of clubs worldwide. These clubs include, New York City FC, Melbourne City, Girona, Yokohama Marinos, Mumbai City, Montevideo City Torque, Sichuan Jiuniu, Lommel SK and Esperance Sportive Troyes Aube Champagne.

CONMEBOL: Confederación Sudamericana de Futbol, South American football governing body

FA: Football Association of England

FIFA: Federation Internationale de Football Association, world governing body of football

GCC: International Olympic Committee

IOC: International Olympic Committee

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

MBS: Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and de facto ruler.

PIF: Public Investment Fund of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, used to purchase Newcastle United.

PSG: Paris Saint Germain, Parisian football club owned by Qatar.

QIA: Qatar Investment Authority

QSI: Qatar Sports Investment, subsidiary of QIA, used to purchase PSG.

SAFF: Saudi Arabia Football Federation

UAE: United Arab Emirates

UEFA: Union of European Football Associations, European football governing body

Introduction

After the British Empire captured the Suez Canal in 1882, football was introduced to the Middle East and North Africa. First restricted to Europeans, in time the educated Egyptian community was allowed to play as the game ‘introduced them to Western culture and provided lessons on morality, unity, discipline and authority’ (Raab, 2013). Football eventually became the most popular sport in the region.¹ Nowadays it is a source of national pride, and political influence, especially given the amount of money invested in the game by three Gulf states.

On 20 November 2022, Qatar will start hosting the twenty-second FIFA World Cup, the first in the Middle East. The tournament will be the culmination of a long-term soft power political sporting strategy which has raised the level of international political and media attention on Qatar. Its powerful neighbours, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have also invested heavily in football as they compete with Qatar for regional socioeconomic and political supremacy.

Sports have always been political. Coakley (2008) posits that sport is subject to the laws of the state and is a social and cultural institution with transnational impact. However, the study of the nexus of sport and politics in International Relations did not truly begin until the 1980s. The first notable work produced was *Approaches to the Study of Sport in International Relations* by Kyrolainen and Varis in 1981 (Coakley, 2008). Until recently, from a scholarly perspective there has been a perceived lack of importance in the subject of sport, but, in fact, sport has been a political tool for decades, if not centuries. Hough (2008) argues football has been a tool of rapprochement, peacekeeping – like the 2008 football détente between Armenia and Turkey – and nation-building. Kobiercki (2013) notes that sports have been used to establish national superiority – the 1936 Olympics – and gain international recognition.

Today the football landscape is changing. Clubs once ingrained in the fabric of the community are morphing into international entities with extreme financial and cultural power. Likewise, events such as the FIFA World Cup and the UEFA Champions League are increasingly consequential due to their economic and cultural appeal.² Qatar, the UAE and Saudi

¹ This was controversial. Imams claimed football distracted from Islam. The Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia even claimed ‘the nature of the game sparks fanatical partisanship, trouble and the emergence of hate and malice.’ (Goldblatt, 2019)

² The first week of the 2014 FIFA World Cup saw a greater number of Facebook interactions than the 2014

Arabia recognise the opportunities that football's popularity provides and have chosen to exploit them to increase their international standing.

Football and Politics

Sport and politics are increasingly studied in unison. Works such as Dichter and Johns' (2020) and Coakley (2008) have helped explain the political use of sport. Like most other works, both focus primarily on Cold War Era events and the Olympic Games. Long overdue is an adjustment of the research scope, with a broader understanding of how sport is used for political means. It is necessary to examine individual sports, events, time periods and geographic locations to get a global perspective of how intertwined sport and politics truly are.

Football generates the most money,³ and is the most accessible sport worldwide. Given its international appeal, football has the unique ability to mix massive markets with fan popularity, while simultaneously gathering the attention of politicians, investors and fans (Trillas, 2018). This popularity is now being capitalised upon by Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who are using football's global reach to create new identities.

With the first MENA World Cup about to kick off, this paper should serve as a timely study of football as a soft power diplomacy tool on the eve of the greatest sporting event the MENA region has ever hosted. The purpose of this work is to address the political motivations behind Qatar, the UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's use of football as a soft power diplomacy tool.

What goals are they trying to achieve, and why is football the tool of choice?

It is the author's contention that these nations are using football to elevate their standing in the world. Qatar seeks to ensure its long-term security and relevance, while diversifying away from natural gas. The UAE focuses its football-related spending on attracting foreign business and converting the nation into a business and transport hub. Saudi Arabia enters the football market seeking to modernise its image and retreat from oil-based revenues. The attention and attraction football investment can generate is priceless for these Gulf states.

Super Bowl, Winter Olympics and Academy Awards combined (Goldblatt, 2019).

³ The European Football Market generated €25.2 billion in the 2019-20 season, while American Football generated roughly €13 billion. The difference, around €12 billion, does not account for non-European leagues and markets, nor does it factor in summer tournaments such as the FIFA World Cup (Gough, 2021 and Lange, 2021).

As a small state, Qatar fears threats to its national sovereignty, like the blockade imposed in 2017 by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain. Qatar's soft power football strategy aims to amplify its standing in the world by raising its national profile as a global sporting hub. Hosting sports mega-events and investing in European club football increases Qatar's international recognition. Qatar is betting that its augmented international standing will deter potential coercive actions neighbouring states may be contemplating.

The UAE have opted for a football security strategy based around business. While the Emirates have hosted smaller tournaments, like the FIFA Club World Cup,⁴ they are focused on football sponsorship opportunities and creating a diverse business portfolio. The use of Etihad and Emirates airlines as sponsors for major football clubs, and the development of the City Football Group, have made Dubai and Abu Dhabi synonymous with success, modernity and forward-thinking business.

Despite being the most successful of the three nations on the football field, Saudi Arabia is the relative newcomer to the political football world. In 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) launched Vision 2030, a plan emphasising modernisation and seeking to appeal to western investment, while decreasing oil dependency. The Vision included the use of sport as an attractive force, but was quickly undermined due to backlash from the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In response, MBS pushed more progressive reforms, such as allowing women to drive and go out without male companions. In 2019, the Saudi Arabia Football Federation (SAFF) even launched the Department of Women's Football Development (FIFA, 2022).

The culmination of increased Saudi investment in football has been the purchase of Newcastle United. The historic club in northern England is now a pawn in a political game, like the Abu Dhabi-owned Manchester City and Qatari-owned Paris Saint Germain (PSG). It is hoped that each of these clubs will reflect some of their glamour on to their Middle Eastern owners.

The political motives for using the beautiful game are evident. All three nations have cause for concern and have sought non-traditional remedies to their problems. The world's most popular sport is an attractive tool by which these nations can create new economic, social and political ties with critical international players. The hope is that these ties will

⁴ The FIFA Club World Cup, previously the Intercontinental Cup, is a tournament in which the club champions of each footballing confederation face each other. Unlike the FIFA World Cup – in which national teams compete - this tournament is less of a draw for fans and is often won by the financially dominant European clubs.

bring economic growth, enhanced reputation and security and hitherto unknown political power to these Gulf states.

Initial backlash to these football projects is pertinent. However, further research is required to study the implementation and success of the soft power football strategies. Despite the author's desire to delve fully into these issues, they lie outside the scope of the present study. Moreover, the question of these projects' success is ongoing, as the strategies of all three nations are still under way. Therefore, no final conclusions can be made at this point.

Methodology and Sources

The hypotheses in this paper stem from the use of qualitative research and persistent observation of the football world. The sources used are diverse. They aim to provide context and a deeper understanding of the football world to tease out the motives behind each nation's use of the sport.

The study grounds itself in the work of renowned International Relations scholar Joseph S. Nye. Three of his articles discussing his seminal theory of soft power will be unpacked. By clarifying the definition of soft power and discussing some of its uses and criticisms, the theoretical underpinnings of the study are set.

Each state is studied individually and considered in its proper context. Critical sources which contributed to the study of the Gulf nations' use of football were the pioneering books of Goldblatt (2019), Dorsey (2016) and Montague (2017). Primary sources from each state were also consulted, with focus placed on the Qatar and Saudi 2030 Vision projects and The UAE Soft Power Strategy. Press releases from the UN, FIFA and human rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were critical in understanding the international community's response to these football initiatives and are evidence of the kind of unwanted attention generated by state-sponsored investment in football.

Despite Gulf investment in football becoming mainstream news in recent years, there remains limited scholarship on the link between sports and international relations. Regardless, primary sources were supported by available scholarly articles from experts on football or MENA affairs. Essential authors for this project included Ulrichsen (2016), Grix and Lee (2013), Farred (2016), Hough (2008) and Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015). To keep the study current, prominent news outlets such as *The Guardian*, *Deutsche Welle* and *The Athletic* were also consulted. They provided extensive coverage on the World Cup's human

rights issues, relations between each of these states and their associated football club(s), the purchase of Newcastle United and sportswashing.

Sportswashing is a relatively new term which refers to reputation laundering through sport. The premise is that by investing in sport a nation-state, company or individual can alter their public perception for the better. In this study, sportswashing will refer to Qatar, the UAE and specifically Saudi Arabia's concerted investments in football to project modern images while covering up less savoury aspects of their reputations.

The academic texts consulted used qualitative studies, including interviews with people involved in the game, studies of historical events and long-term analysis of political trends in the MENA region to understand current Gulf investment in the beautiful game. The core debates drawn from these works were varied. One of the most prominent debates dealt with the use of Sports Mega- Events as one-off opportunities for state-branding, power expansion and increased attraction.

This debate proved useful in the context of the upcoming World Cup. Likewise, the concept of soft-disempowerment ran through several articles. When sports branding or events go wrong, they open the door to disaster, as the scandal around the FIFA World Cup bidding process did for Qatar. Other debates which surfaced were the use of sports to enact social change, sports as an alternative form of nationalistic expression to war, the in-vogue concept of sportswashing and of course the effect of intangible soft power resources like culture, values and ideology which can easily be perpetuated through football.

Each debate helped lay a portion of the foundation for this study. By looking at these three nations' involvement in football this study looks past the single sporting event to the general politicisation of sport. It focuses on football's capacity to increase the relevance and attraction of these three non-Western nations, and each state's motivation for using it.

The Definition of Soft Power

As the Cold War drew to a close in the early 1990s, Harvard Associate Dean for International Affairs, Joseph S. Nye, authored his first article about his new theory of soft power. He stated that power 'is an ability to do things and control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not,' (1990, p.154). He further expanded on the topic by qualifying it as 'the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion' (Nye, 2008, p.94).

Traditionally, control stemmed from hard power, made up of elements such as natural resources, population, territory, economic output, military might and political stability (Nye, 1990). The fall of the Soviet Union changed a bipolar world temporarily to a unipolar one, eventually giving way to multipolarity. Simultaneously, economic and political interconnectedness increased. Nye understood that international power dynamics no longer revolved solely around hard power and postulated a power unreliant on economic inducement or coercion, but rather on co-optation.⁵

Soft power is founded on three key resources: culture, political values and foreign policies. A soft power player (sometimes also referred to as an actor) is only attractive if their culture pleases others, their values are consistently practised and their policies seen as inclusive and legitimate.⁶ Culture, as described by Nye, is ‘a set of practices that create meaning for a society,’ (2008, p.96). Culture extends to mass entertainment, including sports, film and the arts, and it is through the effective sale of culture that soft power grows.

Public diplomacy is an integral part of an effective soft power strategy. Public broadcasts, international exchanges, subsidies of cultural exports and assistance programs all attempt to draw attention to the culture, values and policies of the soft power player. Nye postulated (2008, p.101) that ‘the effectiveness of public diplomacy is measured in minds changed, not money spent.’ To change minds, practising what you preach and credibility are key. But in a world where information is nearly unlimited and attention is scarce, using a tool which amplifies publicity and recognition can make all the difference.

Football is the ultimate tool. It ‘constitutes a worldwide known sport that is able to project the image of companies around the world using transnational values which are able to be shared within different communities and cultures’ (Ginesta, 2013, p.77).

Criticisms

Nye’s theory of soft power has detractors. Todd Hall (Felsch, 2016) questions soft power’s validity, stating that attraction is not a suitable analytical tool. True, soft power is more

⁵ Co-optation refers to power subsumed through shared attractive policies, values and culture. In the context of this study, the Gulf nations aim to co-opt power and legitimacy by portraying an appropriation of Western values and culture through football. If the other states believe Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE uphold said policies and values, their international legitimacy increases as does their power. Football is therefore, their conduit of soft power.

⁶ According to Nye (2009), a lack of inclusivity and legitimacy help explain a decrease in US popularity. The US preaches democracy and freedom, but has often waged wars under the banner of democracy and nation building.

difficult to assess than hard power.⁷ Furthermore, soft power poses two other issues: it frequently involves other, non-governmental players, and it appeals to the individual (Seymour, 2020).

Realists believe that the main players of geopolitics are nation-states. To accept a theory which sees states and non-state players as equal competitors is an affront to their understanding of international relations. Therefore, they often refute the theory. But FIFA, like Hollywood and McDonalds, is a player whose product is so attractive, its influence is global.

Humans are complex: different beliefs, customs, values and identities make appealing to them a challenge for public diplomacy. However, as studies have proven, some phenomena create cross-cultural appeal. Football is one of these. As Ginesta (2013, p.70) explains, 'Being linked to sports brands and events allows companies and entities to share values and overcome language and cultural barriers.'

Soft power yields results slowly, gradually convincing individuals in different societies of its purpose. Polling data, interviews and other measurement techniques can assess the influence of soft power on communities, nation-states and other players.⁸ While it may not be holistic, this approach can grab other players' attention, change narratives, shape preferences and set examples, all increasing a player's legitimacy. Admittedly, this may not always work. Soft disempowerment (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015) occurs when the player attempting to attract, instead upsets or offends and therefore loses attractiveness and influence altogether. This phenomenon can undercut even the most well-thought-out soft power strategies. But as Nye (2009, p.161) posits, 'Even if soft power is rarely sufficient, it can help create an enabling or disabling context for policy.'

How Soft Power Relates to the Gulf States

Xavier Ginesta may have been talking about companies when he wrote that football can help project an image and reach different communities and cultures, but the same applies to nation-states. Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia all seek greater footing on the global stage. None has enough hard power resources to reach the heights they strive for; they

⁷ Seymour (2020) points out that a battle assessment can be done almost instantaneously, but the cultural understanding gained during a Fulbright exchange may take years to comprehend. Check softpower30.com for an extensive soft power assessment of nation-states.

⁸ The Anholt-Gfk Roper Survey in 2011 showed that tourism, media, food and German film consumption all increased after the 2006 FIFA World Cup. Likewise, research shows that hosting a lackluster event can harm reputation and limit attraction. The Athens 2004 Olympics and the 2010 Indian Commonwealth Games are examples of this (Grix and Houlihan, 2013).

therefore rely upon foreign trade and military deals to maintain their authority and legitimacy in international politics.

Much of Qatar's credibility in international politics stems from its relationship with the US. They host the longest-standing US military base in the region and have recently agreed to represent US interests in Afghanistan, essentially becoming the US-Taliban go-between (Landay and Pamuk, 2021). The UAE's international legitimacy stems from its more than twenty tax free zones (Bruns, 2017), which have allowed international business to flourish. Saudi Arabia relies upon arms deals with the US and UK for security. Mecca and Medina give Saudi Arabia cultural and religious influence. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has at times sought to ensure regional stability, backing institutions such as the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the Arab League, and even supporting the formation of an Arab Customs Union and a Common Market (Gallarotti and Al-Filali, 2012). Yet, until recently, all three states have generated limited attraction – through their cultures, policies and values – beyond, and at times within, the Muslim world.

These predominantly Muslim nations do not resonate culturally with the West or East Asia. Strict interpretations of the Qur'an and Shariah-based law often scare away foreigners. They are also strictly authoritarian, limiting all types of free speech and repressing women's freedoms. Additionally, they suffer from post-colonial orientalist stigma, which stereotypes them as uncivilised, exotic, inferior and having opposing values to their Western counterparts (Griffin, 2019).

Football can be the great equalizer in this regard. As Grix and Lee (2013) state, 'They can show the world they are guardians of universal norms and can construct attraction by illuminating truths such as fair play that have universal appeal.'

Qatar

Political History

Formed in 1971, Qatar is an Islamic constitutional emirate ruled by the Al Thani family with a population of roughly 2.5 million people, only 12% of whom are Qatari citizens (Britannica, n.d.; Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015). Originally intended to be the eighth emirate of the UAE and seen as a vassal by the House of Saud, Qatar's existence has always been contentious. The once poor pearl diving protectorate has become the world's principal sup-

plier of liquefied natural gas. Now, Qatar is using its vast wealth⁹ to develop into a modern state, with football helping to generate international goodwill and ideally long-term security. However, as Qatar prepares for the 2022 World Cup, human rights and corruption issues within the country have drawn heavy criticism, significantly counteracting all these efforts. In addition, Qatar's investment in the beautiful game has increased the longstanding friction with its neighbours.

Vision 2030 and the Move towards Modernisation

In 2008, Qatar mapped out its future. Understanding that international appeal would help ensure sovereignty and security, and that economic and social progress were paramount in garnering such appeal, its rulers consulted experts to create Qatar National Vision 2030. The Vision provided a framework to transform Qatar into an advanced, self-sustaining nation and explicitly planned Qatar's increased role in regional economic, political and cultural affairs.

To carry out the Vision, Qatar drafted two National Development Strategies (NDS). NDS 1 stressed the importance of hosting events and developing first-class sporting facilities, which would prove a powerful tool for international engagement and diplomacy, encouraging tourism and trade (General Secretariat, 2008). In 2018, NDS 2 emphasised promoting sports within the country, building them into the culture and establishing a national identity. By developing excellence in sports, Qatar would be appreciated as a central hub for cultural exchange (Ministry of Development, 2018).

Vision 2030 also seeks to protect the Qatari identity while coexisting with global values (Griffin, 2019). Various reforms to please the international community show this, including electronic wage transfers, a new minimum wage and the beginning of the end of the Kafala system; a legal framework that gives companies and private citizens complete control over migrant labourers and their immigrations status, and one which has long been derided as a violation of human rights and equated to modern day slavery (Robinson, 2021)¹⁰

⁹ According to the IMF Qatari GDP per capita stood at roughly US\$64,770 at the end of 2021. The total GDP stood at roughly US\$169 billion in 2021 and is projected to reach US\$214 billion by 2026. Fitch Solutions predicts Qatari GDP to increase 3.2% annually between 2022 and 2030 (Owen, 2021). The state's sovereign wealth fund stands at £300 billion (Slater, 2019).

¹⁰ According to the International Labour Organisation (2021), Qatar is the first state in the MENA region to introduce a non-discriminatory minimum wage. Current reforms include a minimum wage of 1000 QAR, 300 QAR for food and a stipend for housing if it is not provided by employers. The ILO reports that compliance with the new system will be checked and violations will be penalised. They also expect the Kafala system and No Objection Certificates to be eliminated.

Football is being reformed too. The implementation of a women's national team in 2010 and a female domestic league in 2012 were huge developments. The normalisation of female sport in Qatar was a first in the region, broadcasting its progressive views to the outside world.

Qatar's Vision 2030 is a modernisation strategy to ensure the backing of the international community in case of any emergency, like the invasion of Kuwait in the 1990s (Dorsey, 2016). The Vision plan encompasses soft power, hard power and inducements. 'Political mediation, its world-class airline and position as an international transport hub, its US military base, its prominent news network – Al-Jazeera, sponsorship of the arts, world-class museums and investment in real estate and bay-front assets all play a role in their strategy' (Dorsey, Nov 2021). Football, however, has become a critical element in the Qatari vision for a modern, self-sustaining state.

The 2022 FIFA World Cup and Relations with Other Gulf Nations

Although diplomatic relations were recently restored through the Al-Ula declaration, Qatar's relationship with its neighbours has been unstable for years. Saudi Arabia and the UAE both took issue with Qatar's backing of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Iran and more recently the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The Saudi-Arabian-backed coalition considered this backing an attempt to subvert the status quo in the region.¹¹

As one of the smaller Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, Qatar has often been seen as an insignificant player in the region. However, it was Qatar who first devised a soft-power football strategy, created state-of-the-art facilities and won the 2022 World Cup bid. Griffin (2019) posits that the World Cup has become a source of tension between, specifically, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has tried to persuade FIFA that 2022 World Cup hosting duties should be shared amongst the Gulf nations. This was reflected in a speech made by FIFA President Gianni Infantino (2018), when he mentioned the idea of World Cup games being played in 'Qatar and other countries in the Arabian Gulf.' Despite Saudi Arabia's attempts to interfere, the tournament is going ahead as planned.

¹¹ Relations between Qatar and the Saudi-led coalition (UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) hit their lowest point in 2017 when the coalition severed ties with Qatar. Qatari goods were boycotted, ships banned and BeIn Sports was pirated by Saudi Arabian-backed BeOutQ. The pirating cost Qatar millions of dollars and resulted in an international lawsuit.

The Saudis understand that by winning the hosting bid, Qatar has earned the world's focus for over ten years.¹² Hosting an event of this magnitude cannot be underestimated; it is a 'relatively cheap'¹³ means of improving a nation's image, credibility, stature, economic competitiveness and (they hope) ability to exercise agency on the international stage' (Grix and Lee, 2013, p.522).

PSG, BeIN Sports and Aspire Academy

The World Cup is the pinnacle for Qatar, but serious state investment in football began at the turn of the century. In 2004, Qatar opened Aspire Academy in Doha, a state-of-the-art multisport training complex, later opening fifteen more Aspire facilities worldwide.¹⁴ Aspire played host to a US\$15 million global tryout for several years running. The prize, a chance for young football players to earn a permanent spot in the academies and have a better life (Dorsey, 2016). As one of the world's best facilities, Aspire has facilitated long-term relationships between Qatar, prominent football clubs¹⁵ and thousands of talented young players from diverse backgrounds.

In 2011 Qatar Sports Investment (QSI) authorised the purchase of the French club Paris Saint Germain (PSG). PSG was not a super club, but as the only major club in the city, it offered the new owners the brilliance of Paris and a large fanbase. QSI began constructing the club into a global brand. They followed Real Madrid's example, signing stars like Beckham, Ibrahimović, Mbappé and Neymar. PSG introduced a new logo, new marketing techniques and a new CEO; Nasser Al Khelaifi (Chanavat, 2017).¹⁶ Within two years, the club signed

¹² The Saudis are eager to earn the same international attention. Their unsuccessful attempt to hijack Qatar's World Cup has given way to their own bid to host the World Cup in 2030. This will be the centenary tournament, marking 100 years since the original tournament, which will only draw more attention, and Saudi Arabia hopes to capitalise on that.

¹³ Estimates show costs of the 2022 FIFA World Cup will add up to roughly US\$250 billion (Ellwood, 2020). However, the World Cup is a one-off investment which helps create new infrastructure, generates investment and foreign interest and improves the national image.

¹⁴ Six of these fifteen facilities were in nations on FIFA's Executive Committee due to vote on the 2010 World Cup bids (Montague, 2017).

¹⁵ FC Barcelona, FC Bayern Munich and AS Roma have all been sponsored by Qatar Airways in recent years. Bayern have attended winter training camps at Aspire since 2011, and despite criticism from their own fans, Bayern claim Qatari sponsorship is vital to compete at the highest level of football. Their former CEO acknowledged the criticisms of Qatar, but claimed dialogue, not criticism was the only way to improve things (Ford, 2021).

¹⁶ Khelaifi has curated an image of Qatari excellence. He is the CEO of PSG, the chairman of QSI, was the chairman of BeIn Sports and is the head of the European Club Association. He even won an award as most influential person in football, beating out Messi, Ronaldo and the FIFA president (Uddin, 2020). He is such a power broker in European football, that any potential sanction for his threats towards Dutch referee Danny Makkelie after PSG's exit from the Champions League last season have been swept under the rug (Panja, 2022).

a €200 million per year sponsorship with the Qatar Tourism Authority. This ensured that every jersey had the nation's name on it, fusing Qatar's identity with PSG.

Despite initial investigations from UEFA over PSG's spending, the Qatari ownership of the club has proved lucrative. PSG has won all but two league titles since 2012 and reached the Champions League final in 2019-20. One year prior they became the fifth most lucrative football brand in the world, surpassing Abu Dhabi-owned Manchester City. Sponsorships with Air Jordan and Accor International were announced and merchandise stores were opened in Japan. PSG has become a marketing machine for Qatar, linking success on the field to Doha and the gas fields beyond it (Murphy, 2021). And 16 months before the start of their World Cup, despite the Saudi-led boycott, PSG signed seven-time Balon d'Or winner Lionel Messi (Uddin, Aug 2021).¹⁷

Seeking to become the sports capital of the world, Qatar is spending more per capita on football than any other nation (Murphy, 2021).

The final piece of the Qatari football puzzle is BeIn Sports, vital to Qatar spreading its influence worldwide. BeIn broadcasts globally, including in US and Asian markets. In the MENA region and vast portions of Asia, they have the rights to the major European domestic leagues as well as the 2018 World Cup and their own (Dorsey, 2016).

Qatar's co-optation of football is an investment in a new future for the nation. As Dorsey (2016, p.2) posits:

'Qatar has led the other Gulf states in spending massively to position itself as a global hub punching above its weight, increasing its diplomatic and economic influence and employing soft power to embed itself in the international community and to enhance its security, branding and access.'

Backlash

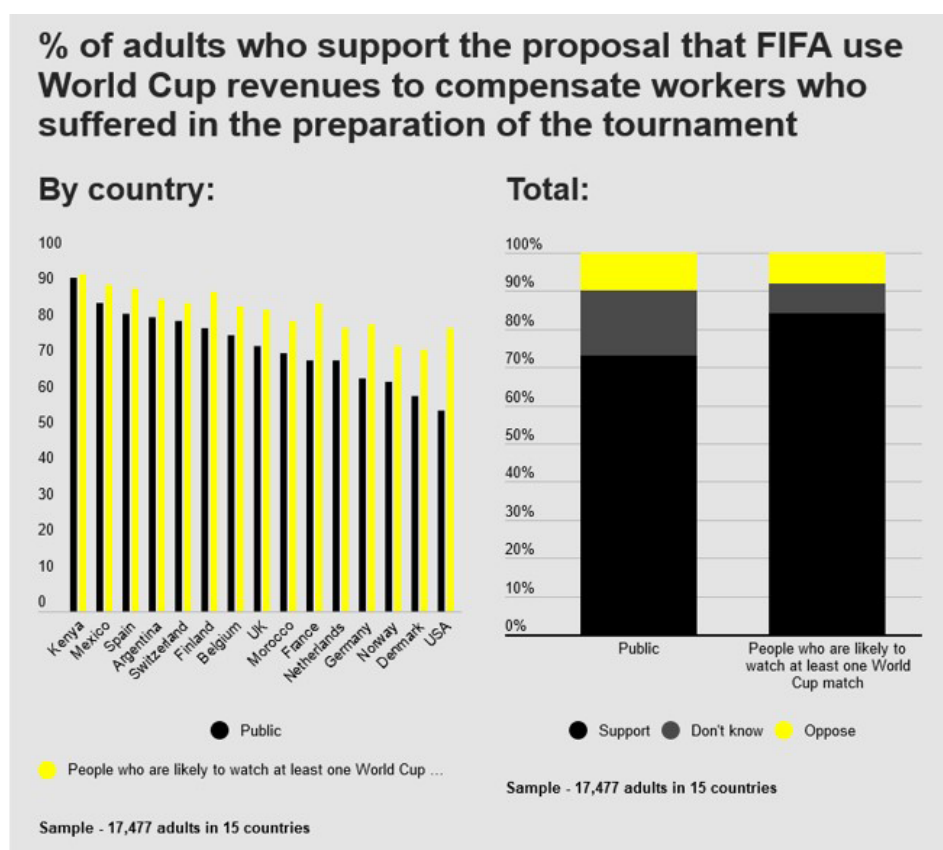
The FIFA World Cup provides Qatar the opportunity to display its unique characteristics and signals its capacity to host events on a par with any developed nation (Griffin, 2019). However, Qatar's involvement in football has drawn serious criticism, to which Qatar initially did not respond. As criticism mounted, so did the potential for soft disempowerment

¹⁷ The contract signed was worth reportedly €25 million net per season, however, QSI believe that the commercial benefit outweighs the cost, and they intend to use Messi's image in a PSG shirt to promote their World Cup (Crafton, Aug 2021).

(Dorsey, 2016). Thus, Qatar implemented reforms and claimed that football would be the kick-starter for social change in the Gulf. But much of the damage has already been done.

HUMAN RIGHTS - Amnesty International's (2021) report, *Qatar, One Year Out*, concludes that the labour reforms, highly touted by Qatar and FIFA are not being implemented effectively. The Kafala System and exit permits restricting a worker's ability to switch jobs or leave the country are still in effect. Many workers go unpaid or receive payments late and working conditions have been described as inhumane, with workers labouring in 48C heat (Neville in Qatar, 2019). Consequently, *The Guardian* in 2021 reported that 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar, while ZDF Sportsudio (2021) recently reported a total of around 15,000.

On September 15th, 2022 Amnesty International released the results of a global poll they commissioned regarding the upcoming World Cup. Two conclusions can be drawn from the poll: 1) there is still great interest in watching this year's tournament, 2) there is demand from fans for FIFA and national football associations to speak out about the human rights issues in occurring in Qatar. The poll surveyed people from both the global north and south, and over 50% of those asked said they would watch at least one game of this World Cup. However, nearly three quarters of all interviewees stated they would like to see FIFA compensate World Cup workers for the injustices they have suffered. This poll shows both backlash to and interest in the tournament, the dichotomy of sport in a nutshell.



The Results of the Amnesty International Poll (Amnesty International, 2022)

WORLD CUP BID – the bidding process was marred by unprecedented levels of corruption, spawning several criminal investigations. Qatar even used a former CIA operative, Kevin Chalker, to spy on the FIFA officials selecting the winner and ensure their bid’s victory (Suderman, 2021).

The 22-man FIFA ExCo who voted on the 2018 & 2022 World Cup hosts in 2010

Name	B = been banned or serving ban for corruption / breaches of ethics C = accused / indicted for / or been convicted of criminal corruption D = involved in FBI / DoJ case of “criminal schemes, racketeering” etc E = accused of ethical violations but never prosecuted
Jack Warner (T&T)	Ticket tout, bribe giver, and taker, all-round corruption king. Life ban. B, C & D
Chuck Blazer (USA)	Died 2017. Massive crook in all senses. Tax dodger. Serial bung taker. B, C & D
Nicolas Leoz (Par)	Took ISL bribes. Much later banned by FIFA. On Interpol RED list. B, C & D
Ricardo Teixeira (Bra)	Took ISL bribes, dodged tax, deeply involved in contract and rights bribes. C & D
Rafael Salguero (Guat)	Indicted in DoJ case. FIFA want \$5.1m back in salary, expenses paid to him. C, D
F Beckenbauer (Ger)	Ban for blanking corruption inquiry. Under investigation for alleged 2006 bribes. B, C
Julio Grondona (Arg)	Died 2014; named by FIFA in 2015 as authorising \$10m bribe around 2010 WC. C
AM Villar Llona (Spn)	Fined for blanking corruption inquiry. Arrested for alleged embezzlement. C
M Bin Hammam (Qatar)	Banned for life after multiple bribery and conflict of interest allegations. B
Worawi Makudi (Thai)	Serially accused of taking bribes for votes; 5-year ban for forgery. B
Sepp Blatter (Swit)	Presided over decades of corruption, banned for 6 years for payment to Platini. B
Chung Mong Joon (SK)	Banned for 6 years for five ethics breaches over 2018-2022 bidding conduct. B
Michel Platini (Fra)	Banned for receiving ‘disloyal payment’ of £1.6m from Blatter. Backed Qatar. B
Vitaly Mutko (Rus)	Olympic life ban by IOC for his role in Russia’s state-sponsored doping. B
Issa Hayatou (Cam)	Named by <i>Panorama</i> as taking 1990s ISL bribes. E
Junji Ogura (Jpn)	Boyhood West Ham fan. Denies \$1.5m bribe payment over 2002 WC. E
Geoff Thompson (Eng)	Head of England 2018, a bid team accused by Garcia Report of improper campaign.
Michel D’Hooge (Bel)	Accepted a painting as a gift from Russia 2018 during lobbying process.
Senes Erzik (Tur)	Vice-president of UEFA. ‘The embodiment of wisdom,’ according to Platini.
Marios Lefkaritis (Cyp)	Said £27m land sale to Qatari interests was unrelated to voting for Qatar.
Jacques Anouma (IvCo)	Denied a Commons claim he took an inducement to vote for Qatar.
Hany Abo Rida (Egy)	Accompanied Bin Hammam on 2011 ‘cash in brown bags’ trip to Trinidad.

Nick Harris’ list profiling the World Cup Executive Voting Committee (Nick Harris, 2021)

LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE – Harris (2021) cites that Qatar is seeking to attract roughly 1.2 million visitors for the World Cup. However, total rooms in Qatari hotels and apartments currently stand at 130,000. This may lead fans to take drastic measures: flying in and out of Qatar on the same day, camping in the desert or even staying in ‘nearby cities’ such as Riyadh, Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

COSY RELATIONSHIP WITH FA – Documents obtained by *The Athletic* (Crafton, 2021) reveal a close relationship between the English FA and the Qatari government. Qatar purchased £6 billion worth of Typhoon fighter jets and in return, the FA is showing full support for the 2022 World Cup, and the reforms being made in the Gulf nation.

CIVIL LIBERTIES – The UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner investigated Qatar in 2019 about arbitrary detention and suppression of civil liberties. Despite the lack of full cooperation by the Qatari authorities, the UN (2019) gathered enough information for them to determine that fair trials were rare, adultery laws unfairly targeted women and freedom of speech was criminalised. The case of Jordanian national Abdullah Ibais, who worked for the Qatari state’s Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy of the World Cup, is a prominent example of restricted civil liberties. He was arrested and tried without due process after expressing concerns about how a workers’ strike was handled by the committee (Melnaes, 2021).

LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY – The Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs has given assurances that all people, including those of LGBTQ+ distinction, will be welcome at the tournament. However, homosexuality is illegal in Qatar, and as such many LGBTQ+ fans say they will not go to Qatar. Despite that, LGBTQ+ fans ability to love whom they choose will be defended by the OneLove campaign initiated by the Dutch national team. Their captain and the captains of seven other nations will wear rainbow armbands at the tournament to show their support for love in all forms and as a gesture of opposition to discrimination (NOS Voetbal, 2022).

These concerns portray the soft disempowerment Farred (2016) describes as the auto-immunity of sports mega-events. The host invites praise and disaster in equal measure as it opens its doors to the outside world. For some fans, Qatar’s human rights abuses and inconsistent values and policy render the World Cup unwatchable.¹⁸ Yet, the 2018 World Cup provided enough distraction to cause people to forget the controversial politics surrounding Russia. The same is occurring in Qatar. Official figures show over 2.9 million tickets have already been sold for the tournament, with heavy demand for tickets coming from the US, the UK, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Germany, Brazil and Argentina (TyC Sports, 2022).

Despite its authoritarian nature, its attempts to repress free speech and the obvious issues surrounding workers’ rights, there is enough political will from within FIFA, Qatar and from major sponsors for the tournament to go ahead. FIFA and the ITUC see a strong positive shift in labour laws and progressive measures being taken in Qatar.

¹⁸ Qatar was supportive of the Arab Spring, preferring a change of the status quo. It used Al Jazeera to encourage debate about the uprisings, yet, it remains a highly authoritarian state. President Obama noted the contradiction, saying that Qatar was a booster of democracy but was failing to reform its own state (Dorsey, p.259). Qatar also relies heavily on economic power. Like the UAE, it builds relationships on financial incentives and humanitarian aid. These elements undercut strict interpretations of Nye’s soft power resources.

Furthermore, in both political and sporting circles Qatar has a positive image, associated with stars, success international diplomacy and the glamorous side of football. This is telling.

The UAE

Political History

The United Arab Emirates – or commonly the UAE, a nation of seven constituent emirates – gained independence from Great Britain in 1971.¹⁹ Historically dominated by fractured fishing tribes, the Emirates is now an elective monarchy with the seventh-largest oil reserve in the world and a founding member of the GCC. The Emirates' quantity of oil, its location and its moderate Islam compared to neighbour Saudi Arabia, have made it an appealing trade partner, despite its authoritarian government. The UAE is a long-time ally of Saudi Arabia. Former leader Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan emphasised in 1972 that the Emirates wished to have the same attitude and direction as Saudi Arabia (Ulrichsen, 2021).

Despite its alliances and oil profits, the UAE is looking to diversify its revenue streams and rely less on its allies.²⁰ Since 2004, the UAE has taken a more aggressive stance in the region, engaging in both soft and hard power politics. It has launched a soft power strategy, while at the same time bombing Yemen and backing the blockade of Qatar as part of the Saudi-led coalition (Ulrichsen, 2017). The government's goal is to increase state power, push towards modernisation and steer away from an oil-based economy. Football is a tool of modernisation that attracts tourism and foreign investment to the Emirates.

Soft Power Plans

Unlike Qatar, the UAE has been a political contradiction since the Arab Spring. Its involvement in Yemen, its backing of the military in Libya and its support for the Egyptian coup has caused the Emirates to lose international support but gain regional security. The Emirati soft power strategy of nation branding through football aims to combat the negativity surrounding its military interventions and human rights abuses.

¹⁹ Each emirate has its own limited autonomy. Abu Dhabi joining OPEC in 1967, four years before the entire UAE joined, shows the individual authority of each emirate (Ulrichsen, 2017).

²⁰ In the 1990s, the Emirates established a military relationship with the US, securing US protection against a potential Iraqi attack. In 1994 the Defense Cooperation Agreement was signed making the Al-Dhafra base in Abu Dhabi a vital US military base in the region.

To curry international favour, the UAE established progressive development plans. Its Soft Power Strategy (UAE Soft Power Council 2017) aims ‘to increase the country’s global reputation abroad by highlighting its identity, heritage, culture and the contributions of the UAE to the world.’ The Emirates would like to make itself a gateway to the world and establish a reputation as a modern state that welcomes all people. Dubai also created its own 2021 plan with the objective of creating the best place to live and work. It seeks to engage stakeholders and adopt the best practices in national strategic planning (Executive Council, 2014). Major events, such as the World Expo 2020 and sporting occasions are crucial points of the plan.

These plans show the UAE is trying to buy cultural appeal by spending on infrastructure, healthcare, education and entertainment. Investing in culture helps keep the population happy and reinforces the established social contract. Football specifically has huge appeal to men and women under 35, a demographic often targeted by radical Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Football and movies can distract the population and keep them off the streets and away from protests, allowing the current governing system to survive (Ellwood, 2020).

Moreover, by making the conversation about itself and its contributions, the UAE weaves a positive narrative to attract prospective business and increase their reputation.²¹

Abu Dhabi and Dubai

Although they are constituent emirates of the UAE, Abu Dhabi and Dubai operate with certain autonomy. Both seek to increase their prestige through their activities as tourist and business hubs (and compete with each other to be the bigger and better in this endeavour). Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE, is ruled by the al-Nahyan family and home to 90 per cent of the nation’s oil reserves. It is also the seat of the president. Dubai is the ‘business emirate’, ruled by the al- Maktoum family, and home to the office of the Prime Minister (Ulrichsen, 2017). Its dwindling oil supply has compelled the emirate to establish a business-friendly environment with over twenty tax-free zones.²² This business first mentality made Dubai the city with the most economic growth between 1975 and 2009 (Bruns, 2017).

²¹ The films *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* were both filmed in the UAE. Moreover, the UAE was one of the largest spenders in the US in the 2000s. Their strategy of winning hearts and minds entailed building hospitals, medical centres, donations to charities and even school systems.

²² In 2016 oil and gas made up 6% of Dubai’s annual budget (Bruns, 2017). This drives the region’s commitment to trade. Without investment, Dubai would lose its global prominence.

Dubai has attached itself to European football's elite. Emirates Airlines, the airline of the emirate of Dubai, sponsors the jerseys of Arsenal, AC Milan, Benfica, Hamburg and Real Madrid.²³ The emirate also hosts academies for Arsenal, Barcelona and Manchester United, which have established long-lasting, highly visible relationships between Europe, its clubs and the UAE. Both the ruler of Dubai and the CEO of Emirates recognise the importance of these ties, the former noting that sports are a multi-billion-dollar charm offensive, and the latter stating, 'sport provides an international platform to connect with our customer, something vital for the growth strategy of the state-run company' (Thani and Heenan, 2016).²⁴

Abu Dhabi's investment in football has been monumental. Manchester City, Inter Milan and Real Madrid have all established academies in the capital. Moreover, Etihad Airways, the state-owned airline, has been sponsoring Manchester City's jersey and stadium since 2011 to the tune of £400 million (Murphy, 2021). But the crown jewel of their strategy is City Football Group (CFG) and Manchester City. According to Khaldoon al Mubarak,²⁵ the CFG project is supposed to show people the true essence of Abu Dhabi (Pitt-Brooke, 2021).

City Football Group

In 2008, Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan, the deputy Prime Minister of the UAE, minister of presidential affairs and the direct overseer of the UAE soft power strategy, created CFG and then purchased Manchester City Football Club (Murphy, 2021). Manchester City went from little importance to the richest club in the richest league in the world overnight. CFG broadened the Emirati investment base, diversified revenue streams and most importantly, began to raise the Emirates' global profile (Thani and Heenan, 2016).

The purchase of Manchester City was politically motivated. Gary Cook, CEO of City in 2008, oversaw the sale of the club and allegedly told Sheikh Mansour 'we are your proxy brand for the nation' (Pitt-Brooke, 2021). Since the purchase, his statement has come to fruition. City has become a marketing machine for Abu Dhabi. Ads for Etisalat (telecom),

²³ Real Madrid: US\$85 million per year, Arsenal: US\$42 million per year and stadium naming rights, AC Milan: US\$20 million per year (Murphy, 2021).

²⁴ Over one billion people watched the final of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, and when Germany won, the medals were distributed by Emirates Airlines flight attendants. The Dubai airline company spent over US\$100 million between 2010 and 2014 for the FIFA World Cup rights. They have even partnered with an Abu Dhabi owned investment company to help finance the remodelling of the Santiago Bernabeu, home to Real Madrid (Ulrichsen, 2017).

²⁵ Mubarak is a key advisor to Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan. He was made part of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council age 27, he is the CEO of an Abu Dhabi investment firm and he is the chairman of Manchester City (Montague, 2017).

Anbar (investment group) and Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority are seen during events at the aptly named Etihad Stadium.

Abu Dhabi's investment has gone beyond just the football club. In 2014, ADUG and the Manchester city council agreed a 10-year deal worth £1 billion to redevelop areas of the city²⁶ and build six thousand new homes (Ulrichsen, 2017). This investment has bought credibility and the affection of citizens as reflected in a banner hung at the Etihad Stadium which says, 'Manchester thanks you Sheikh Mansour'.

Further support for the club's owners has grown via a constructed outsider narrative. The UAE has consistently pushed the idea that Manchester City is the likeable underdog against the villainous UEFA, galvanising a fanbase that will defend them at all costs (Uddin, April 2021). Manchester City fans have shown unbending loyalty to the club and its owners, even supporting the government's trial of a British citizen accused of spying in the UAE (Ronay, 2018). Their passion for football and love for their club encourages fans to overlook the absence in the UAE of free speech, democracy, an independent media and human rights.

CFG seeks to establish its presence on every continent, by purchasing football clubs, developing football players, playing beautiful football and winning. In 2021, its investment in football returned unprecedented levels of success with four league titles on four different continents.²⁷ This has greatly increased CFG's standing in the world of football as well as the demand for it to invest in more clubs. Abu Dhabi is even beginning to use football as a source of diplomacy in the Levant. In 2020, a member of the al-Nahyan family purchased 50% ownership of Beitar Jerusalem, Israel's most notorious far-right club.²⁸ Using Beitar, the UAE can establish a political presence in Israel in a subtle manner as they seek to normalise relations with Israel.

Since Abu Dhabi's purchase of Manchester City, the club has won five Premier League titles, two FA Cups and six League Cups. It has made the Champions League final and has signed one of the world's best coaches, Pep Guardiola (Pitt-Brooke, 2021). However, the political impact has been even greater. Abu Dhabi has systematically ingrained itself in the fabric of Manchester and the other cities where it owns clubs. Its ownership has given the

²⁶ A recent report in *The Guardian* (Chakraborty, 2022) exposes how bad of a deal this has turned out to be for the city of Manchester. Prime real estate, previously owned by the city, was sold off at a cut-rate to ADUG who have created luxury housing and have pocketed the profits in offshore accounts. The same working-class fans who attend Manchester City matches have lost a part of their city to the club's owners.

²⁷ Manchester City (Europe), Melbourne City (Australia), New York City FC (North America), Mumbai City (Asia).

²⁸ Beitar Jerusalem is famous for being a far-right anti-Muslim club. The club has strong ties to the Likud party, and because it has the most fans in Israel, is a useful propaganda tool (Murphy, 2021).

UAE added prestige and respectability in business and sporting circles alike. It has also provided local fan support and has created new revenue streams. Moreover, CFG's clubs highlight the capacity of the small Gulf nation to build something successful. Most media attention focuses on CFG's success as opposed to human rights issues in the UAE. As Ellwood (2020) states, Manchester City is proof that 'soccer can function globally as a classic currency of soft power, recognised by very different states and societies.'

Saudi Arabia

Political History

Founded in 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Arabic and Islamic absolute monarchy of 34 million people ruled by the descendants of the House of Saud. The King is the Prime Minister, he presides over national security, upholds Shariah law and appoints a council of ministers. The constitution is the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and the version of Islam followed is Wahhabism. National revenue is highly dependent on oil, which accounts for roughly 90% of Saudi exports (Fatta, 2013).

Saudi Arabia has long been one of the more powerful countries in the region due to its sovereign wealth fund exceeding US\$400 billion. Its religious importance, as home to Mecca and Medina, cannot be understated. Despite lacking a prodigious military force, Saudi Arabia has relied on coercive measures to maintain its regional power. As the main opponent of Iran in the region, and a major exporter of oil, Saudi Arabia has benefited from economic and military trade with the US and the UK. However, as Saudi Arabia pivots away from oil and seeks to modernise, its authoritarian nature and human rights abuses draw increased scrutiny. Reports show over 1,065 executions in just a decade.²⁹ Freedom of speech is also vigorously suppressed. It is no surprise Freedom House (2022) gave Saudi Arabia a paltry 7/100 on its freedom scale.³⁰

Saudi Arabia has other concerns: its growing population, the onset of climate change, an uneasy relationship with Qatar,³¹ the ongoing proxy war in Yemen and the long-lasting Cold

²⁹ March 12, 2022, reports surfaced Saudi Arabia executed 81 people, including Yemenis and Syrians (Reuters, 2022). The next day Newcastle fans hung a Saudi flag in support of their owners at an away game to Chelsea (Benge, 2022).

³⁰ Activist Raif Badawi received ten years in prison and one thousand lashes for speaking out (Tifo Football, 2018).

³¹ Saudi Arabia accuses Qatar of financing terrorist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and Iranian militant groups who they believe are attempting to subvert the regional order. The Saudi-led blockade was an attempt to dissuade Qatar from backing these groups, aiding Iran and liberalising its society. However, as Qatar liberalises social restrictions and reforms its labour system, Saudi Arabia fears potential demands for

War with Iran which defines its struggle for Islamic superiority within the MENA region. To distract observers from these issues, Saudi Arabia is trying hard to show the world it is reinventing itself. Its de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), has established a national vision plan which will change the face of the nation and capitalise on the country's most popular sport, football.

MBS and Vision 2030

MBS became Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in 2017 (Montague, 2021), and was seen as a moderate, looking to improve life for the younger population and loosen religious restrictions. He opened cinemas, allowed women to drive and attend football matches and reduced religious police power (Tifo Football, 2018). He was also instrumental in dismantling the guardianship system, allowing women to get passports and travel on their own, and ending public flogging and executions for minor crimes (Montague, 2021). These reforms were received with great approval from Western partners.

MBS was also the author of the Vision 2030 plan, launched in 2016, which he calls 'an ambitious but achievable blueprint' that will strengthen the country's capacity to become a 'global investment powerhouse and gateway to the world', (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). With the power the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund, or Public Investment Fund (PIF), 'the engine behind economic diversity in the Kingdom' (Montague, 2021), Vision 2030 pushes strategic objectives emphasising the progressive direction of the nation and improving the lives of its citizens.

Part of the Vision framework is to diversify the nation's wealth, engage the under-30 population (70% of the total population) and improve the national image (Tarrago, 2019). To achieve these goals, there is a shift towards the privatisation of companies, especially football clubs. Under MBS's mandate, clubs in the Saudi Premier League (now also identified as the Prince Mohammed bin Salman Professional League or MBS Pro League) are being transferred to private ownership, ideally becoming more profitable and commercially driven. An economically stable league attracts players, coaches and investment. It also helps reduce pressure on club owners, who up to this point have been members of the royal family. With this move, MBS hopes the league will improve in quality, appeasing the public

societal and governmental change from its own citizenry. Saudi Arabia's 2017 decision to cut diplomatic ties with Qatar can be understood as a two-pronged warning towards anyone threatening regional stability and the regime's authority.

and garnering international attention.

All of MBS's reforms aim to modernise the nation and create an environment in which private business can flourish. By changing the domestic situation, the hope is that the West will see Saudi Arabia as an international partner. However, criticisms of MBS paint a different portrait.

One of his major critics, Jamal Khashoggi, openly refuted MBS's reformist narrative, exposing the truth about people being imprisoned for speaking out against the new agenda.³² The Washington Post journalist was subsequently dismembered in a Saudi Embassy in Istanbul, a murder the CIA has since confirmed was ordered by MBS (Montague, 2021). As a result, MBS's reputation, and that of Saudi Arabia, has been tarnished, making them a pariah in the global community. The Crown Prince, following in the footsteps of his Emirati mentor, Mohammed Bin Zayed, has turned to football to wash away the stains. It is the ideal tool to repair his international image, distract foreign investors and diversify the economy, leading to greater tourism, an influx of investment and recognition on the world stage.

Involvement with Football

Football's popularity in the Kingdom began in the 1900s as Muslims from around the world made the Hajj to Mecca.³³ In 1956 the Saudi Arabia Football Federation (SAFF)³⁴ was established and in 1959 Saudi Arabia became a member of FIFA. As football investment grew in the 1970s, the Saudi Premier League was established, as were stadiums and sports facilities around the country (Fatta, 2013). The large domestic investment paid dividends in the 1990s as Saudi Arabia qualified for the 1994 World Cup, becoming the first Gulf nation to reach the knockout phase. However, by the turn of the century, infrastructure was crumbling, quality of play was low and the Saudi public's attention turned to televised European football (Goldblatt, 2019).

MBS has reignited state investment in football. Jeddah has become the venue for both the Italian and Spanish Super Cups.³⁵ These events showcase the Kingdom and its capacity

³² In 2017 MBS purged his political enemies in Saudi Arabia. He held them for weeks in a hotel until many signed over large parts of their fortunes. There were claims of torture and a possible death (Montague, 2021).

³³ The first game in Saudi Arabia was organised in Mecca in 1932 for Indonesian pilgrims (Fatta, 2013)

³⁴ Not to be confused with the South Asian Football Federation which uses the same acronym.

³⁵ The deal to host the Spanish Super Cup is valued at €300 million over ten years. The tournament has also been reconstructed to involve four teams, ensuring a higher potential for El Clasico to be played in the kingdom. The deal also led to the ban on women attending matches being lifted in 2018, signalling Saudi Arabia's desire to be seen as more progressive.

to host elite competitions. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia signed a deal with the Real Federación Española de Fútbol (RFEF) to send its most talented players to Spanish clubs, creating a long-term relationship with a high-profile European football powerhouse.

Elsewhere, Saudi Arabia has attempted to increase its regional influence by creating the Southwest Asian Football Federation (SWAFF). This Saudi controlled, unsanctioned organisation proposes hosting events in Saudi territory every year, and would directly compete with the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) (Dorsey, 2018). It also suggested revamping the UEFA Champions League in a rejected deal worth US\$25 billion. Most importantly, it has tried to interfere with Qatar's World Cup hosting rights, by pressuring FIFA to give it future hosting rights, intellectual property rights and an expanded Club World Cup to be hosted in Saudi Arabia (Tifo Football, 2018).³⁶

The Kingdom has invested nearly US\$1.5 billion in hosting sporting events and placed an unsuccessful US\$600 million bid to replace BeIn Sports as the MENA region Champions League TV provider. Vision 2030 prioritises the growth of the professional sports industry and becoming the region's foremost sports destination is a priority.³⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising Saudi Arabia is still seeking more opportunities, as with its bid to host both the Asian Cup in 2027 and the FIFA World Cup in 2030.³⁸ Dorsey (July 2021) posits that if the World Cup bid proves successful, it would grow the Saudi leisure industry on an exponential scale, distract their young population – thus avoiding potential radicalisation or push for greater freedoms, polish their national image and help them challenge Qatar. Critics refer to much of this as sportswashing – using sport to improve reputation.³⁹ Quinn (2021) states that the Kingdom is looking for affection, but will settle for a change of focus, brought about by its vast investment in the world's most popular sport and progressive moves such as its new women's league. However, Saudi Arabia's boldest move has been the 2021 purchase of Newcastle United.

³⁶ Saudi Arabia pushed to have the hosting rights taken away from Qatar. When that did not happen, they encouraged World Cup expansion to 48 teams, meaning the hosting rights would have to be shared amongst Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (TIFO, 2018). This also did not happen.

³⁷ Private conversation with James Dorsey, July 2022.

³⁸ The Saudi's are bidding together with Egypt and Greece to host the 2030 World Cup in the year of the tournament's centenary.

³⁹ In a brazen sportswashing attempt Messi and Ronaldo were offered nearly €6 million to endorse the Visit Saudi campaign. Both rejected the offer (Uddin, February 2021).

Newcastle United

Despite having been in the market for a football club since 2018, Saudi pirating of Qatar's BeIn Sports, had prevented any successful club purchase in England. The Al-Ula agreement settled the pirating matter and Newcastle United ownership was transferred from British billionaire Mike Ashley to a consortium of the investment firms PCP Capital Partners and Rueben Brothers and the Saudi Arabian PIF.⁴⁰ A large portion of the club's fanbase took to the streets celebrating the deal, many in traditional Saudi headdress.

The deal is monumental for the Gulf kingdom. Investing late in football compared to its neighbours, Saudi Arabia now has a foothold in the world's most watched league. Following the blueprint handed down by Abu Dhabi and Manchester City, Saudi Arabia hope that its investment in an undervalued asset will pay great political dividends. Significantly, the Newcastle purchase gives Saudi Arabia leverage in the UK, where the kingdom will now be seen as patrons of a working-class city and saviours of an underperforming club (Quinn, 2021). The club will also be a magnet for increased foreign direct investment to the kingdom.⁴¹

Most importantly, as Dr. Ulrichsen (Montague, 2021) explains, 'The Saudi involvement in the Newcastle takeover is about buying a prestige asset for state-branding purposes... There is an intangible factor which the Saudis will be looking for in such an investment which is more about soft power projection, changing the image of Saudi Arabia abroad and utilising the mass appeal of football as a way to reach new constituencies.'

The new ownership group of Newcastle is under heavy scrutiny. The PIF is the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia, staffed by six government officials and chaired by MBS. Moreover, the PIF reports to the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, also chaired by MBS. Yet, the takeover deal was accepted by the Premier League on 'legally binding assurances,' that Newcastle would not be under direct control of the Saudi monarchy (D'Urso, 2021). Given the PIF is state run, and its entire purpose is to invest state assets over the long term to provide for its citizens, it seems farfetched to claim that Newcastle will not be run in a way that directly benefits Saudi Arabia.⁴²

⁴⁰ PCP - 10% ownership stake, Rueben Brothers-10% ownership stake, PIF-80% ownership stake.

⁴¹ This investment is critical. In 2021, FDI had only hit one quarter of the goal set in 2016, despite over US\$1 billion in Saudi money being invested into hosting and sponsoring sporting events (Rome, 2021).

⁴² Reports show the PIF hired KARV Communications on 25/02/2019 to 'create a clear distinction between the PIF and the political leadership in Saudi Arabia.' This is an attempt to obscure the truth. (D'Urso, 2021).

The purchase has also been branded as blatant sportswashing. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International claim it is distracting from the ongoing proxy war in Yemen and human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. Newcastle's success will help curate a polished image of the kingdom sidestepping the political realities. Amanda Staveley, part owner of PCP Capital Partners and the public face of the takeover, claims that the new owners take human rights very seriously and that the investment is not an example of sportswashing (D'Urso, 2021). However, Jamal Khashoggi's widow puts the true nature of MBS and the Newcastle purchase into perspective:

'Since the murder, many companies and countries don't want to partner or do business because of the backlash. He wants legitimacy and credibility. Buying a team like Newcastle in the Premier League, in one of the most powerful countries in Europe and the world? You buy legitimacy in the international community. He's accepted and celebrated for rescuing a struggling team. Everyone then sees everything in a different light.'

(Montague, 2021)

Saudi Arabia's investment in football is bringing it increased attention; it hopes foreign investment and greater international standing will follow. The PIF has already secured investments in Uber, Disney and Starbucks, and continues to finance Saudi modernisation projects such as NEOM and Qiddiya. As Nick McGeehan, Human Rights Researcher, puts it, the investment is not about making money, but about using high-value brands to present itself as progressive and tolerant (Delaney, 2018).

Conclusion

This paper set out to expand the scholarship in the study of sports in international relations by establishing Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia's motivations for investing in football. To do so, Nye's theory of soft power was explained, and its use by each nation individually examined.

Nye's theory is based on the principle of attraction, which he posits is rooted in culture, values and policies. Due to their connection to Islam and their human rights concerns, Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia suffer from an attraction deficit. Seeing that the pull of fossil fuels – the resource which has kept them relevant in international affairs until now

– will wane in the coming decades, all three nations have begun to reinvent themselves in the hopes of being more accepted in the international community. Using football allows these nations to create long-term relationships between the state and the communities where their clubs play. Moreover, their investment creates constant opportunities for nation-branding, painting these states in a new light and increasing their cultural appeal.

The attraction of football is its universal popularity. As Goldblatt (2019) explains, over 3 billion people watched some of the 2018 World Cup, and nearly 40% of the audience was female. Even nations that did not qualify, like China and India, had vast amounts of fans tuning in. Moreover, football has universally understood values, and a shared culture which helps foster unity.⁴³ Football also provides lucrative economic opportunities and often earns owners praise from their fan bases.

Given its lack of military power and its much publicised falling out with neighbouring nations, Qatar is seeking to protect itself by gaining international renown. To do so, it has purchased PSG, linking Qatar with Paris. It has created first-class sporting facilities, sponsored major European clubs like FC Barcelona and will host the FIFA World Cup in 2022. Qatar's sponsorship of FC Barcelona cannot be overlooked. Barcelona's social values, ties to UNICEF and 'més que un club' ethos grant Qatar new legitimacy on the international stage (Ginesta, 2013). It is recognised as an important intermediary in the Middle East, especially by the US, and it is proving to be a reliable business partner to many Western European nations.

However, Qatar's legitimacy and international renown will be tested at the upcoming World Cup. If human rights issues, lack of available hotel rooms, lack of alcohol and congested transportation prove to be the primary talking points throughout the tournament, Qatar's star will fade quickly. The stereotype of the Arab-Islamic nation as a representative of 'the other' will return, and billions will have been spent with little return to show for it.

The UAE use of football focuses on turning the nation into a global transportation and business hub. Abu Dhabi and Dubai have spent billions sponsoring events and clubs in Europe and around the world, ensuring that their clubs become household names.

Moreover, Abu Dhabi has worked hard to establish City Football Group which invests in clubs on every continent and has become synonymous with footballing success. Despite

⁴³ Despite wars and national borders dividing both North and South Korea and North and South Yemen, both sets of divided nations have used football to break bread, promote unity and maintain the notion of a single ethnic nation (Stevenson and Alaug, 2008).

occasional backlash regarding human rights issues, or opportunistic business deals, by establishing successful football clubs and sponsorship deals, the UAE has increased its international credibility and drawn the attention of investors, becoming an indispensable part of the global economy in the process.

Saudi Arabia is the newest soft power player in the football world. Having seen the benefits its neighbours have reaped from investing in football, the Kingdom has joined in. Saudi Arabia is looking to reinvent its image after the war in Yemen and the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. Hosting events like the Spanish Super Cup, buying Newcastle United and making progressive changes to Saudi society are creating connections between Saudi Arabia and other nations. The rewards of this project are beginning to show in northern England where the talk of Saudi blood-money and human rights abuses has dissipated as Newcastle Football Club's results on the field have improved. Newcastle are showing signs of competitiveness, but more so, they seem to be well run, and have likeable and knowledgeable characters like Eddie Howe and Dan Ashworth in charge now. This has reenergised the connection between the fans and the club and could help foster goodwill.⁴⁴

The use of football to create goodwill and ensure survival beyond fossil fuels has also given rise to backlash. Not only has it opened the door for possible soft disempowerment, but it has created the sportswashing narrative. These states present themselves as progressive nations through football, and thereby wash their hands clean of their human rights abuses. When effective, such sportswashing gives international legitimacy, but because portions of the media have recognised it as a screen for such abuses, the sponsorship and fostering of football has also led to heavy criticism of these states by the international media. This is especially the case for Qatar. As the first World Cup in the Middle East approaches, scrutiny over workers' rights and LGBTQ+ issues are ever increasing. Fans are even voicing their support for compensation pay for workers to be given from tournament prize money (Amnesty International, 2022).

The connection between sports and politics is as old as time, however the use of football by states to increase their public profile and international appeal is a relatively new phenomenon. According to journalist Miguel Delaney (2018), football is in a new age of geo-

⁴⁴ Not all fans are on board. A recent report in the *Middle East Eye* (Uddin, 2022) discusses a small group of 20-25 Newcastle fans who have come together in rejection of their new owners. They believe the values of the Saudi government and their owners do not represent Newcastle as a city or football club. These fans have authored their own magazine, *Hailstones in the Desert*, touching on sportswashing, the Saudi-sponsored war in Yemen and homophobia in the kingdom.

politics, as evidenced by state-run clubs and the recent asset seizure of Russian oligarchs who own football teams. The future will determine if using football as a tool of soft power attraction has in fact increased the international legitimacy of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, there is no doubt that they are attempting to become more internationally relevant through football. They have everything to gain by doing so, after all, football is now 'sanctuary... the ultimate mark of acceptance' (Smith, 2022).

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Appendix: Timelines

Qatari involvement in Football

- 1940s Football arrives in Qatar with the influx of British oil workers
- 1972 Qatar becomes a member nation of FIFA
- 1975 Qatar appoint former English footballer Frank Wignall as head coach of the national team
- 2003 The Q-League is launched, each club is allotted US\$10 million. Stars from big European leagues like Stefan Effenberg, Gabriel Batistuta and Frank Leboeuf sign contracts in Qatar. Eventually the league is rebranded the Qatar Stars League (Goldblatt, 2019)
- 2004 Qatar opens Aspire Academy, a state-of-the-art training centre for football and other sports
- 2 December 2010 Qatar win the hosting rights to the 2022 FIFA World Cup This will be the first ever World Cup in the Middle East. (Griffin, 2019)
- 13 December 2010 QSI and FC Barcelona agree a sponsorship deal for €165 million over six seasons (Eugenio, Ginesta, Xifra, 2015)
- 2010 Qatar creates a Women's National Team (Goldblatt, 2019)
- 2012 QSI purchases PSG
- 2012 Qatar established a domestic women's football league (Griffin, 2019)
- 2014 Qatar Airways begins to sponsor FIFA World Cup, previously Emirates Airlines was the aviation partner
- 2017 Amid the Saudi organised embargo, Qatar runs a campaign to end the boycott using famous footballers; Xavi, Iker Casillas and the De Boer twins all participated. (Goldblatt, 2019)
- 2019 and 2020 Qatar hosts the FIFA Club World Cup
- 2019 Qatar wins the Asian Cup in the UAE, beating both Saudi Arabia and the UAE on-route to the final.
- 2022 Qatar hosts the FIFA World Cup

UAE involvement in Football

- 1974 UAE becomes FIFA member nation
- 1977 Famous Leeds United and England manager Don Revie is appointed as coach of the national team. His contract is for 4 years and £340,000 per year. His wage as the England national team coach was a relatively measly £25,000 per year. This appointment stuns the English public and offends the FA, leading them to suspend him for ten years for bringing the game into disrepute (Thani and Heenan, 2016). In the decades since, famous European coaches Roy Hodgson, Henri Michel, Dick Advocaat and Carlos Queiros have all coached the UAE national team.
- 1990 The National Team qualifies for its first FIFA World Cup
- 2002 Emirates Airlines begins sponsorship of the AFC
- 2004 Emirate Airlines secures the naming rights to the new Arsenal FC stadium in London for £90 million.
- 2007 Sheikh Mohammed Al Maktoum of Dubai tries to purchase Liverpool FC (Montague, 2017)
- 2007 UAE hosts and wins the Gulf Cup, sparking enthusiasm around the sport and the single largest public gathering since the nation was founded.
- 2008 The football league in the UAE is relaunched
- 2008 Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan purchases Manchester City Football Club
- 2009 UAE hosts the FIFA Club World Cup in, and again in 2010, 2017, 2018 and 2021
- 2010 UAE creates a Women's National Team (Goldbaltt, 2019)
- 2011 Etihad Airways begins a ten year, £400 million deal with Manchester City for stadium naming rights and shirt sponsorship (Montague, 2017)
- 2013 Government flies female fans to Bahrain to enable them to watch the Gulf Cup final
- 2019 UAE host the Asian Cup. Forced to allow Qatar to participate despite the on-going political boycott of them organised by Saudi Arabia. FIFA had threatened to expel the UAE if they did not allow Qatar in.

Saudi Arabia involvement in Football

- 1969 The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia calls for a ban on football, saying the game sparks trouble and hate and draws attention away from Islam (Goldblatt, 2019)
- 1970s Saudi Arabia begins to heavily invest in domestic football
- 1989 Saudi Arabia hosts and win the FIFA Youth World Cup
- 1992 Saudi Arabia hosts the first FIFA Confederations Cup, and do so again in 1995.
- 1994-2006 The national team qualifies for four successive World Cups
- 1994 The national team becomes the first Arabic team to reach the round of 16 at the FIFA World Cup (Goldblatt, 2019)
- 2012 Prince Nawaf bin Faisal forced out as president of SAFF by the people, replaced with a commoner and advocate for women's football – Ahmed Eid Al Harbi (Goldblatt, 2019)
- 2016 The Council of Ministers of Saudi Arabia approves the move towards privatisation of the Saudi Premier League (SPL)
- 2017–2021 Saudi Arabia leads an embargo of Qatar by other MENA nations. Simultaneously, it urges FIFA to strip Qatar of its right to host the 2022 World Cup.
- January 2018 Ban on women attending football matches is lifted
- Feb 2018 SAFF agree ten-year US\$1.76 billion deal with Saudi Telecomm Company to broadcast the SPL (Bainbridge and Moroney, 2018)
- 2018 Saudi Arabia pirate's the BeIN Sports (Qatar) feed of the FIFA World Cup, providing it free to its national audience
- 2019 and 2020 Regional women's leagues are established around the country
- 2019 Department of Women's Football Development set up, centred on creating a new national league and expanding the growth of the women's game.
- 2021 Saudi Arabia establishes a national women's league. 16 teams participate and Al- Mamlaka wins the inaugural title.
- 2022 A women's national team is also set up and focus is put on developing female coaches and referees as well (FIFA Report, 2022)
- 2022 The SAFF Website publishes Saudi Arabia's major achievements in international football: World Cup participation – 1994 – 2006 and 2018. Asian Cup Champion – 1984, 1988 in Qatar, 1996 in UAE. Arab Cup Champion – 1998 in Qatar, 2002. Gulf Cup Champion – 1994 in UAE, 2002 at home, 2003.

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