



**“Qatar’s Sports Diplomacy as a Driver for International  
Visibility, Prestige, and Branding”**

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Sciences Po

Spring 2021

This paper has received the Kuwait Program at Sciences Po Student  
Paper Award

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## I. Introduction

Despite its minuscule size, the emirate of Qatar underwent a rapid transformation since the 1970s towards one of the wealthiest countries on the globe due to its sheer fossil fuel wealth combined with the advents of globalization. While the emirate's ascent to global prominence was mostly driven by economic rationales, Qatar has consciously ventured into other domains to build on the momentum afforded by its wealth. In particular, the emirate has identified the sports sector as an appealing domain for investments and diplomacy, as signified by its bids to host mega-events including the FIFA World Cup 2022 and the upcoming 2032 Olympic Games. Against this backdrop, the paper at hand seeks to assess the emirate's sports diplomacy in promoting the brand and visibility of the emirate by selectively examining the naturalization of foreign-born high-level athletes and Qatar's involvement in international football by hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022 and acquiring stakes in European football clubs, mainly *Paris Saint-Germain*. To this end, it provides 1) an overview of the academic literature on sports diplomacy and sport as a soft power tool in the pursuit of prestige and international visibility, 2) lays out the emirate's distinct sports strategy amid the need for economic diversification, and 3) assesses the concrete practices of the latter - the naturalization of athletes and football-related investments and events. Lastly, the paper critically evaluates the feasibility and impact of Qatar's sports 'diplomacy of attraction' in elevating the emirate's prestige, visibility, and favorable branding. In particular, it advances the argument that the intended benefits of the Qatari sports diplomacy are threatened by the close scrutiny the emirate has received as a result of its enhanced visibility. As such, this may also endanger the long-term objective of economic diversification away from fossil fuel resources which is closely intertwined with the former.

## II. Sports Diplomacy, Soft Power, and Branding

Sport constitutes one of the oldest leisure activities pursued by humans for the sake of pleasure, "spectacle and [...] the sublimation of conflict."<sup>1</sup> While today's internationalized sports world has become vastly more convoluted since the age of Ancient Greece - the cradle of modern sports spectacles - sport continues to play a powerful role in public life. In fact, sport has become a 'truly global' endeavor that generates immense profits and captures the minds and attention of billions of spectators, athletes, and coaches alike.

From a historical perspective, governments and ruling elites have frequently exploited sports as a soft power tool to transcend the boundaries of the game. The politicization of sports in the international arena is captured by the notion of *sports*

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2018), 37.

*diplomacy*. Sports diplomacy - a growing field of academic and civil society interest - is understood to encompass the utilization of sport as a means to achieve concrete objectives, mitigate discord and antagonism, as well as to facilitate strangers' mutual exchanges.<sup>2</sup> Precisely, it entails conscious and strategic efforts by state and non-state entities to leverage athletes, sporting events, and sports-related experiences to shape public perception among foreign and domestic audiences in so far as to further the aims and objectives of the former.<sup>3</sup> To this end, sport is considered to be a comparably relevant diplomatic soft power device to high culture - including music and arts - in easing political and social discord.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from its theoretical implications, sports diplomacy is being progressively incorporated into governments' domestic and foreign policy agendas, whether pertaining to disputes between nation-states, antagonized, and for broader ideological, economic, and political purposes. What Murray coins *traditional sports diplomacy* is thus plainly a subdivision in the field of international relations.<sup>5</sup>

An identifiable and notable practice in the field of sports diplomacy is the co-optation and exploitation of athletes, clubs, and sporting events. The academic literature suggests that sports mega-events largely appeal to states for the sake of their 'international prestige' as opposed to the mere socio-economic returns of hosting them.<sup>6</sup> Here, scholars have applied understandings of soft power and 'politics of attraction' as conceptual tools to rationalize the international appetite for sports-related mega-events.<sup>7</sup> While the practical character of these strategies is only progressively emerging, it is commonly acknowledged that a favorable public perception of the nation constitutes a critical variable in the encouragement of tourism, international trade, and political influence. This is particularly appealing to developing countries who consider such strategies to enable their incorporation within the global economy and expedite their development trajectory.<sup>8</sup>

Soft diplomacy emanating from sport has found several state proponents over the past decade. Here, the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing represent one prominent manifestation of this strategy by which sports constituted a strong soft power tool

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 61.; Stuart Murray, "Moving Beyond the Ping-Pong Table: Sports Diplomacy in the Modern Diplomatic Environment," *Public Diplomacy Magazine* 9 (2013): 12.; Thierry Côme and Michel Raspaud, "Sports Diplomacy: A Strategic Challenge for Qatar," *Hermès, La Revue* 2 (2018): 169-70.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy*, 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>6</sup> David Black, "The Symbolic Politics of Sport Mega-Events: 2010 in Comparative Perspective," *Politikon* 34, no. 3 (2007): 261-276.; Yoav Dubinsky, "From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy: A Theoretical and Conceptual Discussion," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 15, no. 3 (2019): 156-164.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfram Manzenreiter, "The Beijing Games in the Western Imagination of China: The Weak Power of Soft Power," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 34, no. 1 (2010): 29-48.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Grix, "'Image' Leveraging and Sports Mega-Events: Germany and the 2006 FIFA World Cup," *Journal of Sport & Tourism* 17, no. 4 (2012): 290.

for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>9</sup> While the portrayal of China in popular media was that of a backward and underdeveloped country before the event, the country capitalized on the international attention to project China as a powerful and resourceful nation by investing more than \$40 billion into the Olympic Games and showcasing state of art Chinese technology to the global market<sup>10</sup>, thus heavily leveraging sport to complement broader economic and political objectives. As of 2008, China has doubled down on this strategy as exemplified by its financial commitments related to the 2015 World Athletics Championship and the 2022 Winter Olympics. In particular, football has captured the attention of the CCP and is leveraged to obtain global recognition in the domain of sports by linking themes of soft diplomacy and nationalism with the sport.<sup>11</sup>

However, sport as a soft power tool is not solely conveyed and amplified through mega-events like the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. Athletes themselves can become valuable assets for governments keen on reinforcing a positive image and conveying a particular political and economic messaging to the (sports) world. In 2014, the US consciously sent three openly homosexual athletes to act as sports envoys at the Olympic Games in Sochi, interpreted as a direct message against the Russian position on LGBTQ+ rights.<sup>12</sup> Further, governments tap into the success stories of superstar athletes like Kobe Bryant, Usain Bolt, and Yao Ming. While these athletes “personify qualities such as virtue, grace, courage, humility,” they also symbolize success, which is of considerable importance in sports diplomacy strategies.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the consultancy firm *Portland* considers the amount of Olympic hardware of a country’s athletes in its *Global Soft Power Ranking 2019* as an indicator of the nation’s socio-cultural prestige.<sup>14</sup> To this end, winning and success are equally relevant in the domestic context, contributing to nation-building processes and strengthening national pride.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, capital and human investments in the competitiveness of a state’s professional sports sector are considered to be closely linked to a nation’s infrastructural development including sports-related facilities and other forms of physical infrastructure that harbors long-term benefits for the country and may increase its attraction to foreign investment and tourism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Dubinsky, “From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy,” 160.

<sup>11</sup> Owen Gibson, “The Great Windfall of China: A Football Revolution that may lead to World Cup,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2016/feb/06/china-football-revolution-world-cup>.

<sup>12</sup> Murray, *Sports Diplomacy*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 77 & 103.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan McClory, “The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2019,” *Portland*, October 31, 2019. <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2019-1.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Danyel Reiche, “Investing in Sporting Success as a Domestic and Foreign Policy Tool: The Case of Qatar,” *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 7, no. 4 (2015): 490.

<sup>16</sup> Dubinsky, “From Soft Power to Sports Diplomacy,” 157-158.

### III. The Case of Qatar - Main Section/Analysis

#### A) Qatar's Sports Diplomacy - Background and Purpose(s)

Building on the theoretical and conceptual insights outlined in the preceding section, the sports diplomacy pursued by Qatar presents a remarkably intriguing case. In juxtaposition to other emerging countries on the international sports stage without a notable history of sporting success - i.e. China, South Africa, and Brazil to some extent - Qatar is characterized by a relatively minuscule population with one of the highest GDP per capita in the world. Whereas the former states possess obvious socio-economic incentives to engage in the highly monetized sports world amid the persistence of wide-scale poverty and regional imbalances, Qatar - on the surface - does not encounter these obstacles.<sup>17</sup> Hence, this section traces the background and objectives of Qatar's unique sports diplomacy strategy against the backdrop of the emirate's domestic context and international configuration.

In 2011, with the launch of the *National Development Strategy 2011-2016*, the Qatar Olympic Committee (QCC) publicly presented the priorities and objectives of the emirate's sports diplomacy strategy, which ought to be the focal point of investment and financial allocation.<sup>18</sup> For one, the strategy set specific domestic targets including the improvement of national health amid the proliferation of chronic diseases due to a lack of physical activity and domestic lifestyles, as well as the preservation of national identity and cultural awareness among young citizens. More importantly, the QCC expressed a focus on the improvement of Qatar's visibility and relations with international partners in line with the emirate's short- and long-term objectives, which marks the focus of this section.<sup>19</sup>

The latter dimension - the enhancement of Qatar's visibility and international partnerships through sports - aligns with the traditional sports diplomacy paradigm and the utilization of sports as a soft power tool identified in the scholarly literature. As outlined throughout the document, Qatar regards the prioritization of investments into sporting success and the hosting of mega-events as a means to enhance its cultural attractiveness and the emirate's visibility on the international stage. On one hand, the emirate's sports diplomacy can be perceived as a direct attempt to conceal and compensate for its weaknesses in terms of hard power through soft power tools - i.e. the attraction of fans, political leaders, and socio-

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<sup>17</sup> Reiche, "Investing in Sporting Success," 491.

<sup>18</sup> Government of Qatar, "Qatar Second National Development Strategy 2018-2022," September 2018. <https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/knowledge/Documents/NDS2Final.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Reiche, "Investing in Sporting Success," 497.

economic elites through the vehicle of sports.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Qatar seeks to tie sporting success to the brand of Qatar and thereby gain upper hand over foreign investment, tourism, and popular perceptions across the globe vis-à-vis its regional competitors. A key strategy in this context is to raise awareness of the emirate's achievements in a variety of domains - including sports - to "position the state in the minds of international audiences alongside notions of excellence, admiration and leadership."<sup>21</sup> Simultaneously, the strategy serves to distinguish the emirate from its regional competitors and the broader region which remains mired in conflict and political instability, portraying itself as a bulwark of stability.<sup>22</sup> This is particularly relevant in consideration of Qatar's vulnerability in terms of security and defense in a highly volatile region and intra-regional geopolitical competition.

However, the aim of transforming Qatar into a global sports hub cannot be divorced from the emirate's long-term objective to stimulate economic diversification codified in Qatar's *Vision 2030*. As recognized by scholars and policymakers alike, Qatar - like its regional peers - has anticipated the need for diversification of national income away from reliance on fossil fuel resources against the backdrop of global dependence on LNG and related rent-seeking arrangements.<sup>23</sup> While Qatar boasts considerable fossil fuel reserves, the early and progressive shift to alternative income streams may allow the emirate to evade expensive transformation at a later stage.<sup>24</sup> Qatar's thus leverages its sports as a branding strategy to trigger an anticipatory shift towards the diversification of national income generation towards sports-related sectors. These aims include the boosting of tourism, TV deals, and foreign investments disassociated from the emirate's fossil fuel wealth. In this context, sports-related investments are equally considered to enhance the attractiveness of the emirate to white-collar workers from advanced industrialized economies who are often reluctant to pursue employment in the region. Here, the entertainment value of sports is expected to overcome the obstacles to the employment of highly skilled laborers.<sup>25</sup> In consideration of these factors, Qatar's sports diplomacy noticeably diverges from the strategies pursued by Brazil, China, and South Africa whose objectives are principally related to ambitions of regional and global primacy.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> James M. Dorsey, "Qatar's sports-focused public diplomacy policies backfiring," *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 10, 2014. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/qatars-sports-focused-public-diplomacy-policies-backfiring-62226>.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Grix, Paul Michael Brannagan, and Donna Lee, "Qatar's Global Sports Strategy: Soft Power and the 2022 World Cup," In *Entering the Global Arena* (Palgrave Pivot, Singapore, 2019), 101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.; Côme and Raspaud, "A Strategic Challenge for Qatar," 171-72.

<sup>24</sup> Danyel Reiche, "Energy Policies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—Possibilities and Limitations of Ecological Modernization in Rentier States," *Energy Policy* 38, no. 5 (2010): 2396.

<sup>25</sup> Reiche, "Investing in Sporting Success," 497.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.

Hence, while it contains a range of domestic and foreign targets, the strategy clearly envisions the emirate's sports investments to translate into improved ties with foreign partners, visibility, and favorable public perceptions. This is partly motivated by regional configurations, but equally by the need to diversify national income in the face of a global shift away from fossil fuel resources.

### B) *Manifestations of Qatar's Sports Diplomacy/Strategy*

This section examines the practical manifestation of Qatar's sports diplomacy. To this end, it does not exhaustively investigate every aspect of this diplomacy which is strongly tied to national media outlets, mainly *Al-Jazeera* and *beIN Sports*. Rather, the section selectively explores the naturalization of foreign-born athletes - mainly for the purposes of Qatar's visibility in the Olympic Games and related international competitions - as well as the involvement of the emirate in international football, reflected in the partial ownership of European football clubs and the emirate's successful bid to host the FIFA World Cup 2022.

#### a. The Naturalization of High-Level Athletes

A progressively developing practice among states seeking to enhance their sporting success and thus their international reputation is the naturalization of foreign-born athletes, a process that entails the provision of citizenship to athletes without clear ties to the state. The naturalization of high-level athletes is generally considered as a mutually beneficial arrangement for weak sporting nations and athletes from highly competitive sporting nations.<sup>27</sup> While mired in controversy amid the perceived commodification of citizenship, naturalization schemes enable states to build on the sporting successes of foreign-born high-level athletes to enhance their competitiveness and thus prestige on the global stage in the form of "medal tables and FIFA world rankings", while high-level athletes are provided with an easier path towards participation in international tournaments and events when suiting up for less competitive sporting countries which lack sophisticated domestic sporting structures.<sup>28</sup>

This outlined practice of naturalizing foreign-born athletes is particularly common among GCC countries - including Bahrain and Qatar - which seek to make up for their relatively minuscule domestic populations by attracting foreign-born talent. In the specific case of Qatar, the naturalization of high-level athletes constitutes one tangible manifestation of the emirate's strategy to boost its international reputation

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<sup>27</sup> Cem Tinaz and Danyel Reiche, "Policies for Naturalisation of Foreign-born Athletes: Qatar and Turkey in Comparison," *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 11, no. 1 (2019): 153.

<sup>28</sup> Joost Jansen, Gijsbert Oonk, and Godfried Engbersen, "Nationality Swapping in the Olympic Field: Towards the Marketization of Citizenship?," *Citizenship Studies* 22, no. 5 (2018): 524.



and enhancing its (perceived) sporting excellence in international competitions with the ultimate objective of attaining additional benefits in socio-cultural and economic terms.

The naturalization scheme pursued by Qatar was noticeably evident during the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. It is estimated that at around 23 of the 39 members of the Qatari sports delegation were born outside of the emirate and had been provided with citizenship solely for the purpose of representing Qatar at the international event.<sup>29</sup> While the naturalization of athletes commonly reflects historically-rooted migrational patterns, only a limited number of athletes in question actually originated from Arab descent. Conversely, athletes from Nigeria and Senegal - 13 in total - constituted the bulk of Qatar's foreign-born athletes.<sup>30</sup> While the marginal sporting success of Qatar in the 2016 Olympic Games was mainly driven by Qatari-born athletes like Mutaz Essa Barshim who won the silver medal in the high jump, the added value of the naturalized athletes was that it enabled the emirate "to send large, visible delegations to Brazil," thus projecting it as a competitive sporting nation to the world.<sup>31</sup> Here, the Olympic Games, due to its immense viewership and social media outreach - around 3.6 billion in 2016<sup>32</sup> - offer significant public diplomacy opportunities. As such, in spite of its limited success, Qatar consciously exploited the international attention of the Olympic Games to project itself as a tangible player in the international sporting world through the naturalization scheme.

While Qatar's practice of naturalizing high-level athletes for the sake of competitiveness and visibility in the 2016 Olympic Games has received the bulk of media attention, the naturalization scheme is by no means restricted to Olympic competition. Equally, Qatar's national men's handball team has become the beneficiary of foreign-born talent in recent years and has consequently managed to significantly raise its sporting success. In the prelude to the 2015 World Men's Handball Championship, Qatar strategically exploited the specifics of the International Handball Federation (IHF) rulebook to facilitate the naturalization of foreign-born players that had previously suited up for other nations. These players - including the Borja Vidal originally from Spain, the Montenegrin-born Goran Stojanović and Jovo Damjanović, and Bertrand Roiné who formerly represented France - suited up for Qatar at the competition in 2015 and tremendously enhanced

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<sup>29</sup> Tom Finn, "Qatar's recruited athletes stir debate on citizenship," *Reuters*, August 25, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-olympics-nationality-idUSKCN11015P>.

<sup>30</sup> Jansen, Oonk, and Engbersen, "Nationality Swapping in the Olympic Field," 530.; Tinaz and Reiche, "Policies for Naturalisation," 158-59.

<sup>31</sup> Tinaz and Reiche, "Policies for Naturalisation," 159.

<sup>32</sup> International Olympic Committee, "Global Broadcast and Audience Report: Olympic Games Rio 2016," Accessed April 17, 2021.

the team's sporting performance.<sup>33</sup> This was particularly crucial in consideration that Qatar had won the bid to host the event and thus wanted to field a competitive team. While Qatar was previously not worth mentioning among the major handball nations as signified by mediocre performances in the preceding decades, the emirate successfully placed 2nd in 2015 and has since managed to finish among the top ten in both 2017 and 2021.<sup>34</sup> While it certainly lacks the prestige of the Olympic Games, the Handball Championship captivated a broad viewership and simultaneously enabled the emirate to display its sports facilities, which again, remains a crucial aspect of its broader public diplomacy of attraction.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas the naturalization of foreign-born athletes remains controversial, Qatar's legal framework contains specific clauses that facilitate the above-described naturalization scheme in international sporting competitions. Precisely, Art. 6 of the emirate's nationality law states that Qatari citizenship "may be granted to those who have rendered great service to the country, or who have particular skills the country needs, or students who excel by showing promising scientific ability. Based on the requirements of the public interest, Qatari nationality may be granted in such cases to the persons concerned, who may also retain their original nationality."<sup>36</sup> Despite these provisions, it must be recognized that the majority of naturalized athletes are only provided with temporary passports and are only awarded dual-citizen status in order to circumvent the ceiling of 50 naturalizations encoded in Article 17 of the nationality law.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the granting of full citizenship tied to the inherent benefits afforded to the Qatari population remains reserved for high-level athletes that have managed to reach extraordinary victories while representing the emirate. Nevertheless, Qatar's visibility in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio and the emirate's sporting success in the 2015 Handball championship demonstrate the extent to which naturalization - even if only awarded temporarily - has emerged as a formidable strategy in strengthening the nation's visibility and sporting success on the international level.

#### b. Qatar in International Football Structures

The naturalization scheme pursued by Qatar presents a clear example of the emirate's attempt to enhance its international prestige and attractiveness through

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<sup>33</sup> International Handball Federation, "Player Eligibility Code," July 8, 2014.; Deutsche Welle, "Qatar's foreign legion primed for handball date with Germany," January 27, 2015. <https://www.dw.com/en/qatars-foreign-legion-primed-for-handball-date-with-germany/a-18219900>.

<sup>34</sup> International Handball Federation, "Team Details: Qatar," Accessed April 18, 2021. <https://www.ihf.info/competitions/men/308/27th-ihf-mens-world-championship-2021/22415/teams/133>.

<sup>35</sup> Sportcal, "Audience records tumble as France net fifth men's world handball title," February 2, 2015. <https://www.sportcal.com/News/FeaturedNews/5864>.

<sup>36</sup> Qatar Legal Portal, *Law No. 38 of 2005 on the Acquisition of Qatari Nationality*, October 30, 2005. <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/542975124.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Tinaz and Reiche, "Policies for Naturalisation," 160.

participation in sporting events. However, the most publicized manifestation of this strategy is the emirate's interwovenness within the structures of international football. While this aspect of Qatar's sports diplomacy raises the visibility of the emirate, it is - more than the naturalization of high-level athletes - inextricably linked to the aim of diversifying national income. Two notable exemplifications of this are the emirate's investments into international football clubs through the acquisition of ownership stakes and the highly-debated FIFA World Cup 2022 to be hosted in Qatar.

The FIFA World Cup 2022 is scheduled to take place in Qatar and has received considerable media attention over the past decade. For the first time in the tournament's history, the 22<sup>nd</sup> edition of the event will be held in a Muslim-majority country, as the emirate was able to outbid foreign competitors including Australia, Japan, and the United States.<sup>38</sup> However, despite the public awareness and scrutiny surrounding the competition, the World Cup is by no means the first sporting event to be hosted by the emirate. It is noted that Qatar has developed into "a serial user of sports events" and will have hosted around 24 prestigious sports tournaments/events since 2004, including the FIFA World Cup 2022.<sup>39</sup> While the emirate previously staged the 2011 Asia Football Cup, it is not merely invested in football-related tournaments. Qatar has hosted diverse events including golf and tennis tournaments, Formula 1 racing competitions, and the aforementioned 2015 World Men's Handball Championship.<sup>40</sup>

As outlined in preceding sections, the hosting of internationally relevant sporting events is an integral aspect of Qatar's sports diplomacy that serves to project the emirate's 'high-level culture' to brand itself as an attractive destination for tourism, foreign investments, and white-collar employees which feeds into the long-term strategy of economic diversification. Indeed, the chairman of the emirate's *National Tourism Authority* - Mr. Hassan Abdulrahman al-Ibrahim - explicitly affirmed that the FIFA World Cup 2022 intends to draw in fans and sports aficionados for a unique experience in Qatar and to familiarize foreigners from around the globe with what the emirate has to offer.<sup>41</sup> As such, the emirate seeks to draw upon the extensive media coverage "to have a permanent window for international promotion."<sup>42</sup> However, Qatar's involvement in the hosting of high-profile events, including the

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<sup>38</sup> BBC News, "World Cup 2022: Qatar bid team accused of secret campaign to sabotage rivals," July 29, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/44994041>.amp.

<sup>39</sup> Grix, Brannagan, and Lee, "Qatar's Global Sports Strategy," 99.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Hassan Abdulrahman al-Ibrahim, "Qatar's Tourism Strategy vis-à-vis World Cup 2022," September 7, 2018. <https://www.sbc-international.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Qatar-Tourism-Strategy-World-Cup-2022.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Xavier Ginesta and Jordi de San Eugenio, "The Use of Football as a Country Branding Strategy. Case Study: Qatar and the Catalan Sports Press," *Communication & Sport* 2, no. 3 (2014): 234.

FIFA World Cup 2022, is not solely a marketing strategy but equally serves to distinguish the emirate from its GCC competitors. Here, the emirate's efforts can be viewed a strategy to gain the upper hand over tourism, foreign investments, and white-collar workers from highly industrialized societies, while also helping it to foster positive relations and liaison with global partners and potential competitors.

Moreover, Qatar's obvious promotion of its brand as a global sports hub is strongly linked to the development of the emirate's domestic infrastructure which remains in flux despite vast investments since the 1990s. Reiche notes that the World Cup presents an incentive for the emirate to accelerate the process of infrastructure development before the influx of international tourists and delegations. These projects include the construction of a metro network in Doha which was originally estimated to be finalized after the completion of the tournament. However, the project has been accelerated and the first phase - connecting the mega-events main venues - is expected to be finalized by Winter 2022.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, Doha's sports diplomacy is not solely confined to the hosting of sports-related tournaments and events. The emirate has equally pursued its intertwined objectives of becoming a prestigious sports hub and driving the diversification of national income through the acquisition of ownership stakes and sponsoring of (successful) European football clubs.

Most notably, the Qatari shareholding company *Qatar Sports Investments* - managed by Nasser Al-Khelaifi<sup>44</sup> - acquired majority stakes in the French Ligue 1 club *Paris Saint-Germain* (PSG) in 2011, while a member of the ruling family - Sheikh Abdullah Bin Nassar Al-Thani - bought the Spanish team *Málaga CF*.<sup>45</sup> Especially the PSG constitutes a significant symbolism in the emirate's sports diplomacy. This is exemplified by the immense amount of monetary investments funneled to the French football team. The emirate has recently - with the acquisition of French superstar Kylian Mbappé - exceeded the billion mark of total investment into the club.<sup>46</sup> While the large amounts of spending have not yet translated to the ultimate success on the football pitch, the club has tremendously improved its competitiveness on the international level, regularly advancing to the latter stages of the UEFA Champion's League, Europe's most prestigious club football

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<sup>43</sup> Reiche, "Investing in Sporting Success," 497.; France24, "Qatar hits metro milestone ahead of World Cup," December 10, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20191210-qatar-hits-metro-milestone-ahead-of-world-cup>.

<sup>44</sup> While the link between media and sports is not discussed extensively in this paper, it is notable that Al-Khelaifi is also the chairman of *beIn Sports*.

<sup>45</sup> Côme and Raspaud, "A Strategic Challenge for Qatar," 171.

<sup>46</sup> Goal, "How much have PSG spent on transfers since Qatar takeover?," March 6, 2018. <https://www.goal.com/en/lists/how-much-have-psg-spent-on-transfers-since-qatar-takeover/hz1zvwykh4mv11vep6qdygex#1fbo4gzl8jhg17dj6nzez45rs>.

tournament. In this context, Ennasri stresses that the ownership of successful European clubs - in this case PSG - compensates for the weakness of Qatar's national team and that the former's sporting success provides the emirate with favorable public perception internationally and a sense of pride domestically.<sup>47</sup>

Ennasri's observation adequately underlines the importance of success in Qatar's sports diplomacy. In particular, Qatar hopes to tie the success of PSG - by spending exuberant amounts of money - to the emirate and thereby project itself to the global viewership and gain sympathies among fans. This approach serves to improve the emirate's international prestige, while also serving as an ideal branding strategy as demonstrated by the 'premium sponsorship' with national companies including *Qatar Airways*.<sup>48</sup> The latter aspect goes hand-in-hand with the idea that Qatar's strategic procurements simply constitute a way for the emirate to break its reliance on fossil fuel resources by investing in alternative business sectors and promoting its brand which fuels the visibility and profitability of national business and tourism.<sup>49</sup> While it cannot be disregarded that football remains a potentially profitable income source for the emirate, the acquisition of PSG is mainly motivated by soft power aspirations. Indeed, the emirate has staged several commercials featuring the club's top players - Neymar Jr. and Kylian Mbappé - to promote tourism in Qatar and the national airline *Qatar Airways*.<sup>50</sup>

### C) *Evaluating Qatar's Sports Diplomacy*

While the vision of Qatar's sports diplomacy appears sound and economically reasonable, it is debatable whether the strategy - selectively outlined in the preceding sections - has truly translated into the envisioned transformation of Qatar into a global sports hub along with the associated benefits of attraction, international visibility, and branding that would eventually drive tourism, foreign investment, and economic diversification.

For instance, the naturalization scheme employed by Qatar during the 2016 Rio Olympics has not translated into heightened sporting success. While it fulfilled its purpose of projecting the emirate's image as a sporting nation by allowing it to send a large delegation to the games, Qatar remains insignificant in terms of medal counts - winning only one medal in 2016.<sup>51</sup> Instead, the scarce success of the

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<sup>47</sup> Côme and Raspaud, "A Strategic Challenge for Qatar," 172.

<sup>48</sup> Qatar Airways, "Qatar Airways Announced as Premium Partner of Paris Saint-Germain," February 1, 2020. <https://www.qatarairways.com/en/press-releases/2020/January/PSG.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Grix, Brannagan, and Lee, "Qatar's Global Sports Strategy," 102.

<sup>50</sup> Neymar Jr. has actually starred in Qatar Airways' pre-flight safety and security video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFbwsWKi7iA>.

<sup>51</sup> Washington Post, "Rio 2016 Medal Count," Accessed April 17, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/sports/olympics/rio-2016-olympic-medal-count/>.

emirate was achieved by Qatari-born athletes, raising significant questions about the long-term feasibility of the emirate's practice. In fact, the naturalization scheme can be argued to stall the development of local talent through a process of crowding out, thus conflicting with a key pillar of the emirate's strategy. Conversely, the current condition of overreliance on foreign-born athletes that creates barriers for local athletes may cease to matter amid the emirate's investments in the long-term development of Qatari sporting talents - i.e. the *Aspire Academy*.<sup>52</sup> It thus remains to be seen whether the emirate can develop a new generation of Qatari-born athletes and achieve sustainable sporting success.

Whereas the naturalization of athletes for the sake of the 2015 Men's Handball Championship was more successful in terms of sporting success, the event was mired in controversy and did not help polish the emirate's image among international audiences. In particular, questions were raised about the emirate's excessive reliance on foreign-born players with (temporary) Qatari citizenship - more than two-third of the fielded team. While strictly speaking the actions did not violate the IHL rulebook, Qatar was accused of undermining the spirit of fair play and the competition as a whole.<sup>53</sup> In addition to criticism expressed by fellow athletes - including Australia's goalkeeper Thomas Bauer - the international press broadly scoffed at Qatar's strategy, "emphasizing that the Qatari national team was mainly composed of 'mercenaries'," comments that were not well received by Qatar's sporting authorities.<sup>54</sup> As a result, the emirate's sporting success was noticeably overshadowed by the means it took to achieve it.<sup>55</sup>

The positive impact of the World Cup 2022 to be hosted in Qatar envisioned by the emirate's sports authorities is equally questionable. While it has been shown that Qatar is banking on the mega-event to enhance its global image as a sporting nation, boost tourism and foreign investments, and drive domestic infrastructural development, these objectives are undermined by a multitude of factors.

Firstly, after the announcement of Qatar's successful bid, sports analysts and health experts alike quickly questioned the suitability of the emirate's climate, pointing to the potential dangers of exposing top-level athletes and fans to the region's extreme climate which can easily exceed 40°C in the summer. Even the FIFA Chief Medical Official asserted that hosting the mega-event under the above-described

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<sup>52</sup> The *Aspire Academy* is a state of the art training center - founded in 2004 - for the development of local and foreign-born talents. It constitutes an integral element of Qatar's long-term sports strategy.

<sup>53</sup> BBC News, "Qatar handball team coach faces questions over foreign players," January 29, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31031852>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.; Côme and Raspaud, "A Strategic Challenge for Qatar," 173-74.

<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that similar criticisms were raised about Qatar's Olympic delegation in 2016 but did not lead to comparable backlash, perhaps due to the lack of success of these foreign-born athletes in the event.

conditions would constitute a serious risk to both players and fans.<sup>56</sup> While FIFA responded to these concerns by postponing the event to the winter months, the reputational damage to the emirate had already been done. As a result of the controversy surrounding the regional climate, the suitability of the emirate as a summer holiday destination was put into question, thus conflicting with the objective of promoting Qatar as such.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the 2017-imposed blockade of Qatar by the Saudi-led coalition further dispelled popular perceptions of Qatar as a stable country. Instead, the emirate's alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and other regional Islamist movements, such as Hamas, served to perpetuate the image of Qatar as an unprogressive and conservative nation, thus damaging the reputational efforts of the emirate as it relates to tourism and foreign investment.<sup>58</sup>

In a similar vein, the spotlight of the World Cup 2022 has put a magnifying glass on the emirate's *kafala* sponsorship system for foreign and domestic workers. The Guardian estimates that approximately 6500 foreign workers - mostly from South East Asia - have died since 2010 due to a lack of regulations and safety measures on construction sites and climate-related conditions while building the infrastructure and venues for the mega-event in 2022.<sup>59</sup> In response, international media outlets and human rights organizations - including *Amnesty International* and *Human Rights Watch* - have repeatedly condemned Qatar for its well-known practice of sponsorship by which foreign workers often reside in inhumane conditions, are stripped of their travel documents, frequently do not receive their wages, and are thus essentially pushed into 'modern slavery'.<sup>60</sup> While the Qatari government and FIFA alike have repeatedly promised full transparency and guaranteed the stringency of work-related regulations, the sheer number of publications, statements from sports pundits, and professional athletes have arguably damaged the emirate's reputation and placed dark clouds over the event before it has even started.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, in regards to the FIFA World Cup 2022, Barthe highlights the inherent symbolic juxtaposition between the emirate's massive investments into national infrastructure and the expected performance of Qatar's national team at the mega-event. In particular, Barthe argues that against the backdrop of world-class facilities

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<sup>56</sup> Grix, Brannagan, and Lee, "Qatar's Global Sports Strategy," 105.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> The Guardian, "Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded," February 23, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.; Amnesty International, "Qatar World Cup of Shame," Accessed April 19, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/03/qatar-world-cup-of-shame/>.

<sup>61</sup> Brandon Jordan and Miguel Salazar, "Spoiling the Beautiful Game," September 8, 2017. <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/09/soccer-barcelona-fifa-qatar-migrant-labor-human-rights/>; In this context, the Dutch national football team is reported to have discussed boycotting the event as a whole.

and huge spending, the Qatari national team's weakness "reduces the little monarchy to a caricature that it so desperately wants to leave behind, that of the 'fake,' the artificial, stuffed with petrodollars."<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, the mega-event may reinforce an image and public perception that the emirate is desperately trying to escape by hosting it in the first place.

While the definite impact of the FIFA World Cup 2022 remains to be seen - it could turn out to be a spectacle that overcomes the highlighted criticism and backlash - the strategy of acquiring ownership stakes in European Football is one of the emirate's most controversial practices in the sports domain. While Qatari investment has arguable strengthened the performance of teams like PSG and thus gained some sympathies among fans, the general view of Qatar's role is perceived negatively. Indeed, football fans have lamented Qatar's 'financial doping' as a threat to the integrity of the game and the club has received several warnings from the UEFA and regulating bodies over illegal and opaque transfers to the team that violate European football's 'Financial Fair Play'.<sup>63</sup> As such, the intended branding strategy tied to PSG is severely damaged by these practices, including the highly publicized transaction of Neymar Jr. for a record amount of 222€ million in 2017.<sup>64</sup> While intended to enhance the publicity amid the Saudi-led blockade in the same year, European competitors perceived the acquisition as a manifestation of PSG' and the emirate's "nouveau riche behavior."<sup>65</sup> The move was equally mocked by football fans and considered as further evidence for the club's and ownership's lack of integrity. The backlash has been so severe since the acquisition of the club in 2012, that the emirate even shortly considered backing out from its involvement with PSG to preserve the image of Qatar and its ruling class<sup>66</sup>, thus illustrating the potential of the emirate's sports diplomacy to backfire amid increasing scrutiny and visibility.

#### **IV. Conclusion(s)**

Overall, the sports diplomacy pursued by Qatar for the purposes of branding and international prestige has brought mixed results. While it has strengthened the emirate's soft power and visibility on the international stage - in the form of sizeable Olympic delegations, success in Handball competitions and the hosting of

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Barthe, "Le foot, coûteuse obsession du Qatar," August 11, 2017. [https://www.lemonde.fr/festival/article/2017/08/11/le-foot-couteuse-obsession-du-qatar\\_5171226\\_4415198.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/festival/article/2017/08/11/le-foot-couteuse-obsession-du-qatar_5171226_4415198.html).

<sup>63</sup> Jordan and Salazar, "Spoiling the Beautiful Game."

<sup>64</sup> Goal, "How much have PSG spent on transfers since Qatar takeover?."

<sup>65</sup> Côme and Raspaud, "A Strategic Challenge for Qatar," 174.

<sup>66</sup> Danny Gallagher, "Qatar 'could look to sell PSG' because years of failure in the Champions League and ongoing criticism in France is reflecting badly on the country," May 3, 2019. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-6988343/PSG-funding-pulled-Qatar-ongoing-criticism-France.html>.



internationally-televised mega-events - this visibility has arguably rendered the emirate vulnerable to criticism and backlash by placing a magnifying glass on the practices inherent to its strategy and domestic status quo, such as the treatment of foreign workers. Nevertheless, it is difficult to precisely estimate the success of the emirate's strategy at this moment due to its long-term character. The FIFA World Cup 2022 may turn out to be a success and transcend international scrutiny, attract foreign tourists and strengthen the image of the emirate in the eyes of white-collar workers and foreign investors, which feeds into the crucial objective of diversifying national income. However, despite immense spending, the emirate continues to lack significant local talent and single events "like world championships and annual events like ATP tennis tournaments are not enough to operate costly world-class facilities at full capacity."<sup>67</sup> Further, it is noted that the current strategy is highly dependent on the emirate's fossil fuel wealth and raises concerns whether it can sustain the hosting of events or acquisition of foreign-born talent through the promise of financial benefits. In this context, it is noteworthy that the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected one of the emirate's profitable sporting investments - PSG - which is estimated to have amassed losses of €300 million since the outbreak of the virus in early 2020.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Reiche, "Investing in Sporting Success," 501.

<sup>68</sup> Frédéric Gouillard and Harold Marchetti, "Ligue 1 : le Covid plombe les comptes du PSG et de l'OM," *Le Parisien*, January 12, 2021. <https://www.leparisien.fr/sports/football/psg/ligue-1-avec-300-et-150-millions-d-euros-le-psg-et-l-om-s-attendent-a-des-pertes-records-12-01-2021-8418605.php>.

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