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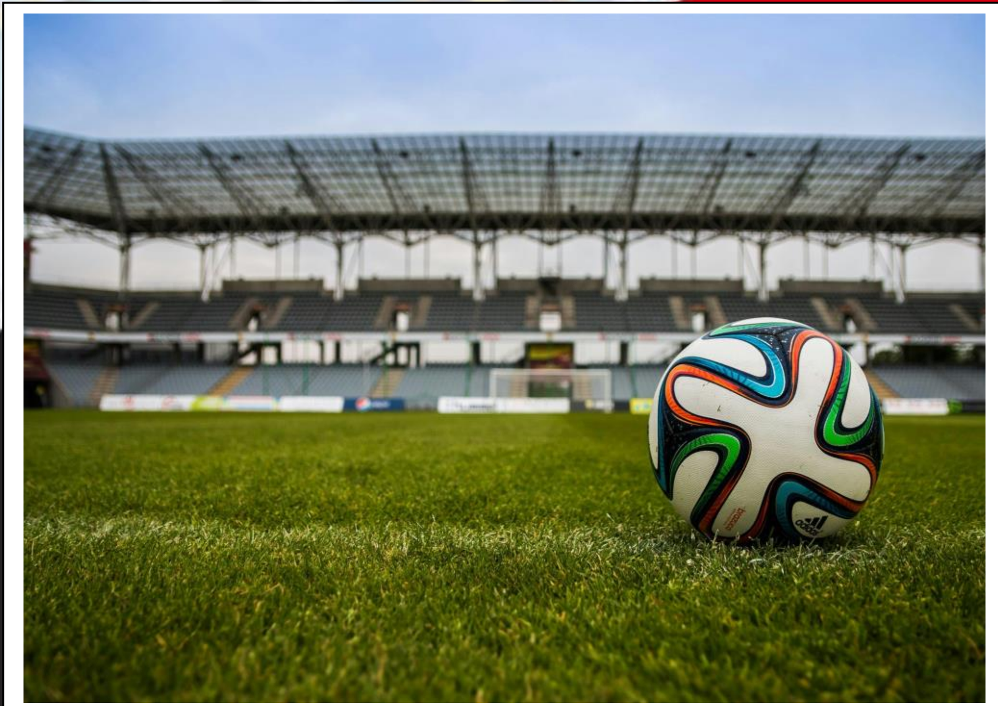

# Football, Identity and Politics in and from the MENA Region

Francesco Belcastro and Javier Bordon (eds.)

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La definizione delle soggettività di genere nella diaspora musulmana nel mediterraneo, Mimesis, Milano, 2015.

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## Introduction: football, identity and politics in and from the MENA Region

*Javier Bordón and Francesco Belcastro*

This report on Football, Identity and Politics in the MENA Region originated from a workshop held online on the 20th of June 2024 and hosted by the SEPAD project at the University of Lancaster. We would therefore like to start by thanking SEPAD director Prof Simon Mabon and deputy-director Dr Edward Wastnidge for providing us with the platform to carry out this project. The report offers a stimulating and timely window into an important issue, for which we would like to thank all the authors for their excellent contributions and engagement with the topic. As editors, we are aware that football might seem a trivial matter at a time when the region is witnessing widespread violence, regime change in Syria and a genocide carried out by the Israeli army in Gaza. We are however convinced that sports, and football in particular, provide a unique tool to understand the sociopolitical sphere, and within it complex concepts such as identity (Tuastad, 2019). Football and identity very often intersect to reflect and shape a broad purview of political, social, economic, and cultural phenomena.

This is particularly true in a region such as the Middle East and North Africa, where the game is both incredibly popular and closely linked to regional politics (Al-Arian, 2022). In fact, it may not be too far-fetched to think of football as a metaphor of the politics of MENA, where sometimes it seems that everyone gets hurt and every team has its own style of play that seems unfair to foreigners –paraphrasing George Orwell's words about the beautiful game. In other cases, football is a space of solidarity and accountability, as the support for the Palestinian cause shown in stadiums across the region illustrates. From the political chants of Algerian football fans to the attempts by authoritarian leaders in countries like Syria to use the game for their own popularity, and from the search of social justice by marginalised communities to the investment in the sport by Gulf states, politics and football and never far from each other in the MENA. Football therefore provides a unique lens to study the complex and multi-layered concept of identity, or rather identities, in the Middle East and North Africa.

The contributions to this report decline the concept of identity in different ways. Whilst the authors bring different theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of this

concept, a few themes emerge clearly from the chapters. Firstly, all contributions do not conceptualise the region as an isolated system, but rather incorporate football as a transregional and international phenomenon in their analysis. Several authors remind us how the region is deeply connected to the outside world, and as such identity can only be analysed and understood if we think about networks connecting the MENA to structures and dynamics elsewhere. Valentina Fedele in her chapter deals with diasporic communities and how football represents a network to the region itself. The case of Algerian clubs in France reminds us of the many ways in which identity and football relate to each other. While these clubs are undoubtedly an expression of connection to the motherland, they also reflect an identity of representation of and pride in local neighbourhoods. In this context, the identity of the 'periphery' is strongly marked by the experience of marginalisation and racialisation. Some of the same themes emerge in Tiago Duarte Dias' study of the case of Kurdish-Swedish diaspora club Dalkurd FF. By focusing on the tension between 'Swedish-ness' and 'Kurdish-ness' within the club, the analysis helps exploring the complex identity of a Middle Eastern community in a Northern European country. The chapter however also highlights how this territorial identity dimension interacts and, in some cases, clashes with football's global dimension, represented here by an external investor and his attempts to alter key identity aspects of the club such as the colour of the team's jerseys.

Crucial to this dialogue on identity is the question of who can participate in the sport. Who gets to play, watch and support? In other words, who is an outsider and who is an insider? Zahra Termeh Eskandari analyses how female football fans negotiate their space within the stands and in the wider Iranian society. By focusing on fans' agency, the analysis goes beyond the 'resistance-oppression' dichotomy that is often used to stereotype Muslim women in the region. The analysis looks instead at female football fans as actors with different identities, interests, views and aims, changing according to the specific context in which they operate. In his contribution, James Dorsey deals with the relationship between conservative Islam and football. Retracing the long and complex history of interactions between the beautiful game and jihadi groups in particular, the author demonstrates how the popularity of the game presents a conundrum to radical groups, torn between the predicament to ban the game and its value as a social and political catalyst.

The state looms large in the analysis of many of the contributors. It may be the actor that takes advantage of the popularity of the game, as the Assad regimes did in Syria in the analysis of Ola Rifai. Yet the same chapter shows how, for all of its control over the sport, the regime

in Damascus could not hide divisions amongst Syrians transpiring in the game. The analysis carried out by the author shows how, in the short-lived success of the Syrian national team in the campaign to qualify for the 2018 world cup, the regime used football as an 'identity tool' albeit with limitations. States are also central to the intersection between football, identity and geopolitics in the Gulf region. The media has largely focused its attention on the money invested by states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar to host international tournaments or buy European clubs. The analysis carried out by the contributors to the report however paints a more complex picture, one where geopolitical shifts are often the driving force and identity plays an important role. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen analyses the different forms of investment in football by Gulf states. His contribution demonstrates how the newfound centrality of the Gulf in world football mirrors the centrality of Gulf states in international politics, while domestic aims are often overlooked yet key drivers of investments. The relevance of these internal dynamics is confirmed by David Hernández Martínez's chapter. This contribution focuses on the socio-political role of football across different Gulf states and analyses how the beautiful game represents an important nation-building tool. The author shows how football has an important role in building, or rather re-building, both the domestic identity and the external image of Gulf states. Sarah Muhanna Al-Naimi and Mahfoud Amara focus on the case of Qatar and its sport diplomacy. Through Qatar's use of football, the authors show how it can be a powerful diplomatic tool, including one that allows states to change the narrative around their role in the broader global system. However, the hosting of international tournaments also has a significant impact on societal dynamics, interacting with gender roles in the country and perceptions of Arab and Muslim identities internationally.

Overall, the eight chapters of the report paint an extremely rich and diverse picture of football and identity in the MENA region. The beautiful game is a crucial tool in understanding the politics of a complex region, but it can also be a factor driving societal and political changes. We hope the reader will enjoy this report, that we see as an important contribution to an ongoing debate within academic and policy circles.

-Al-Arian, J. , 2022.(ed.) Football in the Middle East State, Society, and the Beautiful Game. London: Hurst Publisher.

-Tuastad, D. , 2019. 'Football's Role in How Societies Remember: The Symbolic Wars of Jordanian–Palestinian Football', in D.T. Reiche and T. Sorek (eds) *Sport, politics, and society in the Middle East*. London: Hurst & Company, pp. 41–54.

## Diasporas, diasporic football clubs, and their connections to MENA: reflections from Algerian-linked football clubs in France

*Valentina Fedele*

### Introducing Diaspora and Football: some theoretical references

The term diaspora has become widely diffused over the last forty years, evolving from initially describing specific experiences - such as those of Jews and Armenians, and later, populations dispersed for political reasons - to encompassing different and heterogeneous communities with diverse links to nation-states and co-ethnic groups (Vertovec, 2001). These links, across generations, become diversified beyond national origins or affiliations, encompassing new identities and boundaries that are both ethnically rooted and shaped by processes of assimilation and racialization in so-called “host” countries. These processes can foster the creation of ethnic communities or minorities,[1] within which identities are lived and performed in various ways (Werbner, 2000; Portes, 2003). Alongside the collective understanding of diasporic belonging, there is a subjective dimension, which multiplies personal expressions and individual re-articulations of identities. The scope of analysis in diasporic studies has thus expanded: on the one hand, contributing to the increased diffusion of the term itself, and on the other, highlighting the need to deeply analyse and understand how diasporic communities articulate and maintain their internal boundaries (Brubaker, 2005). From this perspective, Mandaville (2003) offers an encompassing definition. Drawing from the Greek root of the word “diaspora” - meaning “scattering of seeds” (Anthias, 1998) - and working with Said's Traveling Theory (1983), Mandaville defines diasporic people as those who: (i) have moved, or whose families have moved, a significant distance to new countries, (ii) where they are a minority, (iii) maintain a relationship with their countries of origin, often remembering them and thus developing a sense of transnational belonging, and (iv) have built a common self-consciousness, a sense of identity (national, cultural, linguistic, or religious) through which people can recognise themselves and be recognised by others. This definition accommodates a variety of migratory experiences that evolve in different ways depending on the conditions

[1]According to de Haas, Castles and Miller (2019) the outcomes of migrants’ settlement process in receiving countries may be different, according to migrants’ characteristics and the action of the receiving state, placed on a continuum where on the one hand, ethnic communities are formed as part of a multicultural society and, on the other, ethnic minorities are created, whose presence is considered undesirable.

of departure from the country of origin, the experiences encountered along the way, and the modes of integration in the host countries, leading to heterogeneous subjective and collective definitions of memory across generations.

Such an approach enables us to examine the complex relationship between diaspora and football. As Kassing and Lee (2023) note, the two share much in common: they are at the same time globalized, embedded in localized places and identities, and transnationalized as imagined communities based on global communication and population movements. Furthermore:

> Football is a significant medium through which identities and communities are constructed and experienced at both the local and global levels for players and fans alike. Since football is also played and watched by diasporic people in transnational contexts, it has significant implications for their nationalized homeland identities, transnational co-ethnic communities, and diasporic, political claims-making (Kassing and Lee, 2023: 10-11).

In particular, through football fandom, as highlighted by Giulianotti (2002), expressions of individual and collective connections can be detected not only to specific clubs or teams, but also to national, sub-national and supranational imagined and material communities (Doidge, Kossakowski and Mintert, 2020).

Around the football pitch, both materially and symbolically, diverse attitudes toward the homeland may emerge, embodying ethnic nationalisms or separatist movements. International competitions, often with extensive media coverage, can engage global audiences in supporting specific diasporic causes and advancing political claims.[2] While the link between (political) identity-building and football has been explored from various angles in studies on migration and diaspora (Bocketti, 2008; Burdsey, Thangaraj, and Dudrah, 2013), giving insight into the role and significance of sports for different communities, there has been less analysis of diasporic football clubs at the European level, and few aggregated data are available on official clubs.[3] From this perspective, further research would be valuable in understanding quantitatively the impact and diffusion of diasporic football clubs, and

[2] See for example Schwabe (2019) on the Club Deportivo Palestino in Chile.

[3] An exception is the contribution of Gasparini (2021) and Gasparini e Koebel (2017) on Turkish communitarian football clubs in Alsace.

qualitatively, how and to what extent they foster diasporic identities, shedding light on possible directions for the reformulation of communal and personal belongings.

**A diaspora approach to Algerian football clubs in France**

Adopting Mandaville's (2003) conceptualisation of diaspora, the experience of Algerian diasporic football clubs in France can be examined starting from the historical and political role of football in Algeria. Introduced by French colonial authorities, football was initially restricted to Algerian nationals. Reclaiming the right to play became one way to challenge the symbolic violence of colonial narratives, and many football clubs were founded during this period, despite bans, embodying strong ideological, political, and religious identities (Amara and Henry, 2004).

This dual understanding of football - both as a hegemonic cultural discourse and as a counter-hegemonic practice - continues to shape its role in post-colonial social politics. It is used both by post-independence governments as a tool for promoting "banal nationalism" (Billing, 2005), and by Algerian people as a way to resist neo-patriarchal states, acting as a "weapon of the weak" (Scott, 1985). As Tuastad (2014) notes, in many MENA countries, football clubs and competitions have remained among the few spaces for dissent, providing a platform for contesting discourses and practices, with protests frequently occurring around national and international football events[4]. This dynamic has a distinct gender, class and generational dimension: among organised football fandom in Algeria and the Maghreb, young unemployed men dominate. The demographic profile of this group—males aged between twelve and thirty, from urban outskirts—also prevails among street protesters and undocumented migrants, the so-called "*harraga*" (Bedjaoui, 2019; Souiah, 2012; Allek, 2011). From this perspective, another characteristic of the link between football and diaspora/migration emerges: football offers an alternative imaginary for young people in countries where social mobility often depends on nepotism. It represents a meritocratic exception, a possible pathway to personal social and economic success. The analysis of diasporic football clubs must take into account also French migration governance, integration policies, racialization processes, and othering practices, which influence how personal and familial memories are used to construct connections to Algeria[5] through diasporic clubs, raising various issues. One

[4]See also Dorsey (2016).
[5]For a wider analysis encompassing the experience of racialization in Europe, see Hellgren and Bereményi (2022).

such issue can be described as the "loyalty challenge": othering means that top players of migrant origin, who publicly support Arab or Muslim causes, may be questioned about their loyalty to French clubs or the national team, especially when sports results are poor.

**Algerian Diasporic Football Clubs in France: between racialization and recognition**

The racialising narrative surrounding North African diasporic football clubs reflects a broader trend in French migration history. Football clubs have long been widespread, especially at the non-professional level, linked to working-class sports practices between the two world wars. Italian or Polish immigrants, for example, appropriated football playing, considered a middle-class practice, to affirm national or political identities (e.g., communist or anti-fascist clubs). However, in the case of North African diasporic communities, clubs were often organised around kinship networks, with football serving as a way for adult players to maintain an emotional connection to their heritage while also expressing attachment to their local neighbourhoods. This attachment often mirrors forms of urban segregation and social discrimination more than an ethnic basis (Gasparini and Weiss, 2008). Since the 1980s, the diversification of migratory flows has impacted neighbourhood-based clubs, which began to include people from various national and ethnic backgrounds. This reflects not so much a shared origin, but rather a common experience of racialization and marginalisation.[6] The racialization of diasporic football clubs has been exacerbated since the mid-2010s by the rise of Islamophobia in the context of international terrorism. National origins have increasingly been viewed as a form of communitarianism, as seen in the controversy surrounding the book '*Quand l'islamisme pénètre le sport*' by Médéric Chapitaux, a former French Minister of Sport, published in January 2024. The book, which catalogues over a hundred clubs and around eleven thousand players allegedly linked to international terrorism, has sparked significant debate. While its methodology has been criticised,[7] the book reflects an ongoing policy of criminalising football clubs based in ethnic neighbourhoods.

Already in 2015, the *Service Central du Renseignement Territorial* (SRCT- Central Service for Territorial Intelligence), after collecting a series of episodes, issued a specific note warning the

[6]This is also the case for clubs holding a direct reference to their origin: the Football Club Berbére has Kabilian colour and symbols, but welcomes people coming from different origins based in Seine-Saint-Denis.
[7] For a critical read of the link between communitarianism in football and terrorism see Gasparini (2024).

Minister of Sport about the risk of radicalism in amateur sports. This note became the basis for the provision of an official guide directed at individuals working in the fields of sport and youth activities (youth and sports agents, sports educators, facilitators, sports managers), with the aim of supporting them in the "football apprehension of radicalisation phenomena" by providing tools to prevent or effectively respond to such issues.[8] More than seventy security controls by the Departmental Directorates of Social Cohesion were carried out in football clubs between 2018 and 2019, targeting areas considered at risk of radicalisation by national plans to combat radicalisation in neighbourhoods (PLRQ-P*lan de lutte contre la radicalisation dans les quartiers)*.

These inspections led to two temporary administrative closures and a formal notice. For example, in 2023, the Sète Olympique Football Club, an amateur club with 50 members in the south of France, was accused by the Departmental Service for Youth, Engagement and Sports (SDJES) of engaging in community-based practices. The accusations included what was considered a "deliberate choice not to develop the practice of women's football" and the "absence of neutrality linked to the use of a symbol emblematic of the Muslim religion as the club logo"[9]. The logo in question displayed a green crescent moon and a star on a black background. It has since been replaced, and the crescent moon has disappeared. While its license has been revoked, the club has rejected the allegations, stating that the logo displayed "community" symbols of the Muslim religion, which were justified by the fact that it is a "popular club" whose members are mostly of Maghreb origin. The club also pointed out that this has been the case for many other sports associations linked to migration, such as clubs with members of Portuguese origin that display a Catholic cross, or clubs of Jewish faith, like Maccabi Lyon, Maccabi Sarcelles, or Maccabi Paris, whose emblems feature a Star of David.[10]

As Sallè and Bréhon (2020) emphasise, the designation of individual clubs as potentially radical does not stem from explicit national or religious references, nor from the use of recognisable symbols, but from individual expressions of religiosity. The media often portrays

[8]https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/religion/des-clubs-de-sport-amateurs-soupconnes-de-radicalisation-et-surveilles-par-le-renseignement_1129005.html

[9]https://www.herault.gouv.fr/contenu/telechargement/49311/368239/file/2024-04-18-86_Recueil_spécial_n°86_du_18_avril_2024.pdf

[10]https://rmc.bfmtv.com/actualites/politique/une-decision-politique-accuse-de-communautarisme-le-sete-olympique-fc-va-porter-plainte-contre-le-prefet_AV-202404250165.html

radicalisation as an individual phenomenon, focusing on cultural and religious aspects, and reducing it to a few signs. This narrative contributes to the racialization of a portion of the

French population. Young people of Maghreb origin and Muslim faith, who come from marginalized working-class neighbourhoods, are socially and publicly constructed as dangerous outsiders, reduced to the nationality of their families' origin, despite being French. This is a process of racialization, where constant reference to visible and ascribed identities leads to the reproduction of ethnic minorities. As a result, clubs are identified as diasporic and ethnic even if they do not explicitly reference ethnic origins in their name or symbols. They are associated with the alleged difficult neighbourhoods in which they are based and with the population that predominates in those areas, which often consists of players with a migratory background. From the perspective of football fandom, this process of racialization, which traces a part of the French population back to its migrant origins, creates a claim to identity that becomes part of transnational imagined communities. These communities share memories of marginalisation and histories of protest. An example of this is seen in the supporters of the Algerian national team during regional and international competitions as the Coupe d'Afrique des Nations (CAN) or the World Football Cup. The display of the Algerian flag becomes a socio-political act, processing the memory of the difficult French-Algerian past, in the claiming of citizenship rights, creating a common belonging based not only on shared roots, but on a shared experience of marginalisation.

What is otherized as a form of un-loyalty, is indeed a matter of self-recognition in a social history and experience. In other words, the Algerian national symbol is performed in the French public space, not only as a way to reconnect with familiar memories and origin, but also as a way to demand recognition as part of the French population. It can be considered as part of a broader struggle against the discrimination of French people with migrant origins, tracing back to the ‘80s movements, exploded in the “Marche des Beurs” (March for Equality and Against Racism- 1983), then in the *banlieues* riots of the ‘90s, and finally in the early 2000s discussed movement - later political party - of the “Indigènes de la République”. The movements, while different among each other, share the complaint and the belief that the roots of discrimination, exclusion, inferiorization practices against people linked to migration, are to be found in French colonial past and its racist narratives and practices. In this sense, recurring to Algerian national symbols is a means to articulate, sometimes through violent clashes with security forces, claims for inclusion. In this context, football can be seen as a narrative tool, providing a socio-historical framework in which hetero- and self-definitions of belonging are assessed, and communal and subjective identities are performed.

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## International football through a Kurdish-Swedish perspective: the case of Dalkurd FF

*Tiago Duarte Dias*

### Introduction

Dalkurd FF is a Swedish football club founded in the city of Borlänge, by Kurdish immigrants and descendants of Kurds, in 2004. In its first five years of existence, the club managed to be promoted five times, going from the eight tier of Swedish football, a competition which is highly regionalized and fully amateur, to the third tier of Swedish football. This league features several teams that are fully professionalized – coaches, players, and the administration – as even in the case of less wealthy teams, a large portion of their squad will be fully professional or at least count football as a relevant part of their income.

Division 1 or “Ettan”, as the third tier is called, is divided into two regions (North and South), but in geographic terms, the North division can easily encompass a much larger part of the country than the two tiers above it, as teams from the northernmost parts of Sweden are generally playing in Division 1. More impressive than the five consecutive promotions from the lower rankings, would be Dalkurd FF´s accomplishment in the 2017 season, which saw them being promoted to Allsvenskan, the top tier of Swedish football.

Although, their presence in the Allsvenskan has been short, with only one season, which saw them finish second-to-last (and also a move from Borlänge to Uppsala), their mark on Swedish football, especially with Kurds in Kurdistan and in the diaspora, not only in Sweden and throughout the diaspora in Europe, has been one that begs a closer analysis (Dias, 2023). This short article aims to bridge that gap, and proceed with bringing up discussions related to contemporary football through the prism of Dalkurd FF.

This work is based on my ethnographic material from 2019 to 2021, a period of time in which I conducted observant-participation with fans, members and staff at Dalkurd FF, and further complemented by an online presence within a Whatsapp group for Dalkurd FF fans and with continuous contact with some of my informants. This article is built, therefore, in dialogue with the perceptions gathered from Dalkurd FF fans, who are close to the club, that is, fans

who are based in Sweden and who follow the games and are, in some cases, engaged with the bureaucratic structure of the club.

**A team for Kurds or a team for Swedish people?**

In the year of 2024, Dalkurd FF are certain to be relegated from the 4$^{th}$ tier to the 5$^{th}$, the result of an economic crisis that saw the club being relegated in spite of finishing third place in the previous season, as the club was sanctioned due to malpractices. The discussion between who are the real fans of Dalkurd FF is still a permanent one with members of Dalkurd FF's fan organization, as they ask themselves, while the club they love is under the risk of disappearing, where are all the fans from overseas? This conflict between the desire of being a truly, transnational representation of Kurdishness, which happens to be in Sweden or the desire of being a representation of Kurdishness in a Swedish context and within a Swedish footballing tradition, lays at the heart of many of the discussions that Dalkurd FF fans in Sweden continuously have.

As the club achieved national fame, first by reaching Division 1 in five years, and then continued to be a well-known-actor within Swedish football, while amplifying their influence with the promotion to Superettan (2$^{nd}$ tier) in 2015, and the subsequent promotion to Allsvenskan in 2018, they also amplified their international profile, with articles about the club being featured at The Guardian and The Independent, while social media pages dedicated to Dalkurd FF, both official and fan-created, achieved a following that few other teams in Sweden have[1].

This international profile, based on a Kurdish population in Kurdistan and in the diaspora that has anywhere in between 36,4 to 45,6 million (Fondation Institute Kurde de Paris, 2017) would open up the club to a series of financial and economic possibilities that other clubs within Swedish football normally would not have, while placing Dalkurd FF alongside few football clubs from the top European leagues, or perhaps a few South American teams as well, who have a fan base outside their home cities.

This opportunity to reach the large Kurdish population, in the diaspora and in Kurdistan, would be characterized by the relations between the club and the brothers Sarkat and Kawa Junad, two Kurdish millionaires, who are from Basur (the northern part of Kurdistan, in current day Iraq) and operate in several businesses, but mostly in the branch of telecommunications and

banking. Initially sponsors through their companies, the Junads became involved with the club in 2015, until 2018, when they left the club, after a falling out with the club's chairman at the time, Ramazan Kizil. Sarkat Junad and his brother would eventually come back, not only with a role as a sponsor, but also joining the club's board in 2021, after the club were relegated from Superettan to Division 1 in the playouts, with Sarkat becoming Dalkurd FF's chairman in the beginning of the following year.

The first moments of Sarkat Junad's presence in the club were fraught with controversy, as the club decided to change the team's name and logo, and, after a series of protests on their social media, the decision was reverted, and, in what appeared to be a marketing ploy, the club, then, called upon the supporters to be more engaged and become members. This, in itself, would only be the start of a relationship that would often be described by my informants as fraught, as many of them would tell me that Sarkat Junad was completely unaware of the intricacies and the traditions within Swedish football, such as the fact that in Sweden, at least 51% of a professional football club must be owned by the members association (Andersson & Hognestad, 2019).

Some weeks later, Dalkurd FF would change the colour of their home jersey from green to yellow. This led to another series of protests from their fanbase, as several of them would tell me that the reason that Sarkat implemented this was that yellow was the colour of his political party in the Kurdish area of Iraq. Whether this was truth or not, within my informants, there was an ongoing feeling that Sarkat controlled the club through his sponsorship, and did everything in his power to bend Dalkurd FF to his will and his whims, even if he, effectively, could not own the club. Alongside his sponsorship came the promise of taking the club back to the top tier of Swedish football.

Dalkurd FF board was also quick to hire players of Kurdish origin from Kurdistan (mostly from the Iraqi league, but also an Iranian international who played in the 2014 World Cup), a movement which made some of my informants a little sceptic due to their choice being mainly due to their ethnicity and not their ability to contribute on the pitch, while some, would make inferences – unproven ones – that the players would get well-paid contracts to Dalkurd FF mostly to their personal connections or of their agents and family members to Sarkat, as a way for him to fix favours to influential people in Iraqi Kurdish politics.

Besides that, the club's social media between 2021 and 2023 was run by people in Kurdistan, not in Sweden, demonstrating a new focus from the club as an institution. This would, in turn, be interpreted by a large part of active fans as taking the club to their Kurdishness, while ignoring the club's Swedish aspect. That would be taken as a sign that the club would not wish to prioritize building a connection and a presence with its local fanbase, while instead, trying to become a club with an international perspective. With its main sponsor not operating in Sweden, and the club's chairman not being based in Sweden, local supporters would have reason to be suspicious of that pivoting. As the club had its activities within a Swedish footballing structure, its fans in Sweden are very conscious of keeping their favourite team as close as possible to this structure, seeing that, they are the ones engaging with it as a lived and near reality. Furthermore, most of them, if not all, are also Swedish citizens, and almost invariably communicate with themselves using the Swedish language.

**Reflections from Dalkurd FF and the state of contemporary club football**

During my fieldwork and my contact with Dalkurd FF fans, I could observe that their perception of their team, and of football as a globalized endeavour, did not exist in a vacuum but rather, was heavily influenced by the events and ways of understanding the game outside of a Swedish or a Kurdish perspective.

For example, a Kurdish way of playing football in Sweden, that would be perceived as being different than a typical Swedish way would be contextualized by my informants when discussing a typical way in which Dalkurd FF would play (Dias, 2023). In much the same way, teams like Barcelona or Athletic Bilbao played (ideally) in accordance with their Catalan and Basque identities (Szlapek-Sweillo, 2013), and as Giulianotti & Robertson (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004) point out, nations themselves 'play' football in accordance to their perception of their own national identities. Similarly, Kurds would, in spite of not having a national state, also play football in a Kurdish way, setting them apart from other identities present in Sweden and in the Middle East.

Another clear example of how the discussions, which pertain football as a globalized practice, also affect Dalkurd FF and their fans' perception of both the sport and the football club they support, handles on how much power an individual should be allowed to have at a football club. As mentioned before, after wealthy investor Sarkat Junad became chairman at the club, his influence and his ability to make changes in the club began to be questioned by a portion

of the club's fans. As Swedish law does not permit for individuals to own a professional football club themselves, many fans mentioned that Junad's lack of understanding of the intricacies of Swedish football (and according to others, his lack of desire to learn) as an interesting metaphor of how foreign wealthy investors can create a dissonance by alienating a team's local fan base, while simultaneously amplifying the club's presence in an international market.

In much the same way as Sarkat Junad changed Dalkurd FF's first kit colours, in 2012, Cardiff City F.C changed their home kit from their traditional blue (hence their nickname as "The Bluebirds") to red as its Malayan owner, Vincent Tan, believed that red would be a more appealing colour for Asian markets. He also made some modifications in the club's crest, in which the Welsh dragon, later replaced by a Chinese dragon, would feat more pre-eminently than the bluebird, the traditional club symbol. The kit change would be reversed after three years amid massive protests from the fanbase in Cardiff. However, the changes to the crest still remain.

Parallel to this, a discussion on the influence of money within football can also be understood through the lens of Dalkurd FF. As Swedish football due, in large part, to the aforementioned 51% rule cannot take in the type of money available at larger clubs in Spain, England, Italy or France, it shaped an image of local football as a more competitive and interesting form of the sport, one in which the clubs would be reliant on their member's engagement (Herd, 2018). As Dalkurd FF was, in large part, financially maintained, between 2020 and 2023, by a foreign investor, a part of its fans began to worry that they would need to find another alternative, as the club would become more and more dependent on his money, as other sources of income would become less and less important. Some fans also expressed concern that the club would have strayed too much from the local practices and traditions of Swedish football, something that those fans believed to be very important, as it referred to their identities as Swedish-Kurds.

As the financial of football has been a topic of discussion, as during football's early beginnings, in countries such as England, Brazil and even Sweden, the sport would be characterized by an ideal of amateurism. Even though nowadays a large part of countries in the world has a professional football league (sometimes even several, counting fully professionalized lower divisions), with paid players, coaches, and staff. However, those early ideas of amateurism, in which a club is supposed to be a representation of a community, a locality, a city, a region, a

neighbourhood, a social class, an ethnicity, or even simultaneously a mixture of some of those elements, still remain potently ingrained as symbolic aspects of footballing identities.

The ever-growing influence of money, with the newly round of investments from Saudi clubs in buying football stars from some of the largest clubs in Europe, being just the recent example of the trend, has transformed football into, at least in some aspects, a deterritorialized practice. As clubs buy and sell players to and from all over the world, matches can be followed from everywhere, sponsorship comes from multinational companies, fandoms are no longer defined by the closeness to a club, those changes inevitably bring some important questions to the front. And all those changes and discussions occur within a small, young club founded by Kurds in Sweden. Thus, even if Dalkurd FF to many is as unknown as the large majority of Swedish football teams, specially seeing it is currently playing in the fourth tier, understanding aspects of Dalkurd FF can also help us understanding football in a deeper and more complexified social phenomena, as it articulates a series of discussions which pertain a large part of the contemporary footballing world.

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## “Resistance and Protest” and/or “Negotiation and Joy”: the journey of Iranian women in male football fandom

*Zahra Termeh Eskandari*

Football, with its fandom culture, has become a powerful force in today's world, shaping not only social but also political discourses and policies (Power et al. 2020). Within this context, the role and status of female fans stand out, as they actively challenge norms, redefine identities, and carve out spaces for themselves in male-dominated arenas like football fandom (Pope 2017).

In this report, building on findings from my 2020 master project on female football fandom in Iran and reflecting on the journey of female football fandom in Iran to date, I aim to illuminate often-overlooked dimensions of this landscape. The objective is to underscore the role of women who identify as football fans in driving change by actively pursuing their interests. This analysis seeks to clarify how current narratives surrounding the relationship between women and football fandom in MENA, and particularly in Iran, risk oversimplifying the complex gender dynamics in the region, potentially missing the full scope of this story.

### The MENA region is not homogeneous

When discussing women’s participation in sports across the MENA region, it’s crucial to recognize that this area is far from homogenous. Each country has unique cultural, political, and social factors that influence women’s sports engagement in diverse ways (Hargreaves 2006). The idea that all MENA countries can be grouped together—especially under a shared religion like Islam—limits a deeper understanding of issues rooted in complex social, political, historical, and geographic factors. For instance, the experiences of Iranian women in football, where they have become politicized (Hassanzadeh 2019), differ greatly from those of women in Saudi Arabia, who have recently been encouraged by political leaders to attend stadiums (Lysa 2020), or from Turkish women, who have long benefited from secular policies. Treating the region as a single entity oversimplifies the complexity and diversity of women’s experiences. This simplification often appears in phrases like “Muslim women,” which reduce identities solely to religion, while an intersectional approach reveals a broader variety of experiences influenced by factors such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and class (Toffoletti 2017). Furthermore, some women may not emphasize religious aspects of their

identities; for example, some Iranian women today distance themselves from institutional Islam (Godazgar 2020) and even lean toward secularism (Abdolmohammadi 2015).

Furthermore, we need to question why the concepts of "resistance" and “contestation” are dominant when discussing women and sports in the MENA region, particularly about Iranian women (Fozoni 2008; Toffoletti 2014; Mohammadi 2020; Phips et al. 2024). Traditionally, whenever women in the MENA are the focus, resistance is the first concept that comes to mind. Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, when women face inequality, terms like "negotiation" "progress" and "change" may be more commonly used (Pope 2014; Forbes et al. 2021; Lenneis and Pfister 2015; Radmann and Hedenborg 2018; Gong 2017). In sports, particularly football, studies show that this domain is male-dominated globally, including in the Global North, where women establish their identities and create space through various forms of negotiation and agency (Hoeber and Kerwin 2013; Hjelseth and Hovden 2014; Pope 2014; Forbes et al. 2021; Lenneis and Pfister 2015; Gong 2017; Radmann and Hedenborg 2018; Pitti 2019; Martins 2022; Fenton et al. 2023). While resistance plays a role in the MENA, it is not the entire story. Focusing only on resistance when discussing women in this region oversimplifies the situation and prevents a full understanding of the complexities involved. To capture the full picture, it’s essential to appreciate lenses such as transnational feminism (Mohanti 2005), "which advocates recognizing and understanding the particular social, political, cultural, and economic circumstances informing women’s lived realities" (Toffelotti 2014: 78).

**Resistance and/or Negotiation**

When discussing women’s access to football stadiums in Iran, the typical narrative often centres on resistance, with FIFA or the AFC pressuring Iranian authorities to allow women into stadiums (Mohammadi 2021). While this is part of the story, it misses a crucial element: the steady, everyday presence of female football fans, who long before formal protests were growing in number and affirming their place in football culture. I argue that these women weren’t necessarily protesting or using football as a means of activism against Islamic authorities, as Fozooni (2008) suggests. Instead, they were pursuing their passion for football, following their favourite teams, and forming identities as devoted fans. This sentiment is reflected by Sahar, a 17-year-old interviewee:

> "I am not an activist or a feminist; I just want to be a football fan which is my love. I would love to support my team up close in the stadium. But I can't legally do that right now. So, I'll keep being a fan until someday we can change the law and go freely."

This consistent presence should not be underestimated, as it forms the foundation for larger collective movements. For these women, fandom is not solely an act of resistance but also an assertion of belonging—women affirming themselves as legitimate participants in the world of football. Over time, as the number of female fans has grown, their collective voice has reached a point where it can no longer be ignored. This is not merely about protesting exclusion; it's about embodying a culture of football fandom that demands recognition. One participant, Narges, 20 years old, captures this sentiment:

> "I believe we should keep up our fandom, and when our group becomes large enough, they (the authorities) won't be able to restrict us."

She didn't expect women to gain access to stadiums until their numbers grew so large that their voices would be impossible to ignore. This wasn't about organized protests or explicit demands for equal rights; rather, it was a belief that change would come naturally as fan participation increased. "The more of us there are, the louder our voice becomes," she said. This underscores how female fans are actively negotiating their space in football—not solely through direct confrontation, but by steadily expanding their presence.

The situation of women in Iran, especially regarding their presence in football stadiums, is far more complex than a simple narrative of resistance. While it's true that women face significant political and cultural barriers, including direct government restrictions, the broader cultural landscape has also begun to open up in certain ways (Eskandari 2022). Over time, parts of Iranian society, particularly younger men, have grown more supportive of gender equality (Darvishpour 2020) including female football fans (Eskandari 2022), and this shift has provided new opportunities for women to assert their presence in these spaces. Yet, these cultural changes are incomplete, and many traditional barriers remain (Phipps et al. 2024), especially when it comes to public spaces like stadiums (Phipps et al. 2024), which are still seen as male-dominated arenas. In this context, women are navigating a delicate balance. Yes, they are resisting—they're fighting for their rights, pushing for greater access, and challenging entrenched norms. But their actions are not solely driven by protest. Often, these women are motivated by the simple desire to do what they love—support their favourite football teams and be part of the joy that football brings (Eskandari 2022). These women

don’t necessarily want to confront the political system directly, because the costs of open opposition are too high. Instead, through their everyday actions, they carve out spaces for themselves, asserting their rights in a softer, subtler way (Phipps et al. 2024). The case of Iranian women demonstrates how activism can encompass subtle, everyday negotiations that challenge norms without overt resistance. However, it also underscores the need to rethink how politicisation shapes our understanding of people’s actions, often leading to single-narrative interpretations of these women's experiences that focus solely on resistance. Within the context of Iran’s gender policies, almost every action taken by women becomes politicised and is frequently interpreted as resistance. As a result, women’s activities may be mischaracterized as acts of resistance, even when their personal motivations stem from pleasure and joy.

This combination of resistance, negotiation, and the pursuit of personal joy has created a complex dynamic. Women are not only challenging the political and cultural structures through organized campaigns and overt acts of defiance (Mohammadi 2020), but are also constantly engaging in quiet negotiations with the system (Phipps et al. 2024). They carefully navigate the social and political boundaries, sometimes gaining concessions, other times conceding certain limitations (Azad 2023). For instance, women might agree to follow certain rules when entering stadiums, not because they endorse these rules, but because they see it as a step toward a larger goal. Fatemeh’s, 35 years old, statement shows this:

> “We don’t want to break the laws, we want to assure the government that we will act in the legal structures of the country and we are ready to follow any rules if we enter the stadiums.”

At the same time, these actions are part of a broader cultural shift that is slowly redefining norms and challenging the status quo.

**Globalization and Social Media**

Cultural and social shifts are rapidly occurring due to globalization and the influence of social media, and Iran is no exception. With expanded internet access and the rise of social media, female fans now have powerful tools to connect with one another and the broader world (Kunert 2021; Radmann et al. 2022; Fenton et al. 2023; Han and Xiong 2024). Iranian women are part of these organic changes, using these platforms to explore innovative approaches to social movements and value shifts (Eskandari 2022; Mirsafian 2022; Azad 2023; Sajadi 2023),

engage with global movements, and remain aware of social and cultural trends worldwide. Social media empowers Iranian female fans to negotiate social boundaries, strengthen their identities as football fans, and create new patterns of social and sporting behaviour. Although more research is needed, I argue that these changes emerge through Iranian women's everyday, joyful use of these platforms rather than solely using these platforms for protest and resistance. (Eskandari 2022; Mirsafian 2022; Phipps et al. 2024). As Mina, a 22-year-old fan, explains:

> "My friends and I always chant on Instagram to support our team, and when our team wins, we celebrate with posts and stories on Instagram."

Thus, organic transformations within Iran should be viewed in this broader context. By focusing only on "resistance," we risk overlooking the dynamic ways Iranian women actively negotiate and adapt within these global shifts, while simultaneously navigating local social and political boundaries and creating spaces that are continually evolving.

**Conclusion**

In examining women's participation in sports across the MENA region, it is crucial to move beyond viewing the area as a homogenous entity and benefiting from a transnational feminism lens. Each country's unique cultural, political, and social dynamics shape women's engagement with sports differently. Grouping diverse experiences under a singular "Muslim women" identity, often tied to one dimension of resistance, overlooks the nuanced realities shaped by intersecting factors like gender, religion, class, and nationality.

Likewise, Iranian women's experiences in sports and public life encompass more than mere 'resistance' to restrictions. While resistance is part of their story, they are also actively negotiating within social and political frameworks in ways that go beyond simply opposing oppression. Changes in social norms and political discourse are ongoing, with women playing an active role in these shifts—though not always as a form of resistance. It is important to consider that politicizing these women's activities can result in failing to capture the full picture of their realities.

Moreover, we must consider the broader global connections influencing societies today, contributing to an organic and complex process of change deeply embedded within evolving

cultural, social, political, and global systems. This complexity should be acknowledged: the story is not solely one of resistance, but of a multifaceted engagement with global, national, and local systems, where resistance, negotiation, and joy all intersect.

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## Soccer versus Islam

*James M. Dorsey*

In a sermon in 2024, ultra-conservative Egyptian religious scholar Nashaat Ahmad praised Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup for its civilizational success. He suggested that the World Cup had introduced Western soccer fans to cleanliness, with Qatari toilets furnished with bidets. According to Ahmad, Western fans all bought bidets in Qatari markets to take home with them. "They were amazed. At first, they didn't know how to use the bidet, but they were awestruck when it was explained to them. They felt clean for the first time. Throughout their lives, they were filthy," Ahmad said (MEMRI 2024).

Leaving aside the fact that bidets were first developed in 17th-century France, Ahmad's comment is relevant not for its misreading of history and reality but for reflecting convoluted and contradictory attitudes toward soccer among ultra-conservative Muslim scholars and militants.

For much of the last decade, discussion of soccer among ultra-conservatives faded into the background while Islamic militants appeared to set their sights elsewhere. Even so, security officials feared that a European football championship and the Paris Olympics in the summer of 2024 would change that. A call on an online Islamic State-affiliated media platform, the Al Azaim Foundation, for attacks on London's Emirates Stadium, Paris's Parc de Prince. and Madrid's Santiago Bernabéu during the European quarterfinals bolstered the concern. The posting featured a gunman in a balaclava with the message, "Kill them all" (Lions 2024). Barely a week after the Gaza war erupted, another Islamic State outlet, Sawt al Zarqawi, praised a lone wolf's killing of two Swedes and wounding of a third near a Brussels stadium where Sweden was about to play Belgium (MEMRI 2023).

The Islamic State threat revived the spectre of a decade-old long list of militant attacks on stadia, including Paris in 2015 Martinez 2015), as well as Nigeria and Iraq (Dorsey 2014), and the cancellation of soccer matches in Germany (Ryan, Faiola, and Mekhennet 2015) and Belgium after plots were foiled.

The jihadist threat was compounded by the presence in Europe, particularly Germany, of the Grey Wolves, militant Turkish nationalists, who see Germany's seven million-strong Turkish

German community as fertile ground for recruitment through emotional appeal rather than violence, even if the group has in the past not shied away from violence (Blaschke 2024). Founded in Turkey in the late 1960s as a far-right, ultra-nationalist, prone to violence group associated with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the Grey Wolves expanded in Turkish diaspora communities. With a membership of 18,000, the Grey Wolves constitute Germany's second largest far-right movement. Their ideology marries Turkic ethnicism with a Muslim religious identity.

The threats to the 2024 summer meg-sporting events did not materialize, but it remains to be seen whether the fear was exaggerated, or the result of security officials' prejudice.

**The threat of radicalisation**

For now, the Gaza, and more recently, the Lebanon war's mobilizing effect manifests itself in pro-Palestinian protests rather than violent attacks. Even so, authorities fear that in the long-term Gaza and Lebanon, fueled by perceptions of Western double standards and the images of human and physical carnage, could have a mobilizing and radicalisation effect like that of the Syrian civil war in Muslim-majority countries  diaspora communities.

In turn, radicalization could revive debate among ultra-conservative Muslims and jihadists about sports, particularly soccer, and the targeting of sporting events that have long been a divisive issue in their communities.

One school of ultra-conservative and jihadist thought sees soccer as an infidel invention designed to distract the faithful from fulfilling their religious obligations. Another school that includes soccer fans and former, failed, or disaffected players views the sport as a recruitment and bonding tool.

Men like Osama Bin Laden, Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah based their advocacy of the utility of soccer on ultra-conservative and mainstream Islamic scholars who argued the Prophet Mohammed advocated physical exercise to maintain a healthy body.

Nonetheless, the beautiful game also posed a challenge to men like Bin Laden and more mainstream, non-violent, ultra-conservative Muslims. Soccer was in a swath of land

stretching from Central Asia to the Atlantic coast of Africa, the only institution that rivalled Islam with its vast network of mosques in creating public spaces to vent pent-up anger and frustration.

More militant Saudi Islam scholars, at best, sought to re-write the rules of the game to Islamise it, if not outright ban the sport.

**A doubled edged sword**

The Great Mosque in Mosul, where Islamic State leader Abu Baker Al-Baghdadi, who as a student was known to be a talented soccer player, declared himself caliph in June 2015, was packed with men, many of whom were sporting soccer jerseys, according to Mosul residents speaking in multiple conversations with the author.

Similarly, an online review by Vocativ of jihadist and militant Islamist Facebook pages showed that many followers continued to be soccer fans. They rooted for Algeria during the 2014 World Cup but switched their allegiance to Brazil, Italy, England, and France when the Algerians were knocked out of the tournament despite their condemnation of the Europeans as enemies of Islam. “Jihadis are in some ways like any other fans – they support the local favourites,” wrote Versha Sharama, who conducted the review (Sharma 2014).

Even so, the Islamic State telegraphed its double-edged view of soccer in a purported letter to world soccer body FIFA, demanding the group deprive Qatar of the right to host the 2022 World Cup.

Addressing former FIFA president Sepp Blatter by his formal first name, Joseph, the letter, published on a since defunct jihadist website, Alplatformmedia.com, said: “We sent you a message in 2010 when you decided or were bribed by the former emir of Qatar to have the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Now, after the establishment of the Caliphate, we declare that there will be no World Cup in Qatar since Qatar will be part of the Caliphate under the rule of the Caliph Ibrahim Bin Awad Alqarshi, who doesn’t allow corruption and diversion from Islam in the land of the Muslims. This is why we suggest that you decide to replace Qatar. The Islamic State has long-range Scud missiles that can easily reach Qatar, as the Americans already know.” Ibrahim Bin Awad Alqarshi was Al-Baghdadi’s legal name (Dorsey 2014).

In targeting soccer and stadia, jihadists focused on the world's most cherished form of popular culture and the one fixture that evokes the kind of deep-seated emotion capable of rivalling passions associated with religion and sectarianism.

Soccer represented a double-edged sword for jihadists. The sport offered an attractive environment for recruitment and expressions of empathy. Stadia were ideal venues for dissent and protest as evident in the last decade's popular uprisings in Egypt, Algeria, and Iraq.

Yet, it also constituted a useful target. Thousands attended matches that were broadcast live to huge national, regional, and global audiences. A successful attack on a soccer match went a long way to achieve the jihadists' goals of polarizing communities, exacerbating social tensions and driving the marginalized further into the margins, even if it was likely to alienate large numbers of fans.

**Jihadists struggle with soccer**

The Islamic State embodied the jihadists' struggle with soccer and spotlighted the pitch as a battlefield. Islamic State's sweep through northern Iraq in June 2015, during which it captured Mosul, the country's second-largest city, was preceded by a bombing campaign in which soccer pitches figured prominently.

The Islamic State positioned itself with its spate of attacks and letter to FIFA squarely in the camp of those militant Islamists, jihadists, Salafists, and puritan Muslims who wanted to emulate life at the time of the Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors.

In attempting to do so, they opposed soccer as an infidel creation intended to distract the faithful from their religious obligations. They argued that soccer was not one of several sports mentioned in the Qur'an.

As a result, the Islamic State joined the likes of Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabab in Somalia, an Al Qaeda affiliate, that in 2014 targeted venues where fans gathered to watch World Cup matches on giant television screens. The spate of attacks in 2014 emulated Al Shabab's bombing in 2010 of two sites in the Ugandan capital of Kampala, where fans had gathered to watch that year's World Cup final in South Africa (Ssebulime 2010).

In contrast to Islamic State, Boko Haram and Al Shabab, jihadists like Bin Laden and militant Islamists like Haniyeh and Nasrallah encouraged the game as a halal pastime and useful recruitment and bonding tool. Yet, at times, they straddled the tension between a passion for soccer and a willingness to target fellow supporters.

In 1998, Bin Laden authorized a plan by Algerian jihadists to attack the World Cup (Robinson 2011). Similarly, purported messages by Malaysian-born Al Qaeda-affiliated bomb maker Noordin Mohammed Top claimed that the bombings in 2009 of the Ritz Carlton and Marriott hotels in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta were intended to kill the visiting Manchester United team (Fadly 2009).

Soccer figured prominently in Bin Laden's imagery. Speaking to supporters about the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, he drew an analogy to soccer. "I saw in a dream we were playing a soccer game against the Americans. When our team showed up in the field, they were all pilots! So, I wondered if that was a soccer or a pilot game. Our players were pilots," Bin Laden said (US Defense Department 2001).

**Us against them**

Anti-soccer jihadists were strengthened in their resolve by twisted ultra-conservative rulings that provided the theological underpinnings for the rejection of soccer by militant groups like the Taliban and Boko Haram. The rulings, asserting that soccer distracted Muslims form performing their religious duties, informed Al Shabab's drive to recruit soccer-playing kids in Somalia and inspired some players to become fighters and suicide bombers in foreign lands. A British pan-Islamist website advocating the creation of an Islamic state in the United Kingdom asserted that soccer promoted nationalism as part of a "colonial crusader scheme" to divide Muslims and caused them to stray from the vision of a unified Islamic identity (Lapin 2006).

Jihadist proponents of soccer's utility recognised the fact that fans, like jihadists, live in a world characterized best by US President George W. Bush's us-against-them response to 9/11. The soccer pitch, like the battlefield, is about aggressively dominating and conquering the other. The track record of soccer players-turned suicide bombers proved the point. Soccer was perfect for creating and sustaining strong and cohesive jihadist groups. It facilitated

personal contact and the expansion of informal networks, which in turn encouraged individual participation and the mobilization of resources.

These informal individual connections contributed to jihadist activity in a variety of ways. They facilitated the circulation of information and, therefore, the speed of decision-making. In the absence of any formal coordination among jihadi organizations, recruitment, enlistment, and cooperation focused on individuals.

**Action-oriented friends**

Another essential function of multiple informal individual relationships was their contribution to the growth of feelings of mutual trust. University of Michigan professor Scott Atran noted that “a reliable predictor of whether or not someone joins the Jihad is being a member of an action-oriented group of friends (Dorsey 2011).”

Atran’s yardstick was evident in the analysis of past violent incidents. The perpetrators of the 2004 Madrid subway bombings played soccer together (Dorsey 2016). Various Hamas suicide bombers traced their roots to the same football club in the conservative West Bank town of Hebron (Sharma 2014).

Mohammed Emwazi, who gained notoriety as Jihadi John and featured in Islamic State videos in 2014 and 2015 as the executioner of British and American hostages, was a passionate soccer fan. He and his European associates had seen their hopes dashed of becoming professional players. They belonged to amateur teams or bonded in part by playing soccer together (Verkaik 2015). Like other disaffected youth for whom playing soccer was a stepping stone to joining a militant group or becoming a suicide bomber, Jihadi John and his mates traversed football fields on their journey.

Emwazi dreamt as a child of kicking balls rather than chopping off heads. “What I want to be when I grow up is a footballer,” he wrote in his primary school yearbook. He believed that by 30, he would be “in a football team scoring a goal” (Sawer 2015).

In secondary school, Emwazi played soccer matches in two teams whose members went on to become jihadists. One of the group’s members told an English high court that the group had ten to 12 members. Several travelled to Somalia for training before returning to Britain

as recruiters (Cobain and Randeep 2015). Another, a British-Lebanese national, was stripped of his British citizenship and killed in a US drone strike. The group also included two Ethiopians who were barred from returning to Britain on security grounds, a man who trained in an Al Qaeda camp, and an associate of a group that planned but failed to successfully execute attacks in London in July 2005, barely two weeks after the 7/7 bombings that killed 52 people.

“They were sporty, not particularly studious young men,” The Guardian quoted a person who moved in the same circles as describing Emwazi’s group (Cobain and Randeep 2015).
Like Emwazi’s group, five East Londoners of Portuguese descent, who were believed to have helped produce Jihadi John’s gruesome videos, envisioned themselves as becoming soccer players rather than jihadists to murder in their home countries.

One of them, 28-year-old Nero Seraiva, tweeted days before the execution of American journalist James Foley, the first of the Islamic State’s Western hostages to be decapitated: “"Message to America, the Islamic State is making a new movie. Thank u for the actors."

Prominent among the Portuguese was Celso Rodrigues da Costa, whose brother Edgar was also in Syria and is believed to have attended open training sessions for Arsenal but failed to get selected. Da Costa appeared as a masked fighter in a video in which the Islamic State demonstrated its understanding of the recruitment and propaganda value of soccer (Berman and Times of Israel 2014).

The video exploited Da Costa’s physical likeness to that of French international Lassana Diarra, who played for Arsenal before moving to Lokomotiv Moscow. A caption under the video posting read, “He... played for Arsenal in London and left soccer, money and the European way of life to follow the path of Allah.”

On camera, Da Costa said: "My advice to you, first of all, is that we are in need of all types of help from those who can help us fight the enemy. Welcome, come and find us, and those who think that they cannot fight should also come and join us because it may be that they can help us in something else, for example, help with medicine, help financially, help with advice, help with any other qualities and any other skills they might have, and give and pass on this knowledge. We will take whatever is beneficial, and that way, they will participate in jihad.”

Da Costa's appearance in the video, juxtaposed with the execution in early 2015 of 13 boys in Raqqa, Islamic State's Syrian capital, for watching a match between Jordan and Iraq, reflected the jihadists' convoluted attitude towards soccer.

The Syrian activist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently reported that the boys were publicly executed by firing squad in a sports arena. Loudspeakers reportedly announced that their execution was intended as a message to those who violate the strict laws of the Islamic State, which ordered that their bodies be left in the facility for all to see (Abu Mohammed 2015).

**A jihadist and ultra-conservative conundrum**

Summing it all up, soccer has weaved its way through the history of militant political Islam and jihadism since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Foreigners who fought in Afghanistan alongside the Afghan mujahedeen organized soccer matches after the Soviet withdrawal to maintain contact. Bin Laden was reported to have organized his fighters in a mini-World Cup in down times during the war in Afghanistan and to have formed two soccer teams among his followers during his years in Sudan in the 1980s.

Even so, soccer remains an ultra-conservative Muslim and jihadist conundrum almost half a century later.

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## Syrian football: divided fans in a divided nation

*Ola Rifai*

The collapse of the Assad regime on December 2024 closes the chapter of Thirteen years of the Syrian war, what started as a peaceful movement for regime change in 2011 turned into a multilayered conflict that killed more than 600,000 people (SOHR 2021), displaced half of the Syrian population (UNHCR 2023), and deeply divided the nation. This division is clearly reflected in football and the famous motto sport brings people together, does not seem very accurate when it comes to war-torn Syria. Certainly, football has a unique power that brings people together but at the same time, football is powerful enough to divide people and nations, particularly during wartime when football matches become in George Orwell's words 'war minus shooting' (Orwell 1945).

Literature highlights how politics and sport are inseparable realms and that for long, football has been "inscribed with tribalism, protest, military propaganda, political symbols" (Power et al 2020). The Syrian case, as this paper will argue, illustrates that during conflict, football is manipulated in the struggle for power among different identity groups and constructs clashes in a top-bottom approach.

### Football and Authoritarianism in Syria

Football arrived in Syria at the turn of the century when Damascene students returning from the Syrian Protestant College (which later became American University of Beirut) brought the game home. Prince Faisal, who was the de facto ruler of Syria, instituted the first stadium in Damascus in which Syrian Team played against the British troops in 1919 and won 2-4 (Jabbour 2020).Politicizing sport in Syria can be traced to the Assad tenure, once Hafiz Assad took power in 1970, he controlled Sport Union and all other governmental and non-governmental institutions in the county and utilized sport as a tool for soft power to serve his agenda. In this light, in 1986 Syria hosted the 10th edition of Mediterranean Games in the coastal city of Latakia, at a time when Assad rule was facing external challenges (international isolation due to ties with USSR) and internal ones (Muslim Brotherhood, and the aftermath of military operation in Hama). Therefore, hosting an international sport event yielded Assad a great opportunity to polish his picture at the local and the international level. The opening ceremony evolved around Assad cult of personality and was designed to emphasize Assad's popularity. Interestingly, Syrian Official Television broadcasted the ceremony and showed

Assad while walking into a crowd of people standing heart shape while the TV commentator says, “here is the master of our country walking into the big heart, because he is always and forever a crowd darling” (youtube; 1987; 2017).

In essence, the regime rhetoric aimed to associate sport and Syria to the Assad persona, giant billboards of Assad were displaced in the stadium and were held by many members of the audience. Furthermore, the electronic screen in the stadium displayed a writing in Arabic and in French which says, *sourriya al assad turaheb bi kum* Assad’s Syria welcomes you (Ibid). The ceremony was wrapped up by musical performance in which Ibrahim Saqr, Syrian singer, performed a song titled ‘The land of Assad is singing for love’ (YouTube 2020). At the final tournament, Syrian football team won the gold medal scoring 2-1 against France, making a historical victory celebrated by many Syrians (Najar 2020).

**Football and Identity Clashes**

Like elsewhere in the world, football games might invoke clashes among fans of the competing teams, yet in Syria, socio-political factors trigger identity clashes between supporters of various clubs. In March 2004 violence was sparked during a football game at al-Baladi stadium in Qamishli city (northeast Syria which has the highest Kurdish population). The game was between local team Al-Jihad and visiting team Al-Fotuwa of neighboring Deir al zour (a Sunni majority city). Fans of Al-Fotuwa were holding pictures of the late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein (who murdered thousands of Iraqi Kurds). The incident incited a Kurdish uprising, protests and violent clashes between Arabs and Kurds spread to the Syrian capital Damascus. The regime suppressed the uprising by arresting and killing many Kurds while tightening security measures at sport stadiums (Sidki 2014).

Interestingly, some twenty years later, after the Kurdish areas came out of the regime control and were part of the Kurdish quasi autonomy al-Baladi stadium changed its name to 12th March martyrdoms studium (referring to those killed in 2004) and hosts Kurdish football league where fans proudly displaying Kurdish flags and posters for Ojlan ( A symbol for Kurdish identity) (Ronhi TV 2022).

**Football in post-2011 Syria**

Shortly after the uprising started in March 2011, many football players turned against the Assad regime, the most famed among them was Abdelbaset al-Sarout such, the goalkeeper

for the national team, and who later was labeled as *hares al thawra* the revolution's goalkeeper (AP 2019). al Sarout was killed by the regime in June 2019, he was a civil activist, then joined different anti-Assad militias. For many Syrians, he represents an important symbol of the revolution in all its stages.

Early in 2012, the regime killed and arrested many football players for their political stances; Jihad Qassab, the former captain of the national team, and the national team goalkeeper Mosab Balhous were among regime's victims (Fainaru 2017). Many other players suffered from the regime's atrocities. Furthermore, the regime used stadiums (e.g. al-abbassiyn stadium in Damascus) as detention camp and military bases from which the regime bombed rebel areas.

Indeed, many players left the national team to detach from the ongoing conflict, yet they later opted to play for the team at the international level. Omar al-Soma and Firas al-Khatib are two stars who at the early stage of the conflict declared their anti-regime stances, yet in 2016 they both shifted their positions and decided to return to the national team, while emphasizing that it was 'purely athletic and has nothing to do with anything else other but sports'(ibid).

In 2017 Syria's national team made history by reaching the 2018 World Cup qualifying playoffs an event that was widely celebrated among many pro and anti-Assad-Syrians. Main squares in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs were packed with fans cheering the team while waving Syrian flags and chanting patriotic slogans (Grez 2017) Even on the online sphere, social media were abuzz with a hashtag that says *Souriyya biylba'la al Farah* happiness suits you Syria. Interestingly, for the first time, Syrians with different political views agreed on supporting the team and view it as unifying national symbol that represents all Syrians. A song titled *hay al farha sourriya* this joy is a Syrian one was produced to support the team, and many pro-and anti-Assad Syrians were sharing it. The lyrics stress Syrian national identity, a brief of it says: 'We are going to win for the name of my country, your love unites us, let's hold hands… the love [of Syria] unites us' (Youtube 2017).

Although its three singers, Anas Kareem, Wafeq Habib and Mohamad Majzob, are known for their pro-regime stances, in the video clip of the song renowned Syrian actors and actresses from both sides made appearances.

Yet, on the other hand, many anti-Assad Syrians refused to support the team as for them this team represents the Assad regime. They went further to label the national team as barrels' team (referring to usage of barrel bombs by the Assad forces on opposition areas). In October 2017 many anti-Assad Syrians were supporting the Australian team who won over the Syrian team in the playoffs. The revolution flags were banned in the stadium so many anti-Assad Syrians were waving Australian flags while celebrating the loss of the Syrian team (Hall 2017). Similarly, in January 2024 Syrian national team reached the knockout for Asia cup in Qatar, which marks unprecedented achievement for the team. Many Syrians back home and in the diaspora cheered the event. While anti-Assad activists launched an online campaign with a hashtag, we do not support the barrel's team and circulated a video of the players chanting pro-Assad slogans: "with Our soul, our blood we sacrifice for you Bashar [al-Assad]"( Youtube 2024).

**Regime strategy; normalization at the international arena and emphasizing the cult of personality at the local one**

The official discourse of the Assad regime aimed to explicitly associate football with the ongoing conflict. In 2017 the Syrian official media linked the team's winning in the first round against Australia with the advancement of the regime forces in Deir al-Zour (at the time when brutal military operation was taking place in East Syria) with the hashtag *sourriya tantaser* Syria is prevailing. And henceforth, regardless that some players such as Omar al-Soma who scored the winning goal, have voiced their opposition against the regime, for many anti-Assad Syrians this team is part of Assad propaganda.

In the same context the Syrian regime manipulated national symbols and intended to associate these symbols with Assad. Like the regime rhetoric in the 70s when Syria was identified with Hafiz Assad, Syria is personalized with Bashar Assad any nationalist, patriotic symbol is now representing the regime. Players, coaches and fans are pictured wearing the national team jersey of Assad.

Furthermore, players in the national team were invited to the presidential palace in Damascus to meet with Assad after they came back from Australia (Sheen 2017). In the meeting Assad was filmed while signing his name on the jerseys of some players like Firas al-Khatib and Omar al-Soma. While surrounded by players, Assad told reporters that he is 'very proud of the great achievement [reaching the world cup playoffs]' and that this "achievement indicates how the Syrian people are determined to overcome the war with all means, and sport is one of these

means [to face the war]" (Syria Presidency 2017). He continues: "this achievement is based on the achievements of our military forces on the ground, without them no one could fulfill anything, maybe we would not have a homeland. And I'm sure that each player in this national team keeps in mind that his work parallels that of the military forces" (ibid).

Therefore, in an explicit manner, the regime did not only associate politics to football, but went further to link the violent clashes to football. Henceforth, drawing the line of exclusion and inclusion between Syrian football fans.

Interestingly the national team includes players who belong to various social and sectarian identity groups: Sunnis, Alawites, and Christians from the rural and from urban areas. From Lower, and middle classes. Coming from the diaspora and from the Syrian cities. Yet, alas, this harmony does not cross beyond the green field.

**Conclusion**

When Omar al-Soma scored the winning goal against Iran in 2017 which qualified Syria to the World Cup playoffs, the Syrian commentator Talal Bouslani broke into tears while passionately saying "These are the Syrians, no one would be able to confront them when they are united" (Youtub 2017). Through the thirteen years of war, the Syrian people were deeply divided, football seems to further inflame identity clashes and the dilemma of representation. As argued in this paper, the manipulation of football is rooted in the Syrian regime's strategies. Material structure (e.g. media) interacts with symbols (e.g. flags) to reconstruct identities and draw the line between 'us' and 'them'.

Here in, the Syrian case illustrates how during wartime football became a tool to construct power and that personal experiences with sport are often shaped by the larger political context. Interestingly, this political context in Syria has radically changed in December 2024, the toppling of Assad regime marks a historical juncture for Syria and for Syrians. Despite of the uncertainty and myriads internal and external challenges facing the new leadership in Syria, there is a golden opportunity for nation building and reconstructing the national concord, the role of football in this process is still to be seen.

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## Gulf States' investment in the global game

*Kristian Coates Ulrichsen*

The opening quarter of the twenty-first century has seen the rise of the Gulf States as active participants in the architecture of world football, as sponsors, hosts, and owners. This stimulated a backlash among many fans and commentators in Germany, Scandinavia, and England, for whom the 2022 men's FIFA World Cup in Qatar seemed to crystallize a deeper unease at the direction the modern game was taking. Accusations of 'sports-washing' – a nebulous term of art which did not even exist when Manchester City was acquired by a senior member of Abu Dhabi's ruling family in 2008 or when Qatar won the hosting rights to the 2022 World Cup in 2010 – have dominated media discourse, even as the label has been critically unpicked in an emerging academic literature (Chadwick and Widdop, 2023, p.153; Crossley and Woolf, 2024, p.308). And yet, the changing international footballing landscape is merely consistent with broader shifts in a global order characterized by new centers of geopolitical and geo-economic gravity.

This contribution to the SEPAD volume on football, identity, and politics in the MENA region examines the many forms of Gulf investments into the ecosystem of contemporary football. A key objective in the paper is to highlight a variation that is frequently downplayed or missed altogether in many of the criticisms of a seemingly monolithic approach by 'the Gulf' to buy their way into world football. There are so many differences in the scope, scale, focus, and time-periods of Gulf States' engagement with international football that render impossible any 'one-size-fits-all' approach to analysis. Instead, this paper presents a set of observations about the Gulf States and football which it is hoped may form the basis for a dispassionate agenda of research in the decade-long runup to the 2034 FIFA World Cup in Saudi Arabia.

### Early entry points into world football

In the 1990s, the creation of the FIFA Confederations Cup, which began as the King Fahd Cup in 1992 and 1995 and whose first three editions all took place in Saudi Arabia, marked the first prominent example of a Gulf State's hosting of an international tournament (Munday, 2021). Saudi Arabia had evolved into a regional powerhouse, reaching the final of five consecutive AFC Asian Cup finals between 1984 and 2000, a feat unmatched before or since, and winning three of them. However, it was not Saudi Arabia, but rather the smaller Gulf

States of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which led the way in developing the first generation of state-linked investments in the global football ecosystem, moreover in different ways. The early 2000s saw the rebranded Qatar Stars League attract a succession of aging international stars to the country in a manner that prefigured by two decades the moves to the Saudi Pro League. Pep Guardiola, Gabriel Batistuta, Fernando Hierro, and Stefan Effenberg were among the big names who ended their playing careers in Qatar, as did Xavi a decade later. By the late-2000s, Qatari focus pivoted to bidding for and hosting sports mega-events at the regional and international levels (Lysa, 2021, p.749).

Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar also took the regional lead in using sponsorships as tools of branding to raise their international profile by harnessing the global appeal of sport to reach new audiences worldwide. This was especially apparent in the competition among the three major Gulf airlines – Etihad, Emirates, and Qatar Airways – as they competed for routes and passengers, even though Gulf Air, then the regional airline for Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE, had been the pioneer when it sponsored Chelsea in 1983. In 2004, Emirates fired the starting-gun in the sponsorship stakes when they signed their first shirt agreement, ironically with Chelsea, but this tie-up was quickly surpassed by a rights-naming agreement with Arsenal, who have played in the Emirates Stadium in London since 2006. Etihad similarly acquired the naming rights to the City of Manchester Stadium in 2011, while Qatar Airways became FC Barcelona’s first commercial shirt sponsor in 2013, replacing the non-profit Qatar Foundation (Koch, 2020, p.355).

Sponsorship was the entry path into world football for the Gulf States, and for the smaller emirates and states, which had only gained their full independence in 1971, it was an opportunity not only to brand themselves but also to raise international awareness that they existed at all (Krzyzaniak, 2018, p.500). This was especially significant for the ‘other five’ Gulf States as leaders sought to break out of the Saudi shadow and carve out distinct economic and development plans of their own (Miller, 2016, p.145). Beginning in the 1990s but accelerating in the 2000, the UAE and Qatar engaged proactively in creating strategic and economic niches supported by marketing and branding campaigns (Peterson, 2006, pp.746-48). Emirates’ chairman, Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, noted in 2006 the branding value of “Sport sponsorship [which] provides an international platform to connect with our customers. We believe sponsorship is one of the best ways of getting closer to our customers. It allows us to share and support their interests and to build a personal relationship with them” (Garcia and Amara, 2013, p.15). Securing the naming rights to the Arsenal and

Manchester City stadiums took brand recognition to a new level as 'going to the Emirates' and 'going to the Etihad' entered the everyday vernacular of football fans (Wearing, 2018, pp.148-49).

**Rise of the global Gulf**

A decade after their initial foray into world football, Abu Dhabi and Doha generated headlines through their ownership and subsequent transformation of Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain into European giants. After the acquisition of City by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed's Abu Dhabi United Group in 2008 and PSG by Qatar Sports Investment in 2011, each team went on to dominate the Premier League and Ligue 1. Here, too, a divergence in outcome was observable in the clubs' differing relationship with national and European authorities. Manchester City challenged UEFA and the Premier League after leaked documents suggested they were in breach of financial fair play regulations, and the club's Emirati chairman, Khaldoun Al Mubarak, reportedly told UEFA that he would 'rather spend 30 million on the 50 best lawyers in the world to sue them for the next 10 years' in 2014 (Associated Press, 2018). By contrast, PSG remained loyal to UEFA in the tussle over the European Super League in 2021. In its aftermath, the Qatari president of PSG, Nasser Al Khelaifi, became one of the most powerful figures in European football as he replaced Andrea Agnelli of Juventus (which had, along with Manchester City been one of the twelve clubs to threaten to break away) as Chair of the influential European Club Association (Crafton, 2021).

The trophy-laden record of Manchester City and PSG nevertheless belies the fact that not all instances of Gulf ownership of football teams (primarily) in Europe have succeeded. Many takeovers failed, for a variety of reasons, to generate the returns, whether on or off the field, anticipated by the new owners or by supporters, for whom the expectations around a 'Gulf buyout' are often elevated. Examples in England included Portsmouth, Notts County, and Leeds United, while others elsewhere included Malaga CF and UD Almeria in Spain. While there was no one overarching reason why the takeovers did not work out, they did illustrate a pattern of issues which raise questions about appropriate due diligence, on the side of existing owners selling clubs, and potentially opportunistic activity, on the part of individuals and entities who may have overplayed their credentials to get a seat at a perceived football 'gravy train.' Intermediaries of questionable motivation in some cases played a linking role connecting the two sides, while in others, the positioning of owners within the political and state-business landscape in the Gulf also had a role in determining access to resources and

funding. Several mooted acquisitions never got off the ground, such as one by Dubai International Capital for Liverpool in 2007 and another by Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani, a son of Qatar's former Prime Minister, for Manchester United in 2023 (Crafton, 2023).

While the UAE and Qatar were 'first-movers' in the Gulf as sponsors, owners, and hosts, they have been surpassed in recent years by Saudi Arabia. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom actively sought to harness sport to burnish its international image and change the narrative about the Kingdom away from focus on such issues as human rights violations, the killing of Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018, and the war in Yemen. Much of the initial engagement with sport was driven by Turki Al Sheikh, a confidant of Mohammed bin Salman, in his capacity as Chairman of the General Entertainment Authority and as an investor in football clubs in Egypt, Sudan, and Spain. Boxing, golf, and Formula One saw significant levels of Saudi involvement after 2018, while the Public Investment Fund (PIF), hitherto a largely domestic-focused entity within the Ministry of Finance, was transformed into a globally-focused fund which led the way on sports investment (McPherson-Smith, 2021, p.194).

**The Saudi decade to 2034**

Saudi investments into football have taken multiple paths that have combined domestic and international objectives. In 2023, the PIF took majority 75 percent stakes in four of the largest Saudi clubs (Al Nassr, Al Hilal, Al Ahli, and Al Ittihad), and facilitated a spending spree that brought dozens of world stars to the Saudi Pro League, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar (Sheldon, 2023). For some, the mass arrival of (mostly) aging stars on eye-watering contracts was reminiscent of the influx of players, including Pele, Johan Cruyff, Franz Beckenbauer, and George Best, to the North American Soccer League in the 1970s, or, more recently, the exodus to the Chinese Super League in the mid-2010s. Their presence in Saudi Arabia generated a sense of momentum that portrayed the Kingdom as a node in a new geopolitical landscape of football, even if the buzz did not extend into later transfer windows in 2024. The subsequent announcement by FIFA that the Kingdom would be the sole bidder for the 2034 men's World Cup only added to the emerging narrative of Saudi Arabia as central to the realignment of world football.

In addition to planning for the World Cup in 2034, Saudi Arabia will host the AFC Asian Cup in 2027 – the third successive time the continental competition has been held in the Gulf, after

previous editions in the UAE (2019) and Qatar (2024), the latter after China withdrew as host due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Asian Football Confederation-organized tournaments visibly demonstrated how the Gulf had become the center of gravity in Asian football. In 2023 the AFC announced that Saudi Arabia would host the first five editions of a revamped 'elite-final' stage of the AFC Champions League (comprising single-game quarter-finals, semi-finals, and final) between 2025 and 2029 (Church, 2023). The spate of events, which beyond football will encompass the Asian Games in 2034 (potentially creating an overlapping challenge with the World Cup) and (improbably) the Asian Winter Games, set to take place at a mountain resort in Neom in 2029.

Promoting tourism and pitching Saudi Arabia as a destination are significant components of the Vision 2030 unveiled by Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, and which reached its halfway point in 2023. So, too, are initiatives designed to enhance health, wellbeing, and participation in sport (MacInnes, 2023). Each of these elements of Vision 2030 are evident in the associated 'giga-projects' that have come to dominate media attention. Utilizing players of the caliber of Ronaldo, with his half-billion social media followers, to publicize and spread awareness of the changes underway in the Kingdom, is critical to generating the millions of eventual new visitors and residents by 2030. Ronaldo's unveiling at Al Nassr in 2023 took place in front of a 'Saudi, Welcome to Arabia' backdrop that has become the cornerstone of the Kingdom's marketing campaign, while the other pre-eminent superstar in contemporary men's football, Lionel Messi (who turned down an offer to play in Saudi Arabia in 2023) signed up as a tourism ambassador in 2021 (Zidan and Panja, 2023). In 2024, the tourism authorities launched a new campaign, starring Messi, entitled 'Go Beyond What You Think,' to 'dispel stereotypes about the Kingdom' (Arab News, 2024).

There is thus an internal logic to the Saudi moves into football that tie directly into Vision 2030 and the plans by Mohammed bin Salman to stamp his authority over a country he could lead for decades to come. Focusing on sport simply to 'wash' a country's image or reputation risks missing the bigger picture, and as Christopher Davidson has observed, 'sports-washing is largely irrelevant to Saudi Arabia – there is little concern in Riyadh of what the rest of the world thinks about its human rights record (Eisenberg, 2023). Nevertheless, the speed and scale of the Kingdom's eruption onto the world football stage is likely to overshadow previous Gulf-based initiatives, even as Saudi Arabia also moves into club ownership (Newcastle United) and shirt sponsorship (Riyadh Air), thus emulating some of the earlier moves. What will be instructive in this next phase of Gulf involvement in the global game will be the degree

to which Saudi initiatives merely replicate what has gone before or offer something new and different, and whether there is a shift toward Gulf actors being more assertive, even activists, in their investments in football.

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## Football and nation-building in Gulf monarchies: Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar

*David Hernández Martínez*

### Introduction

Football is one of the remarkable mass phenomena of the globalisation era—a game followed by millions worldwide. No country remains alien to the enormous collective impact of football, where pure entertainment is mixed with political and power elements. In this sense, the populations of the Gulf monarchies have a long-standing connection with this sport, which leads them to combine their passion for national competitions and teams with the following of international tournaments, clubs, and stars.

Football expansion as a social phenomenon in the Gulf monarchies coincides with the construction and consolidation of nation-states throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. The most direct result is that this sport becomes an intrinsic part of the local identity and maintains a particular relationship with the established power.

The chapter analyses the socio-political dimension of football in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. The research is structured in four sections. First, a brief historical overview of the development of football in the countries analysed. Second, the main objectives for which football can be used as a political tool. Third, how the case studies exhibit a close link between football and the construction of nation-states. Finally, the central dilemmas surrounding the future evolution of this sport within the Gulf monarchies.

### The expansion of football in the Gulf monarchies

Football was introduced in the Gulf monarchies at the beginning of the 20th century through three sources of influence. First, the British presence in the area led military personnel, diplomats, and merchants from the United Kingdom to organise the first sports matches and societies. Second, thanks to the migration of Arab workers from other parts of the Middle East, due to the growing demand for labour to exploit oil and gas fields. Finally, partly due to the action of an exclusive local elite, who began to travel abroad, work and study in England

and other Western countries and developed a passion for football, gradually making it one of their favourite pastimes.

Football has a unique journey in the case of Saudi Arabia in comparison with the UAE and Qatar. There are records of the first Saudi matches and clubs from the beginning of the 20th century, several years before the constitution of the modern Saudi state itself (Alkhunaizi, 2024). The Saudi Federation was established in 1956, and since then, the national team has participated in international competitions. The Saudi team has established itself as a football power within the Middle East and Asia. In the 1970s, national tournaments began to be held, and the country's first women's football league was created in 2020.

The institutionalisation of football in the UAE and Qatar is later than in Saudi Arabia, which partly explains the uneven performance of their national teams in international competitions. In the case of the UAE, the first football clubs began to be created in the 1940s and 1950s in different emirates, still under British protectorate (Thani, 2022: 65-66). The decolonisation process and the constitution of the new state were immediately accompanied by the creation of the football federation in 1971, the organisation of the first competitions at the domestic level, and the participation of the national team in regional and international tournaments. The case of football in Qatar is very similar to that of the UAE since its proper development and institutionalisation were only achieved at the end of the British colonial presence. In Qatar, the first official matches were recorded at the end of the 1940s, along with an increase in the local population's interest in this sport (Bishop, 2022). The new state's constitution brought a greater degree of football promotion, which has become a central element of Qatari politics in the 21st century as it seeks to turn the country into a linchpin in the sports industry. Such efforts culminated with the organisation of the 2022 World Cup.

**The realpolitik behind football**

The relationship between football and political power is a long-standing phenomenon. However, its origins lie as a simple pastime and entertainment for the wealthiest classes and, later, all layers of society. The undeniable popularity of football has caused countless leaders and governments to seek to make partisan use of this sport. In this sense, football has become a spectacle of global reach (Fruh, 2023: 103), capable of mobilizing the masses and awakening a conglomerate of emotions in them. Therefore, the control of football becomes a veiled objective of those who hold power since it is recognised as a space to promote alignment

with an established order. However, it can also become a meeting point for criticism, dissent and organised opposition (Raab, 2014: 801-802).

The instrumentalization of football pursues several objectives. Firstly, these sporting events serve as legitimisation tools for political leaders who seek to associate their figures with the sport's popularity. Furthermore, the promotion of national clubs and teams, together with the professional career of the country's footballers, seeks to promote internal cohesion and national identity (Levermore, 2004: 21). This political function is vital in states that do not have a long history as an independent nation. However, in domestic contexts that suffer from high instability and polarization, this dynamic can become counterproductive since it generates mixed feelings and opinions among fans who associate specific teams and players with their proximity to the established power compared to others perceived as opposition figures.

Political power and football also become entangled in the pursuit of more direct and pragmatic objectives. In this sense, the organisation of sporting events and the concentration of large masses of citizens in closed venues allows the security forces to establish more effective control measures (Spaaij, 2013: 170.171), which help them to identify opposition centres and restrict meeting points more quickly. In addition, all the news and controversies surrounding football help to divert public attention from other types of problems, often relegating social concerns and political disaffection to the background. The instrumentalization of football equally links to foreign action. Sportswashing is broadly understood as the use of sport to promote a country's image internationally but also to whitewash those leaders or regimes of an authoritarian and repressive nature which try to silence criticism, both domestic and external (Grix et al., 2023: 5). Along the same lines, the organisation of sporting events sends a powerful message to global public opinion, since it is a show of strength and the resources that a country must host different competitions in majestic and new infrastructures.

Football can also have a very relevant socio-economic impact. On the one hand, the development of the sports industry is usually linked to the intentions of governments to diversify their economies and encourage new sectors, which allow, among other things, to attract foreign investments and generate more sources of wealth (Satish et al., 2024: 35-36). On the other hand, promoting sports is linked to public health since it seeks to encourage

healthy habits among citizens, involve them in grassroots sports and reduce the incidence of diseases.

**Nation-building, Gulf monarchies and football**

The expansion of football among the Gulf monarchies throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries coincide with a series of geopolitical dynamics in the region. Firstly, the origins of football in these countries are inevitably due to the colonial presence of the British, as well as the influence of workers and migrants from third countries in the region. However, football consolidated later in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar after their independence. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has developed mainly since the nation-state's constitution in 1932. These circumstances strongly link the social diffusion of sport and the constitution of independent national identities. Football is no longer seen as an alien and strange element. Indeed, it is incorporated as another element of the culture, collective unity, and daily life of nationals, as well as the numerous foreign workers and stateless persons who live in these countries.

The constitution of new states amidst the expansion of football coincides with a second dynamic: the consolidation of political regimes. Power at the national level has been monopolised since its origins by dynastic clans, which are capable of patrimonialising the most essential socio-political spheres of each country (Gray, 2018: 38-39) in the three analysed cases: The House of Al Saud in Saudi Arabia, the Al Thani family in Qatar or the Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi. In this sense, football popularity is a factor that does not escape the attention of the different governments, which seek to associate it not only with the identity and culture of their territories but also with their legitimacy and authority.

The relevance of football in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar coincides with a crucial period in the nation-building projects of these countries. The authorities are implementing different political and social measures and promoting discourses and narratives that help reinforce the idea of political nationalism, in contrast to the still-existing primacy of tribal and religious identities: a factor that is sometimes perceived as a destabilizing and disruptive element by the authorities. These dynamics can create internal tensions (Sinani, 2024), so the development of popular social events such as football helps to rewrite the citizen's relationship with the national power and enhance the awareness of belonging to a collective that includes its annexation to the crown.

The expansion of football, the constitution of states and the consolidation of regimes are also linked to a more recent geopolitical dynamic. The Gulf monarchies are carrying out ambitious foreign policies, which allow them to place themselves in a privileged position within the world order, thanks to their economic and political relevance (Bianco and Sons, 2023: 94-95). The influence by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in the global football sector and the sports industry reflects the emergence of these new powers, which host important competitions and actively participate in the main sports organisations.

The political management of football in Saudi Arabia has taken on a new dimension in recent years. The coming to power of King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2015 marked a turning point in the country. The Saudi kingdom has major reform plans to boost the national sports industry (Chadwick, 2019: 185). At the same time, the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman sought to associate the popularity of football with the legitimacy of their authority, just at a crucial moment for the kingdom, both due to the succession process after King Salman, as well as the numerous transformations taking place in the region such as the conflict in the Gaza Strip, the tensions between Israel and Iran, or the transition in Syria following the overthrow of Bashar Al Assad.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are also consolidating their position as important venues for organising major international tournaments. The reasons for holding these events are inexorably linked to strengthening nation-building. On the one hand, it serves political regimes to gain the support and affection of younger generations, who feel more represented by a model of society that is more open and connected to the world. On the other hand, the international promotion offered by these sporting events represents a show of strength for the authorities abroad while promoting national pride, as it demonstrates the capabilities and resources of the country and its society.

The political management of football in the UAE is inexorably linked to the domestic and international needs of the federal government. The sporting successes of the Emirati clubs and national teams are used as a social element to promote national identity and cohesion among the populations of the seven emirates since the formation as a single country is very recent. But the drive of the Emirati authorities towards the sports industry reflects the intentions of projecting a very calculated image abroad (Carosella, 2022: 22), which shows the development and strengths of the country and its society, as well as linking it to the new generation of leaders.

Meanwhile, Qatar meets two clear objectives linked to Doha's domestic and international needs through football. Firstly, holding the 2022 World Cup was presented as a diplomatic achievement, which joins other government efforts to gain a significant role in the region's dynamics (Dubinsky, 2024: 223). Secondly, the holding of major sporting events and the successes of Qatari athletes are used to encourage national identity and adherence to the regime, precisely at a turbulent period in the region and for national security, as occurred during the blockade of the peninsula between 2017-2021.

The efforts of the authorities in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar to link football with nation-building and international projection are also reflected in the acquisition of important European clubs such as PSG (Qatari-owned) in France, Manchester City (Emirati-owned) and Newcastle (Saudi-owned) in the English league, among others. The interest in taking control of historic teams is to enter a market as profitable as football, in addition to strengthening the country's international image. In addition, this type of strategy consolidates the reputation of its foreign policy and reinforces an unquestionable image of power and development. This political dynamic seeks to imbue national societies with the logic of participating in a successful collective project.

The European teams acquired by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar will inevitably become a symbol of their international aspirations, as well as further elements of the promotion of the nation-building project among the citizens of their countries. The great stars of the football teams they own visit the Arab monarchies annually as a kind of exhibition of the new national emblems of which they can feel proud. However, the leaders of the clubs still face the problem of achieving a genuine interest among the national population in supporting these teams (Baniya, 2025), and identifying them as another part of their national identity of which they can feel represented.

**Conclusion**

Football has an undeniable social impact on the populations of the Gulf monarchies, making it one of the great spaces for meeting and having fun for the citizens of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. In this sense, the authorities of each of these countries are implementing ambitious plans to link the popularity of football with particular political objectives: national identity, internal cohesion and international projection. In addition, this

sport has other uses for governments, such as promoting health and boosting economic diversification.

The political management of football in the Gulf monarchies has presented numerous successes in the short term. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have managed to establish themselves as important spaces to host major sporting events at the international level. Along the same lines, diplomatic efforts are allowing them to position themselves in privileged positions within the world football and sports organisations. Finally, the development of the sports industry is allowing these countries to expand their global reach and strengthen the development of their actions abroad.

However, such endeavour by the Gulf monarchies presents several challenges in the medium and long term. First, the sustainability of a model based on ingenious resources for the organisation of major sporting events and the attraction of foreign talent. Second, the capacity of educational and health programmes to incorporate sport into the daily routine of their citizens. Third, the growing regional and international rivalry between different countries to gain control of the main competitions.

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## A framework for the study of Qatar's sport diplomacy and international relations

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### Introduction

In the wake of the second Gulf War, countries within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) such as the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain have embarked on ambitious modernization projects, placing considerable emphasis on the development of sports infrastructure. This includes constructing mega sports cities and state-of-the-art facilities capable of hosting regional and international sporting events. A prime example of these initiatives is Qatar's successful hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which marked a significant milestone as the first time an Arab and majority Muslim country hosted a major sporting event, positioning Qatar as one of the smallest nations ever to do so since Uruguay in 1930. Furthermore, with Saudi Arabia set to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup and Qatar's bid for the 2036 Olympics, the international visibility of these states in the sports arena has markedly increased.

This heightened profile on the global sports stage invites a deeper exploration of how sports diplomacy is conceptualized and implemented within these nations, particularly through the lenses of international relations (IR), diplomacy, geopolitics, and cultural studies. By examining Qatar's strategic use of sports as a bridge and beacon—connecting it with the global community and showcasing its cultural openness and modernization—this report aims to enrich the body of knowledge on sports diplomacy. Specifically, it focuses on Qatar and the broader GCC context, discussing how sport and football in particular serve not only as a tool for enhancing Qatar's international image but also as a catalyst for significant sociocultural transformations within the nation. This includes promoting gender inclusivity and reshaping national identity in alignment with global norms. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role sport plays in the process of Qatar's modernization and in shaping its diplomatic narratives, considering the long-term impact on the nation's policy, societal norms, and international relations.

**Defining Qatar from a (Post) Realist Prism**

State centrism in controlling material power (hard power) represents the essence of a typology of Realism—Neorealism. Stemming from a Positivist foundation (Ari et Toprak, 2019), Neorealism offers an analytical lens that maintains a consistent view of the world as one marked by ongoing struggle at its core. At the intra-state level, the relationship between state and non-state actors is often clashing. It endorses the supremacy of the state as the singular player. The existence of various human and non-state entities undermines state cohesion (Royo, 2012), according to Neorealist thought.

At the international relations level, Neorealism views inter-state relations as inherently conflictual. It posits that states are free to pursue their aims in their interactions with other states, often through immoral and illegal means. The source of anarchy in international relations, as perceived by Neorealists, arises from competition among states to safeguard their security and dominance, frequently relying on military strength as a primary tool (Nye, 2013). In this confrontational international arena, Neorealism asserts that small states are inherently weak, as their smallness diminishes their survival capabilities (Miller, 2018). According to this branch of Realism, the limited survival strategies of small states are classified into three categories: building alliances (balancing), aligning with larger powers (bandwagoning), or temporarily retreating in times of instability.

While these characteristics are particularly central to Neorealism, stemming from its structural approach and emphasis on state supremacy, elements of this critique could also extend to broader Realist paradigms that emphasize power dynamics and state behavior in anarchic international systems. However, Neorealism's distinct focus on structural constraints and the role of anarchy in shaping state behavior distinguishes it from other forms of Realism. Therefore, this critique applies most specifically to Neorealism but has limited resonance with other typologies of Realism.

Qatar, a peninsula within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, is categorized as a small state due to its quantitative characteristics related to its territory and population. The geographical area of Qatar is 11,521 km² (PSA, 2023). By August 2024, Qatar’s total population was approximately 3,054,365 (PSA, 2024), with foreigners accounting for nearly 88% (Cochrane, Amin, & Al-Kaabi, 2024). It is noteworthy that Qatar's physical and demographic limitations suggest its disqualification as a powerful state according to the theoretical parameters set by the Realism framework in international relations and

diplomacy. However, Braveboy-Wagner (2008) warns against relying solely on a monolithic theoretical framework to interpret the phenomena and behaviors of small states (cited in Sadiki & Saleh, 2021). In other words, the dominance of Realism in the field of international relations has limited studies on small states. Realism implies that the weaknesses of small states are chronic and that the dynamics of conflict are infinite in international relations. However, the concepts of weakness and strength can be fluid and inconsistent, driven by changes in geopolitical and physical environments. Rather than being a physical handicap, smallness can inspire active creativity for survival, influenced by shifts in geographical context and a reliable soft power toolkit. Nye (2004) describes soft power as the power of attraction intentionally cultivated by one country to achieve its desired aims from others through persuasive tools such as culture and sport.

**Leaping out of the Geopolitics Circle: Qatar's sport diplomacy**

In the case of Qatar, a brief assessment of regional shifts can aid in understanding its transformation into a reliable sports hub both regionally and internationally. The insecurity triggered by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 (Al-Maamary et al., 2017) marked a turning point for Qatar, prompting it to adopt an independent foreign policy that detached its identity from its longstanding alignment with Saudi Arabia since its independence in 1971 (Al-Eshaq & Rasheed, 2022). The political change in 1995, with the rise of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani (1995-2013), accelerated this shift. The Qatari leadership recognized the potential to compensate for Qatar's material vulnerabilities and its geographic position between two regional powers—Iran and Saudi Arabia—by adopting an independent foreign policy. The transition from a passive to an active Qatari foreign policy was necessary not only as a survival strategy in an unstable region but also as a means of advancing a long-term nation-building process. Steps to modernize Qatar under the new regime included engaging in diplomatic activities, particularly those associated with larger countries, based on mediation. Other initiatives involved establishing Al Jazeera Channel in 1996 and modernizing the educational system in 2006 by opening branches of prestigious Western universities in Education City (Yamani, 2006). To further enhance Qatar's international influence, its foreign policy sought to expand its global image by utilizing universally appealing tools, such as sport. Investment in sport aimed to achieve several goals: economic diversification, crafting a political narrative for the post-1995 modern Qatar, and creating social change. As prioritized by Qatar National Vision 2030, shifting from hydrocarbon dependence to a more diversified economy necessitates investing in finite income sources, such as sport, retail and tourism.

Approximately 90% of the government's revenue derives from hydrocarbon resources (Ben Hassen, 2019). In addition to helping Qatar build alliances for global peace and development (MOFA, n.d.), sport provides a context for political discourse on the modernization narrative of Qatar's nation-building, including the integration of Qatari women into these initiative. Notably, Sheikha Moza was the only female speaker during Qatar's bid for the 2010 World Cup, highlighting her influential role in sports diplomacy (Krug, 2022).

This aspect of Qatar's sports diplomacy serves a dual purpose. First, it aims to correct stereotypes about the Arab and Muslim worlds perpetuated by Orientalism. Said (1978, cited in Morra & Smith, 2006) argues that Orientalism as a conceptual lens creates a division between the East (Orient) and the West (Occident), where Arab and Islamic cultures are characterized as an antithesis to the West. Secondly, it opens a new chapter in Qatar's sports diplomacy, which contrasts with the pre-1995 ruling system under Sheikh Khalifa Bin Hamad Al-Thani (1971-1995). During his era, sport was a purely male-dominated. For instance, hosting the fourth Arabian Gulf Cup in 1976 in the newly built Khalifa Stadium, represented a prototype of Qatar's sports infrastructure potentials and aimed to legitimized the ruling family's role in modernization (Silva, 2014). The 15th Asian Games (Asiad), hosted by Doha in 2006, significantly enhanced global recognition of Qatar's hosting capabilities. This tournament, a first for the GCC region, was critical in demonstrating modern sports facilities and Qatar's readiness as a host country, despite its small size. The successful staging of this regional sports mega-event also validated Qatar's potential as a dependable host for larger-scale events, such as the FIFA World Cup. On December 2, 2010, Qatar won the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, marking a significant achievement for the Arab and Islamic regions. However, another negative aspect of soft power, termed "soft-dispowerment" by Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018), emerged in the form accusations of "sportswashing" against Qatar. Sportwashing refers to the unethical use of sport by so called authoritarian regimes and non-state actors to distance themselves from ethical malpractices in human rights and to enhance their public image (Fruh, Archer, & Wojtowicz, 2023). Since Qatar's successful bid to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup, accusations of bribery, corruption, and the maltreatment of migrant workers—especially those involved in constructing the sport infrastructure for the World Cup—and climate suitability concerns have dominated narratives in several Western media outlets (Al-Kubaisi, 2023). Yet, framing Qatar's ambitious use of sport under the umbrella of sportswashing reflects a selective bias against its overall modernization agenda, evidenced by hosting regional and international sporting events. It is important to note that sportswashing is neither a recent phenomenon nor confined to a specific region. Moreover, labeling Qatar's

strategic use of sport as merely an attempt at sportswashing complicates understanding its true motivations behind this strategy, such as promoting a healthy lifestyle and facilitating social change.

**Sport as a Catalyst for Fitness Culture and Social Change in Qatar**

Besides its vital role in both the modernization and economic diversification agenda, Sport in Qatar serves as a unifying element that fosters awareness of healthy lifestyles and drives social change. A key objective of Qatar's sports diplomacy is promoting physical health and inclusivity, particularly by encouraging female participation in sports. Despite its wealth as the host of major sport events, Qatar as the rest of the Arabian Peninsula face significant health challenges. The high GDP and salaries have contributed to sedentary lifestyles, resulting in increased rates of chronic diseases among Qataris, including hypertension, diabetes, and heart conditions. Qatar's National Vision 2030 seeks to create a vibrant and healthy society, addressing these health concerns. In 2011, the Qatar Olympic Committee reported that only 50% of male and 40% of female Qataris engaged in regular physical activity (Knudsen, Krieger, and Duckworth, 2020). Furthermore, the Qatari leadership aims to instill universal sports values within its population, fostering equality with other nations. As Knudsen, Krieger, and Duckworth (2020) suggest, Qatar seeks to bridge the gap between its citizens and international peers by promoting globally recognized sporting norms. The Qatar Public Health Strategy (2017–2022) highlights the serious impact of lifestyle diseases, revealing that 70.% of Qataris are classified as obese, with 44.9% of those aged 18-64 at risk of cardiovascular diseases and approximately 17% being diabetic (WHO, n.d.). Alarmingly, from 2012 to 2016, the incidence of diabetes rose by nearly 20%, influenced by genetic predispositions and lifestyle choices (Ullah et al., 2018). These troubling statistics underscore the need for increased sports participation and physical activity to address these health issues.

To enhance societal awareness of health and to promote youth involvement in sports, Emiri Decree No. 80 of 2011 established the second Tuesday of February as "National Sport Day." This day aims to foster a healthy lifestyle and raise public awareness about the benefits of sports in combating diseases such as diabetes and obesity (Hukoomi, 2022). National Sport Day represents a significant state-led initiative, aligning with Qatar's commitment to improving public health through sports. In this context, Sheikha Moza's role becomes critical. As a prominent Qatari female leadership figure, her public participation in sports serves as a

role model for Qatari women, demonstrating that involvement in sports can coexist with familial and tribal values in modern Qatar.

Since the inception of Qatar's National Sports Day in 2012, Sheikha Moza has symbolically attended the event with her children and grandchildren, blending traditional abaya attire with modest Islamic sportswear while engaging in physical activities. Her presence sends a powerful message to Qatari women about their significant role in the narrative of national modernity.

Since hosting the successful 2006 Asian Games, Qatar has organized several major sporting events, including the 2015 Men’s Handball World Championship and the FIFA Club World Cups in 2019 and 2020 (GCO, 2023). In the same year, QOC introduced a new strategy for 2023-2030, focusing on excelling in elite sports, promoting Olympic culture, and encouraging comprehensive sports engagement among Qataris (QNA, 2023). A key initiative is the School Olympic Program, a collaboration between QOC, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Aspire Academy, and the Qatar Foundation. This program aims to identify and nurture talent from both public and private schools across Qatar, enabling female students to participate in sports , such as  football, handball, volleyball, and basketball for the first time. This program represents a step towards maximizing female visibility in sports which which are culturally conceived for men. From a regional perspective having such a program would keep Qatar in compeptitivenss loop with other regional players rising in the domain of sport diplomacy such as Saudi Arabia. In 2019, a female football division was established in the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, and the first female football team was founded in 2021 (FIFA, 2021).

The smooth leadership transition in Qatar from Sheikh Hamad to the current Emir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, on June 25, 2013 facilitated the expansion of Qatar’s sport diplomacy. It is noteworthy to mention, that the current Emir has been involved in shaping Qatar’s sport strategy in the era of the previous Emir, Sheikh Tamim has been actively involved in the Qatari sports sector, a vital focus of this research. He chaired the Organizing Committee for the 2006 Asian Games in Doha and led the National Olympic Committee from 2002 to 2015, as documented on the International Olympic Committee’s official website (IOC, n.d.[a]). Since 2015, Sheikh Tamim has served as the Executive Chairman of the Qatar Olympic Committee and has chaired the Board of Directors of the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. His election as an IOC member on 31 December

2014 (IOC, 2014) and reselection in 2018 (QOC, 2018) further underscore his commitment to and influence within the sports sector through and diversifying the contributions of multiple elite females within the ruling family in promoting Qatar's sport diplomacy.

As noted earlier Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser Al-Missnad, described as a “pathbreaker” (Dun, 2016) played a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for fostering a female athletic culture in Qatar. In Sheikh Tamim's era, the promotion of Qatar’s sport diplomacy has moved smoothly Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser Al-Missnad to her daughters Sheikha Al-Mayassa and Sheikha Hind. Both have continued to significantly impact Qatar’s sports sector post the FIFA World Cup 2022. In a turn that shows the transformation of Qatar’s sport diplomacy to towards becoming a potential host of the Olympics, Sheikha Al-Mayassa, head of the Qatar Museums Authority, indicated that the goal behind the opening of 3-2-1 museum, which was opened on 30th March 2022 (OCA, n.d.), is to connect Qatar further to the another layer of sport values, which are at the Olympic level by showcasing comprehensive narratives about diverse sports and althetes in the history of sport. Yet, her involvement in supporting Olympic values date back to 2012. In this year, Sheikha Al-Mayassa inagurated the 'Hey Ya: Arab Women in Sport' photographic exhibition, coinciding with Qatar’s first female Olympic participation in London (Amara & Bouandel, 2022).

Sheikha Hind Bint Hamad Al-Thani, Vice-Chairperson and CEO of the Qatar Foundation and an accomplished female triathlete, involvement extends to the international arena, having been appointed to several International Olympic Committee (IOC) commissions in 2022 (QNA, 2022). Sheikha Hind embodies a modern Qatari female figure, blending contemporary values with tradition. In 2021, she completed her first Olympic distance triathlon in Hamburg, Germany, donning sportswear that diverged from traditional Qatari attire. This act symbolizes the balancing act between modernity and tradition, especially for Qatari women (Brannagan, Reiche & Bedwell, 2023). It is noteworthy to mention that the visibilty of Shaikha Al-Mayassa and Shaikha Hind in the recent 2024 Paris Olympics hints at the increased visibility of royal females as significant players in not only representing Qatar in the Olympics but also as potential female lobbyists to enhance Qatar’s willingness in bidding for hosting the Olympics in the future.

**Conclusion**

In reflecting on Qatar's sports diplomacy, it is essential to consider its broader impacts on global sports governance and international relations. As Qatar positions itself on the

international stage, particularly in the Middle East, its approach offers a model of how sport can serve as a powerful tool for diplomatic engagement and narrative shaping. Looking forward, the long-term implications of hosting major events like the FIFA World Cup and potentially the Olympic Games pose both opportunities and challenges. These include enhancing Qatar's global visibility and fostering international partnerships, while also necessitating sustainable practices to ensure lasting benefits for the local community.

Notably, hosting the World Cup provided Qatar with a platform to address pressing social issues, including workers' rights, which had become both a domestic and regional policy concern as well as a diplomatic challenge for the nation. When international media outlets, non-governmental organizations, and labor unions intensified their scrutiny of working conditions, Qatar faced unprecedented global criticism. Managing these criticisms required strategic public diplomacy and broader diplomatic engagement, as the state had to reassure international stakeholders that it was committed to meaningful reform. In response, Qatar undertook significant labor reforms, such as abolishing the Kafala system and implementing minimum wage standards. These measures not only showcased Qatar's willingness to engage with international labor norms but also highlighted the complex interplay between sports mega-events, global image-building, and the acceleration of reforms that might otherwise have taken longer to materialize . Indeed, as Babar and Vora (2022) has noted, effectively improving everyday life for migrant workers in the Gulf requires engaging both local stakeholders and the multiple actors and institutions.

Such efforts, though still evolving, have played a role in reshaping regional narratives about labor rights within the Gulf Cooperation Council and internationally. Notably, Qatar's experience could serve as a valuable model of policy transfer for Saudi Arabia as it plans and constructs facilities for the 2036 FIFA World Cup, potentially inspiring similar reform initiatives aligned with international standards.

Furthermore, the sociocultural changes prompted by these international events are reshaping societal norms and values within Qatar, particularly concerning gender roles and the international perception of Arab and Muslim identities. As such, policymakers should consider specific strategies to leverage Qatar's sports diplomacy experiences to further enhance its cultural exchange and international standing. This involves a critical evaluation of the sustainability of heavy investments in sports and assessing their real long-term benefits

to the local population, ensuring that the legacy of such grand-scale events transcends beyond the immediate effect to foster genuine societal progress.

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