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Policies for naturalisation of foreign-born athletes: Qatar and Turkey in comparison

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates why, how, and under which conditions countries naturalise foreign-born athletes. Such nationality transfers are an under-researched topic in academic literature on citizenship and on elite sport. This can be explained by macro data which shows that naturalisations are a negligible factor to explain the overall, historical performance of countries in international sport. However, what makes the current work relevant is that there are some outliers that have recently made excessive use of foreign-born athletes on their national teams, many of whom have no prior connections to their new homes. This research sheds light on the Middle East, a region that has recently been at the forefront when it comes to nationality transfers of migrant athletes, by discussing naturalisation policy in Qatar and Turkey. The motives of naturalised athletes and national federations, the role of governments in transferring nationality to migrant athletes, as well as the rules and regulations of international federations and the International Olympic Committee concerning nationality transfers are discussed. Naturalisations can be explained in regards to low participation rates in national sport and the desire of both countries to gain international prestige through sport. Athletes switch nationalities for economic and sports-related reasons: it is easier for athletes to qualify for international competitions when representing weaker sporting nations. A distinction between both cases is that Qatar only grants temporary passports to many immigrant athletes, a practice that deserves scrutiny by international federations, while Turkey provides naturalised talents with full citizenship.

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Introduction

In an environment of increasing nationality transfers in international sports, national allegiances are becoming a more fluid and, as some might argue, an arbitrary concept, which calls into question the entire architecture of international sports. Athletes not only compete for countries but also represent them, contributing with their successes to national pride, identity, and cohesion. Nationalism is one main driver behind why people follow international sporting events. If athletes without clear national connections to the country (such as residence and language) compete for such countries, the credibility and attractiveness of events such as the Olympics might be damaged. This could also affect the economics of the Games by attracting less interest from sponsors and TV stations.

Famous examples of nationality switches at the Olympic Games include the following: Lopez Lomong, the flag bearer of the United States at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, who grew
up in South-Sudan; Zola Budd, a South African runner who competed for Great Britain in the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles before later returning to her country of birth to represent South Africa in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona; and Tiffany Porter, a US hurdler in the 2010 British Olympic team. Grix (2016, p.182) refers to the ‘Plastic Brits’ debate, ‘a discussion on whether it is fair that athletes can switch to British nationality and take the place of a home-grown talent.’ Of the 61 foreign-born athletes on the 2012 British Olympic team, the case of Yamilet Aldama was particularly controversial, since she had already represented two other countries in the Olympics (Jansen 2018, p. 13).

While naturalisations are not a new phenomenon, what has changed, according to Grix (2016), is an increasing trend to draft in ‘someone from a foreign country to represent another nation with which they have no cultural, historical, or linguistic connection.’ To describe this development, Jansen et al. have used the term ‘jus talenti’, defined as ‘fast-track admission programmes to attract highly skilled immigrants in the global race for talented migrants’ (Jansen et al. 2018, p. 526), in addition to familiar terms from citizenship literature such as ‘jus sanguinis’ (citizenship acquired through descent), ‘jus soli’ (citizenship acquired by birth in the territory), ‘jus domicilii’ (residence in the territory and usually also other conditions, such as language proficiency and income criteria), and ‘jus matrimonii’ (marriage to a native citizen) (Jansen et al. 2018, p. 525).

Naturalisations are not only an under-researched aspect in academic literature on citizenship but also in the rich body of work on elite sport success. On naturalisations, Reiche (2016, p. 136) argued that ‘While in some cases the naturalisation of foreign-born athletes and hosting the Olympic Games might contribute to Olympic success, their overall contribution as an explanation of success and failure at the Games is insignificant.’ However, data confirm that the overall contribution is small but has grown in recent Games and, consequently, received more attention and scrutiny.

The naturalisation of foreign-born athletes has been an aspect long neglected in mainstream citizenship literature. For example, the Handbook of Citizenship Studies discusses the history, forms and different approaches to citizenship without discussing or even mentioning the phenomenon of athletes switching nationality (Isein and Turner 2002). The journal Citizenship Studies, established in 1997 and published by Taylor & Francis, published an article about the naturalisation of athletes for the first time in 2018. This publication by Jansen, Oonk, and Engbersen (Jansen et al. 2018) is part of a small body of academic literature on nationality transfers in sport that has recently emerged and will be presented below.

Horowitz and McDaniel (2015) have collected data on how immigrant athletes influence Olympic medal counts. They looked for medals won by athletes born in countries different from those for which they competed, focusing their research on the four Olympic Summer Games in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012, respectively. The percentage of medal-winning immigrant athletes increased slightly from 5.6% in 2000 to 6.8% in 2012 (Horowitz and McDaniel 2015).

Jansen and Engbersen looked at Olympic squads from 11 countries. Between 1948 and 2012, the share of foreign-born athletes increased from 6.2% to 9.2% while the share of migrants as a share of the total world population has remained relatively stable, at about 3% (Jansen and Engbersen 2017, p. 6). They conclude, ‘The Summer Olympics have not become inherently more migratory’ (Jansen and Engbersen 2017, p. 8). According to Jansen et al., most athletes who switched nationality had prior connections to their new countries through dual citizenship, marriage, or long-term residence (for example, for educational purposes). They conclude, ‘Most Olympic nationality swaps were not the outcome of a talent-for-citizenship exchange per se.’ However, Jansen et al. looked at 11 cases (the same data set as in Jansen and Engbersen 2017) and admitted that a limitation of their work was that the study ‘does not cover countries such as Qatar and Bahrain’ (Jansen et al. 2018, p. 536).

By investigating Qatar and Turkey we are filling a gap in the academic literature on elite sport and citizenship by examining two countries with naturalised foreign-born athletes at a number far above the international average and, in most cases, with hardly any connections to their new home
countries. For Jansen and Engbersen, such athletes are ‘Olympic mercenaries’ that ‘sell their talents to the highest bidding country’ (Jansen and Engbersen 2017, p. 2). We will argue in this article that non-economic factors for naturalisations, particularly those which are sports-related, are also important reasons for nationality swapping.

The aggressive approach toward naturalising migrant athletes challenges Western sporting dominance. The difference between Middle Eastern and Western countries is not only the fact that the Middle East has just recently entered the race for talent from around the globe but also the process and scale of these naturalisations. For example, at the 2014 Asian Games, 14 of the 22 individual running events were won by athletes of African origin who had switched nationality to Qatar, Bahrain, or the United Arab Emirates (Grix 2016, p. 46). Since Bahrain began participation in the Olympic Games in 1984, the country has won three medals, all by female athletes born in Ethiopia and Kenya. All three women received Bahraini citizenship without having lived or trained in their new home country. As Barker rightfully notes, ‘Bahrain’s climate isn’t suitable for distance running (nor are the Muslim country’s cultural restrictions on women)’ (Barker 2017).

We concur with Jansen (2018) that the discussion about nationality swapping in sport is often based on anecdotal evidence related to single cases and that a more systematic approach is needed.

Case selection

We are focusing in this article on naturalisations in Qatar and Turkey, two countries which have been at the forefront of granting nationality to foreign-born athletes. We are specifically looking at the teams who competed at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. Qatar and Turkey seem to be disparate countries. As Table 1 shows, Turkey’s population size is 35 times larger than that of the former British protectorate; Qatar has a GDP per capita 5.5 times higher than that of Turkey and is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. However, both are considered emerging countries in the process of shifting from a developing to a developed country status (MSCI Emerging Markets Index 2018).

When it comes to sport, however, Qatar and Turkey actually have much in common. Both countries host an increasing number of international sporting events. Turkey hosted, for example, the Istanbul Grand Prix Formula 1 (2005–2011), Universiade Summer Games 2005 and Winter Games 2011, UEFA Champions League Final 2005, and the UEFA Cup Final 2009; besides successfully bidding for the FIFA 2022 World Cup, Qatar has hosted, amongst many other events, the 2006 Asian Games and the 2015 Handball World Cup. Apart from major efforts to host and bid for sports-mega events, both countries are sending larger and more successful delegations to continental and global sporting competitions. However, both countries have so far been unsuccessful in their bids to host the Olympic Games: Doha twice in 2016 and 2020; Istanbul five times in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2020, respectively.

There is a growing body of academic literature on Turkish and Qatari sports policy. According to Dorsey and Sebastian (2013, p. 626), Turkey’s sporting successes, such as the first appearance of the national men’s soccer team in the UEFA European Championship in 1996, are considered in the country as ‘evidence of Turkish progress, vitality, and growing strength.’ Polo argues that Turkey is heavily investing in sports as a branding strategy to diffuse a positive image at home and abroad: ‘as a benevolent country and regional power served by an ambitious foreign policy, as a country with a dynamic economy and a strong stable government, and as a modern state sustained by its commitment to conservative values’ (Polo 2015). Tinaz, Turco, and Salisbury conclude in their analysis of Turkish sport policy that apart from reputational gains Turkish policy-makers hope to change attitudes towards sport in the population and increase grass-roots participation by ‘strategic investment in major sports events, elite sport development, and possibly another Olympic bid’ (Tinaz et al. 2014, p. 543).
The authors argue that in Qatar sports investment is part of a soft power strategy around three key themes: ‘exhibiting Qatar’s supremacy as a microstate; the pursuit of peace, security, and integrity; and confronting national health crises.’ According to Reiche (2015, p. 489), sport is used in Qatar as a domestic policy tool to develop a healthy society and to attract white-collar expats from abroad and ‘as a foreign policy tool to build relations with as many countries and people in the world as possible to gain soft power and for national security reasons’. Kamrava (2013, p. 8) in his book Small State, Big Politics considers Qatar’s high-profile projects, such as the successful bid for the FIFA World Cup 2022, not only as a ‘branding effort’ to have a comparative advantage in relation to other Gulf cooperation council (GCC) states but also as a tool for international recognition and ‘to maintain friendly relations and open lines of communication with allies and potential adversaries alike.’

We argue that naturalisation has developed, apart from the hosting of mega-sporting events, as a key strategy to assist Qatar and Turkey in becoming more visible and successful in international

| Source: sports-reference.com, CIA World Factbook, Turkish National Olympic Committee |
sports. Despite the fact that we cannot verify whether Qatar and Turkey were countries with the highest ratio of imported athletes in their 2016 Olympic teams (as this would have required examining the data from all 205 participating countries), both countries indeed belonged to those with the most radical approach to naturalising foreign-born athletes, along with others such as Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Kazakhstan.

**Methodology**

This work applies one method of political science, comparative politics, in which research is performed in three steps. First, similarities and differences between naturalisation policies in two countries are described; second, similarities and differences between cases are explained; and third, predictions on future criteria for nationality transfers are formulated (Caramani 2008, p. 5). Caramani (2008, p. 3) sheds light on the academic approach adopted by comparative politics and writes, ‘Comparative politics does not ignore external influences on internal structures, but its ultimate concern is power configurations within systems.’ According to Almond et al. (2010, p. 28), ‘Comparing our experience with that of other countries deepens our understanding of our institutions. Examining politics in other societies permits us to see a wider range of political alternatives.’

We analyse the motives behind naturalising foreign-born athletes from different perspectives and examine the processes for granting athletes citizenship. We also investigate the history of nationality transfers in Turkish and Qatari sport. The primary focus point of our research is the most recent Summer Olympics, the 2016 edition in Rio de Janeiro. Data sources we consulted to learn the immigration backgrounds of athletes were Sport-Reference.com, the websites of the National Olympic Committees from Qatar and Turkey as well as websites from national and international sports governing bodies.

Because the cases of Turkey and Qatar have received significant criticism in the international media, we consider how nationality transfers in these countries comply with the eligibility criteria of international sport governing bodies and national laws. Our research contributes to a better understanding of why and how countries that are emerging politically, economically, and in sport are naturalising foreign-born athletes. While the cases of Qatar and Turkey have much in common, we will also explain the differences present in their naturalisation processes; we show that the process of athletic citizenship transfers in Qatar (which are, according to our research, in many cases more of a temporary nature) certainly deserve scrutiny by international sports governing bodies, which may lead to a tightening of rules in the future.

The study is based on a range of sources: We reviewed press and academic articles on sport in Qatar and Turkey and naturalisations in international sport. No academic study has ever been published on the naturalisations of foreign-born athletes in Qatar and Turkey. In this research, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Qatari and Turkish sport authorities and athletes who were decision makers or actors in naturalisation processes in these two countries. Eleven interviews with Qatari and Turkish stakeholders were conducted between November 2017 and May 2018, four in Qatar and seven in Turkey. To identify the individuals to interview, a combination of snowball and theoretical, purposive sampling (Arksey and Knight 1999) was used.

A semi-structured interview is one of the most commonly used qualitative methods in social science, allowing the researcher to examine social processes. An in-depth interview further examines social actors’ meanings and interpretations (Blaikie 2000). The interview guide was based on the information retrieved during the review of the existing academic literature on citizenship and naturalisation in sports. During those interviews two main areas were covered: (i) the motives of different stakeholders for naturalisations; and (ii) the processes of nationality changes for athletes in Qatar and Turkey. Interviews in Turkey were conducted in person by the Istanbul-based researcher whereas the interviews with representatives of Qatari sport were conducted by the Beirut-based researcher via telephone or Skype. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and all were later transcribed verbatim. The interviews in Turkey were conducted in Turkish and later
translated into English; in Qatar the interviews were conducted in English. Data generated from the interviews were content analysed and the results were examined in comparison to the findings in existing literature.

Since most naturalisations in Qatar occurred in handball and in Turkey in athletics, we were particularly interested in interviewing representatives from both of these sports. The goals of the interviews were the following:

- to examine the factors that may have led to the nationality change of the athletes,
- to identify the motives behind naturalisations of different stakeholders: governments, federations, clubs, and athletes,
- to identify the similarities and differences between naturalisation policies in Qatar and Turkey.

The interviewees were as follows: 1) the former technical director of Qatar’s National Olympic Committee; 2) the former coach of Qatar’s national women’s soccer team; 3) a representative of the Qatar Handball Association responsible for International Affairs & Communications; 4) a former (naturalised) player of Qatar’s national men’s handball team; 5) a former coach of Turkey’s national table tennis team; 6) the press liaison of the Turkish Judo Federation; 7) the press liaison of the Turkish Athletic Federation; 8) a Turkish sports agent specialised in athletics; 9) the managing director of ENKA, the most prominent amateur sports club in Turkey; 10) a professional Turkish tennis player who was born in Uzbekistan; 11) the team manager of a major swimming club in Turkey.

Qatar and Turkey at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games

Qatar and Turkey had high numbers of naturalised athletes in their delegations at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. As Table 1 shows Qatar was represented by 24 foreign-born athletes and Turkey by 25. Given the larger delegation size of Turkey, Qatar’s share of naturalised athletes (65%) was higher than Turkey’s (24%). While we could track the place of birth for all 103 Turkish athletes, it was more difficult to do so with the 37 Qatari athletes. The place of birth of eight Qatari athletes is, according to the data sources we consulted, unknown. These eight athletes included one woman (Dalal Al-Harith) and seven men (Noah Al-Khulaifi, Abubaker Haydar, Fares Ibrahim, Ahmed Bader Magour, Nasreddine Megdich, Bassem Hassan Mohammed, and Morad Zemuri). We contacted Qatari sports governing bodies and learned from a representative of the Qatar Athletics Federation that Ahmed Bader Magour (athletics) was born in Egypt, while the other two athletes from athletics, Dalal Al-Harith and Abubaker Haydar, were born in Qatar. We learned in our interviews with representatives from Qatari handball (personal communication, 1 March 2018) that Nasreddine Megdich (handball) is originally from Tunisia. From an article in the Iranian press agency we learned that Fares Ibrahim (weightlifting) is originally from Egypt (Ramezani 2017). We were unable to verify the place of birth of Noah Al-Khulaifi, Bassem Hassan Mohammed, and Morad Zemuri so decided to consider them Qatari-born. This means that the real number of foreign-born Qatari athletes could exceed 65%, but this cannot be verified at this time, and our assumption does not detract from the article’s finding.

As Table 1 shows, both Turkey and Qatar recruited athletes worldwide, and in each delegation, there were athletes born in 15 countries other than Turkey and Qatar. An assumption held at the beginning of the research process was that naturalised Qatari athletes would be predominantly Arabs and/or Muslims and that naturalised Turkish athletes would be predominantly from countries that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Our assumption was substantiated by work from Jansen et al. on naturalised athletes in the Olympic Games that was based on 11 countries. The research concluded that ‘Olympic migration is mainly a reflection of international migration patterns and histories’ (Jansen et al. 2018, p. 530). For example, Senegalese athletes would switch to French nationality because both countries share not only a language but also a colonial history.
However, our data show otherwise. In the case of the athletes on Qatar’s Olympic team, only four out of 15 countries of origin were Arab: Egypt, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia. Syria had the most substantial number of naturalised athletes (4) on the Qatari Olympic team. Nigeria and Senegal were other Muslim-majority countries, raising the number of athletes from such nation-states to 13 out of 24. Some other athletes, such as the boxer Hakan Erseker who grew up in Germany and is of Turkish origin, might be Muslim as well, but there is undoubtedly a large number of athletes from predominantly Christian countries, such as Brazil, Croatia, Cuba, and Spain. Many Turkish athletes also come from Christian-majority countries such as Kenya, with the most substantial number of naturalised athletes (8), as well as Cuba, Jamaica, Ethiopia, and South Africa. Only two of the 15 countries of origin of the foreign-born athletes on Turkey’s Olympic team once belonged to the Ottoman Empire: Bulgaria and Georgia.

Another assumption was that naturalised athletes might be predominantly fortune seekers from developing countries. However, our data show that many athletes came from developed countries. For example, Qatar was represented in boxing by two German-born athletes, Hakan Erseker and Thulasi Tharumalingam. This shows that naturalisation processes are more complex than simplifying core/periphery models that explain athletic labour migration by rich/poor divisions.

A similarity of both cases is that around 60% of naturalised athletes participated in just one sport: 15 out of 25 foreign-born Turkish athletes (60%) competed in athletics; 14 out of 24 naturalised Qatari athletes (58%) were members of the national handball team.

All naturalised athletes in Qatar were men while Turkey displayed more gender balance in its naturalisation efforts by granting Turkish citizenship to 13 male and 12 female athletes. This reflects the gender composition of both Olympic teams. Qatar, which included women for the first-time in its Olympic team for the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, was represented in 2016 by 35 men and only two women. Turkey was represented in Rio by 55 male and 48 female athletes, giving women an impressively high share of 47% in the Turkish Olympic team.

Interestingly, the sporting success of both countries was driven by local athletes, and the main contribution of the foreign-born athletes was that both countries were able to send large, visible delegations to Brazil. Naturalised athletes won only two out of eight Turkish medals, although this 25% share is still much higher than the abovementioned global average of 6.8% medal-winning immigrant athletes in the 2012 Summer Olympics (Horowitz and McDaniel, 2015). The only Qatari medal in Rio 2016 was won by the Doha-born high-jumper Mutaz Essa Barshim. Four years after winning the bronze medal in London 2012, he won the silver medal in Rio.

**Policies for naturalisation in comparison**

National representation in international sports depends on citizenship. The Olympic Charter states, ‘Any competitor in the Olympic Games must be a national of the country of the NOC which is entering such competitor’ (International Olympic Committee 2015, p. 80). A similarity of both Turkey and Qatar is that their citizenship laws have special provisions that allow for the naturalisation of foreign-born athletes. According to article 6 of the Qatari nationality law, ‘Qatari nationality may be granted to those who have rendered great service to the country, or who have particular skills the country needs, or students who excel by showing promising scientific ability. Based on the requirements of the public interest, Qatari nationality may be granted in such cases to the persons concerned, who may also retain their original nationality’ (Qatar Legal Portal 2005). While the Qatari law refers more generally to ‘great service’ and ‘particular skills’ without mentioning athletes (who are in reality the main beneficiaries of the provision), the Turkish law is more specific. It provides in article 12 of the law under the headline ‘Exceptional States in the Acquisition of Turkish Citizenship’ nationality to ‘persons who have brought industrial plants into Turkey or have rendered or are being considered to render in future outstanding services in the scientific,
technological, economic, social, sporting, cultural and artistic fields and about whom a reasoned offer has been made by the ministries relevant’ (Turkish Citizenship Act 2009).

The Qatari citizenship law is far more restrictive than that of Turkey. Campbell (2010, p. 52) rightfully comments that ‘in the case of Qatar, where citizenship might be understood to be by blood, naturalising transnational athlete migrants contradicts citizen criteria.’ Qatari citizenship requires being born to a Qatari father. Opportunities for non-Qatars, which constitute a vast majority (88.4%) of the 2,314,307 inhabitants of the Peninsula (see Table 1), to become Qatari citizens are very limited. Apart from criteria such as good knowledge of the Arabic language, non-Qatars can apply for citizenship only after living as a regular resident of Qatar for ‘not less than twenty-five consecutive years’ and without having been absent for more than two months in a single calendar year. Periods of absence are deducted from the residence period. A further limitation, according to article 17 of the law, states, ‘In accordance with the provisions of Articles 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, Qatari nationality shall not be granted to more than fifty (50) applicants in one calendar year’ (Qatar Legal Portal 2005). Since article 17 refers explicitly to article 6, there is a legal cap on the naturalisation of foreign-born athletes. There is no such limitation in Turkish law.

In comparison to Qatari law, the Turkish nationality law is much more liberal as it does not limit citizenship to children born to Turkish fathers – children may also be born to Turkish mothers. Citizenship can also be granted based on descent, place of birth, adoption, and marriage with a Turkish citizen. It is much easier for foreigners living in Turkey than for those in Qatar to become citizens. Knowledge of the local language (Turkish) is expected, but the waiting period for residents is much shorter than in Qatar: According to article 11, residence in Turkey ‘without interruption for five years’ is expected (Turkish Citizenship Act 2009).

How does the naturalisation process work? According to our interview with the former technical director of Qatar’s National Olympic Committee who held the position for over 10 years, the process has two directions: ‘We identify athletes or athletes offer themselves to compete for Qatar because they receive zero support at home’ (personal communication, 20 November 2017). A peculiarity of Qatar compared with Turkey is that most of the naturalised athletes only receive time-limited ‘mission passports’ and remain dual citizens, which prevents exceeding the cap of 50 naturalisations. Only athletes that can achieve exceptional success receive full citizenship.

How does the process of temporary athletic passports work? We contacted several 2016 Qatari Olympians to find out, but not one agreed to an interview. For example, as we chatted with German-born boxer Thulasi Tharumalingam on 18 January 2018 via Facebook, he explained his reluctance to talk to us by stating, ‘I am enjoying my journey through the world of global sports, regardless of nationality. That’s all I want to say about the matter because I have had the experience of being misquoted by the media.’ Prior to the 2016 Olympic Games in a public interview with a regional newspaper from the athlete’s home city in Germany, the naturalised boxer said, ‘It would have been nicer to represent Germany, but this is still better than not being able to live your dream’ (Bösch 2016).

We interviewed the former coach of the Qatari national women’s soccer team who described the process by which temporary passports are awarded (personal communication, 25 January 2018). The German woman who coached the Qatari national women’s soccer team from February 2013 to June 2014 emphasised two critical components of the system: ‘First, you never possess both passports at the same time. Second, you never have the Qatari passport for yourself.’ On her team there were approximately 20% Qatari players and 80% foreign passport holders, although most of them were born in Qatar: ‘For female soccer, we never imported players. They were anyway present in Qatar, born to parents who worked in the country.’ When she was travelling with the team, the non-Qatari players (from countries such as Egypt and Sudan) had to leave their foreign passports at Doha airport, which were returned to them upon re-entry. Sometimes players with foreign passports could not travel with the team due to administrative mistakes; their Qatari passports were not waiting for them at the airport. If the process ran smoothly, the players could only hold their Qatari passports for a few minutes. Immediately after
passing through immigration control, a person in charge would collect the Qatari passports of the foreign passport-holding players.

A Syrian-born former player of the Qatari national handball team said in an interview with the authors that he moved to Qatar in 2009 at the age of 17 (personal communication, 2 March 2018). He received the offer to move to and play for the tiny Gulf country after participating with the Syrian national school team in an international tournament in which Qatar also participated. The Syrian squad won. When he began representing Qatar, he received a mission passport which he used until 2015. After Qatar’s surprising win against Germany in the quarter-final of the 2015 handball world championship in Doha, the Emir enthusiastically entered the locker room and said to the team (in English), ‘We will not forget what you did for the country.’ While the foreign-born players were proud, they did not understand what this would mean for them practically. However, four months later the player we interviewed received a phone call informing him that he could now apply for a Qatari passport in exchange for his Syrian nationality. He agreed to do so and became a Qatari citizen, six years after he arrived in the country and after numerous appearances for the Qatari national handball team. According to the player, all foreigners from the 2015 national handball World Cup team became full Qatari citizens. Unlike the players from Arab countries, the Qatari government accepted that European players could keep their original passports and become dual citizens. The Syrian-born player we interviewed was injured and his professional handball career came to an end; as a student at Qatar University, he is now benefitting from the privileges of Qatari citizenship. He confirmed this in our conversation: ‘All Qatari rules and regulations that apply to any Qatari citizen apply to me also and studying for free at Qatar University is one of them’ (personal communication, 2 March 2018).

The press liaison of the Turkish Athletic Federation said when interviewed that naturalisations in Turkey happen because of the country’s ‘hunger for success’ (personal communication, 20 February 2018). The former technical director of Qatar’s National Olympic Committee argued, ‘It takes 20 years to develop Olympic athletes. Naturalising is a short-term strategy’ (personal communication, 20 November 2017). He also said, ‘We did it like any other country, but we did it more than others because we had the cash.’ And, ‘I was against naturalisation at the beginning, but then I was in favour because we upgrade the lifestyle of people from poor countries.’

A similarity of both cases is that the naturalisation of athletes has been heavily criticised in the international media while local media have widely ignored the topic. We reviewed Qatari and Turkish media outlets starting in 2015, one year prior to the Olympic team. *Peninsula*, for example, an English daily published in Qatar, published only articles praising Qatari athletes, without discussing their diverse backgrounds. We found only two articles in Qatari media outlets related to the topic: An article entitled ‘Naturalised Players Dominate Qatar’s Sports Scene’ on *Qatar Sports Tanmiya*, a website run by students from Qatar’s Northwestern University, portrayed an Egyptian-born student competing for Qatar in gymnastics (Monir and Al-Thani 2015); and an article entitled ‘So what if most of Qatar’s Olympic team isn’t from Qatar?’ in *Doha News*, an online news blog based in but blocked within Qatar (a main reason for the country’s drop in the 2018 World Press Freedom index to rank 125). The opinion piece referred to the high percentage of Qatari athletes born abroad and argued that ‘maybe it’s time athletes simply compete as individuals, rather than represent an entire nation’ (Thomas 2016). Turkey is ranked even lower than Qatar (at 157) in the 2018 World Press Freedom Index. Reporters Without Borders, the organisation that publishes the ranking, writes that there is a ‘witch hunt’ by the Turkish government against media critics and that ‘censorship of websites and online social media has also reached unprecedented levels’ (Turkey: Massive Purge 2018). One of the rare articles we found that critically discussed naturalisations in Turkish sports was in 2016 on the website *Al Jazeera Turk*, the Turkish branch of the Qatari news network. Since 2017, the website is not operating anymore. The respective article entitled ‘Is naturalisation the cure?’ (in Turkish) asks different stakeholders from Turkish sports about their views on naturalisations. While there are statements such as, ‘There is no harm in using the method employed by the whole world,’ some critical statements are also present. For example, concerning
nationality transfers, a sports writer demands that ‘the number of these sportsmen in our total number of sportsmen should be in a reasonable proportion.’ According to the former President of the Turkish Athletic Federation, ‘People are not happy with the medals won by the recruited sportsmen.’ An athlete complains, ‘For me it is difficult to understand the preference for recruited sportsmen while millions of our young talented people are waiting to be discovered (Çare Devşirme Sporcular mı? 2016).’

Many European newspapers published critiques regarding Turkey in July 2016 when the European Athletics Championships were held, only four weeks prior to the Summer Olympic Games in August 2016 in Rio de Janeiro. Also, thanks to its naturalised athletes, Turkey won 12 medals at the event in Amsterdam – the same number won by Turkey in all previous 22 editions of the European Athletics Championships combined (Lelgemann 2016). The Irish runner Sonia O’Sullivan was quoted in a newspaper article stating, ‘I don’t think they are legitimately running for the country. They haven’t grown up there. There is no connection there. They are basically being paid to run for Turkey’ (Barker 2017).

While recently both men and women were recruited for Turkish athletics in East Africa, there was an interesting gender dimension in the naturalisation efforts in judo, as the press liaison of the Turkish Judo Federation explained when interviewed for this article: ‘Turkish female judo is much better than male judo. That is why we are not in search for women and, apart from one exception, never naturalised women in judo’ (personal communication, 21 February 2018).

The interviewed representative of the Qatar Handball Association said, ‘We bring players from abroad to increase the level of Qatari handball. Many players from outside want to come to Qatar to play here’ (personal communication, 1 March 2018). He described handball in Qatar as a growing sector, referring to the legacy of the 2015 handball World Cup in the country: ‘Many people in Qatar know now about handball after the World Cup was hosted by Qatar.’

In Turkish athletics, there is also the argument that naturalised athletes increase the level of the sport. A sports agent specialised in athletics we interviewed for this research said, ‘Since we have three naturalised athletes, only one Turk entered the 4 × 100 meters race with them at the 2016 Olympics. He has seen the Olympics because of naturalised athletes’ (personal communication, 15 February 2018).

In the case of Qatar there were also critical articles published before Rio 2016, particularly around the 2015 Men’s Handball World Championship, in which Qatar was mainly represented by foreign-born athletes – only four of the Qatari squad originated from the Gulf state. The other players came from countries such as Bosnia, Cuba, France, Montenegro, and Spain. In newspaper articles the Qatari team was described as a ‘foreign legion’ and ‘a multicultural bunch’ (Qatar’s foreign legion primed for handball date with Germany 2015).

Temporary citizenships seem to be legal according to international law. According to Babar, ‘Citizenship means different things in different places’ (Babar 2017, p. 526) and ‘has been tailored to suit particular circumstances’ (Babar 2017, p. 529). She elaborates, ‘Although citizenship may confer specific privileges and rights upon citizens, there is no international agreement on what specific bundle of rights are associated with it’ (Babar 2017, p. 526).

But why is Qatar so hesitant to provide foreign-born athletes with full citizenship as opposed to our second case, Turkey? The main differences between both countries are size (see Table 1), the level of dependence on foreign labour, the number of foreigners which constitute the country – unlike Turkey the vast majority of people who live in Qatar are foreign – and the privileges that come with holding citizenship. A professor from Georgetown University in Qatar explains the financial privileges of Qatari citizenship: ‘In Qatar, citizens benefit not only from occasional government stipends, but also from guaranteed employment in the public sector, free education, training, healthcare, land grants, subsidised housing, free electricity and water, and a host of other benefits. Such largesse places a continuous strain on the financial capacity of the state’ (Babar 2014, p. 409). The researcher concludes that ‘in Qatar, as a result of particular state-society relations, welfare benefits are exceedingly high for nationals, and, consequently, the state shows great
reluctance to expand citizenship, as it would be economically burdensome’ (Babar 2014, p. 403). Different from Qatar, citizenship is less costly for the Turkish state as it comes with fewer privileges. This does not mean that the naturalisation of foreign athletes comes without a cost since cash bonuses for nationality transfers seem to be common.

If players belong to the minority of foreign-born athletes that manage to become fully naturalised in Qatar, they remain second-class citizens: ‘Naturalised Qataris do not have the right to serve in public office until ten years have passed since their naturalisation and are not permitted to work in the public sector until five years have passed since naturalisation. Also, naturalised citizens do not have the right to vote and to run for elections (though they can hold appointed positions) and have limitations on their access to social and economic benefits’ (Babar 2014, p. 414).

Temporary passports for foreign-born athletes and second-class citizenship status for naturalised migrants address ‘local concerns about too much Western influence, which might result in the loss of Arabic language, Muslim values and traditional Qatari social relations’ (Vora 2014, p. 2244). Alshawi and Gardner (2013, p. 54) emphasise that ‘sedentarisation and urbanisation, economic well-being, the development of a robust state, and other social changes wrought by Qatar’s recent path through history have not eroded the tribal social structure.’ Power in contemporary Qatar comes, according to Alshawi and Gardner (2013, p. 56), ‘in part, from the size and strength of the tribe.’ The influx of foreigners into Qatari society and the naturalisation of immigrants is a threat for tribalism as a ‘model of social organisation that regulates and structures political and social interaction’ (Alshawi and Gardner 2013, p. 49).

The citizenship hierarchy of Qatar, comprised of full citizens above naturalised citizens who are above temporary passport holders, is considered protective to the national population (full citizens) who fear losing sovereignty. According to Sater (2014, p. 292), this hierarchy legitimates the state in the following ways: ‘(1) it increases the welfare of citizenship holders; (2) it creates a legal hierarchy of power relationships, corresponding to a sense of fear vis-a`-vis the numerical majority; and (3) it legitimates the state to secure the welfare and to assure the protection of national populations, from the population’s culture and language to crime and diseases that foreign populations may bring.’

Although Qatar is small, citizens are unlikely to meet the athletes that represent their country in international sport. The former technical director of Qatar’s National Olympic Committee confirmed when interviewed that not all athletes who compete for Qatar live in the country (personal communication, 20 November 2017): ‘For example, the equestrian team lives and trains in Europe.’ A sports agent specialised in athletics (personal communication, 15 February 2018), who helped bring many Kenyan runners to Turkey, told researchers that naturalised Kenyan runners spend most of their time in Kenya for two reasons: ‘These athletes must train at an elevation of 2,000–3,000 meters. That is why they have to stay most of the time in Kenya – not because they like to be there.’ A second reason he gave was the better quality of Kenyan coaches compared to those in Turkey.

According to the former technical director of Qatar’s National Olympic Committee, name changes are common in naturalisation processes in Qatar, especially if the birth names are Christian (personal communication, 20 November 2017). The desired name should ‘sound Arabic’ so that athletes ‘are less attacked by the international media.’ While we could not confirm any name change in the Qatari 2016 Summer Olympic Games squad, name changes had certainly occurred several times. One of the five medals Qatar earned at the Olympic Games (including in 2016) was won by Angel Popov, a Bulgarian-born weightlifter who competed under the name Said Saif Asaad at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Melbourne (Campbell 2010, p. 54).

Name changes are also common in Turkey. Examples include two Turkish table tennis players, a man and a woman who competed at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games: Cem Zeng, was born in China as Zheng Changgong, and Melek Hu, born as Hou Meiling, competed for Turkey in women’s table tennis in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 Olympic Games, respectively. In addition, Hüseyin Özkan,
who won a gold medal for Turkey in judo at the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, was born as Huseyn Bisultanov in Chechnya.

English has been the working language for many naturalised athletes on national teams, such as the Qatari handball players and the Turkish track and field athletes. The press liaison for the Turkish Athletic Federation (personal communication, 23 February 2018) said when interviewed, ‘To create a positive effect, the athlete must be speaking the local language in his new country. When he cannot interact with the public, the impact is limited.’

Turkey’s naturalisations have generally happened at a time of declining success in soccer – Turkey’s leading sport (Dorsey and Sebastian 2013). Similarly, Qatar has been struggling to develop a competitive national soccer team in preparation for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Both countries did not qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. Turkey was also affected by a huge doping scandal in 2013: Out of 1,953 athletes who were banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in 2013, roughly 10% (188) came from Turkey. The press liaison of the Turkish Athletic Federation admitted that there was a connection between the doping cases and the naturalisation of East African athletes: ‘Turkish athletics collapsed due to doping in 2013. Almost all elite athletes have been banned in Turkey. Most of the foreign athletes were naturalised in 2014’ (personal communication, 20 February 2018).

For Qatar, a primary obstacle to sporting success is the country’s small population size and low participation rates in sports, particularly among women (Reiche 2015). While Turkey has a much larger population size, it also struggles with low participation numbers, a lack of facilities, and an inadequately developed school sports system (Tinaz et al. 2014). Most of the federations depend on government subsidies, which are based on international sporting success. This is an incentive to naturalise athletes instead of developing long-term strategies to promote local youth.

Handball in Qatar and athletics in Turkey, the two sports in which most naturalisations occur in the countries under investigation, are both struggling heavily with low participation rates. According to the Turkish Ministry of Youth and Sport, by 2017 Turkish athletics had 214,550 members (80,215 women, 134,335 men), but only 14,273 of them (5,719 women, 8,554 men) are ‘actively’ participating in the sport (Turkish General Directorate of Sport 2017). According to our interview with the Qatar Handball Association, there are only 2,000 handball players in Qatar – among them, there are 500 foreigners and around 100–150 female players. In comparison, in Germany – the world leading handball market – there are 760,000 handball players (Sportarten in Deutschland nach Anzahl der Mitglieder im Jahr 2017 [in Millionen] 2017). A better comparison might be Iceland, a small country with a population of around 350,000 people, which is traditionally successful in handball and exports players to top leagues such as Germany. In Iceland, there were, according to the Icelandic Handball Association, 8,537 participants in handball in 2017, more than four times the number in Qatar (Gislason 2018). Apart from the low number of players, there are also very few handball fans in the country. According to the interviewed former handball player and a representative from the Qatar Handball Federation, often fewer than 100 people attend professional handball matches.

**Switching nationalities in international sport**

By naturalising foreign-born athletes, Qatar and Turkey are not violating the rules of international federations (IF) nor are they the only countries represented by immigrants at the Olympic Games. There are differences among sports when it comes to the prevalence of naturalised foreign-born athletes, which can be explained by the dominance of a few countries in those sports as well as the rules for nationality transfers outlined by the IF.

Table tennis, as well as middle and long-distance running, might belong to the most extreme examples in the Summer Olympic Games: ‘Many major international table tennis competitions became competitions among Chinese table tennis players competing for different countries’ (Horowitz and McDaniel 2015, p. 38). This also applies to Qatar and Turkey. The three table tennis
players from both countries in Rio 2016 (two Turkish, one Qatari) were all born in China. Before the Rio Games, Heijmans investigated the Olympic history of table tennis, a sport that has been included in the Summer Games program since 1988. Of the 666 Olympic table tennis competitors in all Games between Seoul 1988 and London 2012, at least 91 players were born in China: ‘Combined with the Chinese competitors, this means that about a fifth of all table tennis Olympians are Chinese!’ (Heijmans 2015).

Similar to Chinese athletes in table tennis, there is in track and field significant migration of athletes from Kenya to other countries. This occurs particularly in middle and long-distance running. According to a Kenyan newspaper article, before the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, ‘More than 30 Kenyan-born athletes lined up for races in Rio de Janeiro, with Turkey and Bahrain accounting for the highest numbers’ (Komen 2016).

According to Grix (2016), countries are naturalising athletes because the global reach of sport is unprecedented. While governments aim to raise their international profiles with sporting success, for athletes there are two primary motivations for changing citizenship and competing for these countries. The first is economical, given the poverty in Kenya and the wealth of the Gulf countries: ‘The unbalanced nature of global wealth and sporting corporate power has created movement of sporting talent from less paying to higher-paying clubs and now nations’ (Njororai 2010, p. 443). However, apart from the economic motives there are also sport-related reasons. In Kenya, there is a concentration of world-class middle and long-distance runners. However, at international competitions such as the Olympics, only three athletes from one country are allowed to compete. This means that many world-class runners from Kenya are not eligible to compete at the Olympic Games. The press liaison of the Turkish Athletic Federation said when interviewed, ‘Most of the incoming athletes cannot enter the national team in their own country. It is so hard to enter the national athletics team in Kenya. These guys have to look after their families, so there is an athlete export from Kenya to the rest of world’ (personal communication, 20 February 2018). The interviewed naturalised Turkish tennis player also emphasised that the conditions in his new home country are much more professional and that the Federation is more supportive than in his country of origin, Uzbekistan.

Competing for another country makes it easier for athletes from countries that dominate a sport (such as China in table tennis and Kenya in running) to enter major sporting events. Looking back, the former Turkish national table tennis coach is sceptical about the benefits of naturalisation: ‘These naturalised players were not beneficial for motivating next generations and the creation of an elite sports system.’ The press liaison of the Turkish Judo Federation shared this scepticism: ‘Naturalised athletes increased the level of success in Turkish judo when they were competing, but as soon as they retired, we didn’t see any change, and we moved back to the same level’ (personal communication, 21 February 2018).

Regarding nationality transfers, there is the following provision in the Olympic Charter: ‘A competitor who has represented one country in the Olympic Games, in continental or regional games or in world or regional championships recognised by the relevant IF, and who has changed his nationality or acquired a new nationality, may participate in the Olympic Games to represent his new country provided that at least three years have passed since the competitor last represented his former country. This period may be reduced or even cancelled, with the agreement of the NOC and IF concerned, by the IOC Executive Board, which takes into account the circumstances of each case’ (International Olympic Committee 2015, p. 80).

The Olympic Charter means that there are only a few restrictions on switching nationalities and representing another country at the Olympic Games. Athletes can even represent two different countries at the Olympic Games, as handball player Hassan Mabrouk did when in 2016 he participated representing Qatar and in 2008 representing Egypt in the Summer Olympic Games. Li Ping won the gold for China in the mixed doubles event during the 2009 World Table Tennis Championships prior to competing for Qatar in the 2016 Summer Olympic Games.

It is no coincidence that most naturalisations have been in athletics (Turkey) and handball (Qatar). Unlike team sports such as soccer and basketball, in which the international sports governing bodies FIFA and FIBA have much stricter rules than the IOC regulations, the
International Handball Federation (IHF) eases changes of citizenship. ‘We follow the IHF rules,’ emphasised the interviewed representative of the Qatar Handball Association (personal communication, 1 March 2018). The IHF player eligibility code states that players ‘shall not have played in any national team of another country in the three years preceding their first appearance in the national team in an official match’ (International Handball Federation 2011, p. 5). In athletics, nationality transfers are even less restrictive than in handball.

Prior to the 2000 Summer Olympic Games, eight Bulgarian weightlifters transferred to Qatar which paid, according to an article in The Telegraph, a compensation of £680,000 to the Bulgarian federation. Two of the eight weightlifters participated in the Sydney Olympics, and one of them – Angel Popov, competing under the name Said Saif Asaad – won a bronze medal for Qatar (Chemi and Fahey 2016).

A famous case in Turkish sports is Bulgarian-born weightlifter Naim Süleymanoğlu, who won gold medals for Turkey at three consecutive Summer Olympic Games (1988, 1992, 1996). Süleymanoğlu belonged to the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria as did the former national table tennis coach of Turkey we interviewed. He moved to Turkey and became a Turkish citizen at the age of 26 when authorities wanted to force him to change his Turkish name to a Bulgarian name. In the case of Süleymanoğlu, it was more complicated to change his national allegiance. Before his first Olympic appearance for Turkey in 1988, Turkey paid a transfer fee to the Bulgarian government. According to the website of the International Olympic Committee, ‘For him to be able to compete internationally he needed the agreement of the Bulgarian government, who received $1,000,000 from the Turks to enable the move’ (Suleymanoglu Lifts Weights and Hearts with Extraordinary Hat-Trick, 1988).

The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) announced in February 2017 that it would freeze its nationality transfer rules and formed a committee to work out stricter eligibility rules (IAAF 2017). The president of the Confederation of African Athletics and head of the newly established IAAF working group on nationality transfers, stated as an aim of a future reform ‘to end the practice of countries more or less buying athletes, without giving them full lifelong nationality’ (Barker 2017). While the statement did not specifically refer to Qatar, it was apparently directed at the tiny Gulf country (as well its neighbour-state Bahrain, which seems to follow a similar approach).

In March 2018, the IAAF Council decided to follow the recommendations from the Transfer of Allegiance Working Group about the following new principles regarding transfers of allegiance in athletics: a minimum three-year waiting period for athletes wanting to transfer from one country to another; the establishment of a review panel to determine the credibility of applications; evidence that countries are offering full citizenship and associated rights; the provision that an athlete can transfer only once in his or her career; and the ceasing of transfers taking place before the age of 20. IAAF’s President Sebastian Coe said the new principles were a ‘monumental decision’ (IAAF 2018). One of the new principles – evidence that full citizenship is offered – is significantly relevant to Qatar, where, as this research has revealed, the practice of temporary passports has been common in the past. The minimum waiting period of three years and the new age restriction do affect both Turkey and Qatar, who can no longer speed up naturalisation processes nor transfer any more athletes under 20 years old.

Table 2 summarises the reasons behind naturalisations of athletes in Qatar and in Turkey from different stakeholders’ perspectives. Table 3 summarises the processes for naturalisations of athletes in both countries under investigation.

### Conclusion

Both Qatar and Turkey use the naturalisation of foreign-born athletes as a key strategy to become major sporting powers. There are, however, some differences in the details. For example, Qatar mainly naturalises men while Turkey has naturalised men and women to a similar extent for the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, the focus point of this research.
Western criticism of naturalisation can also be explained by the fact that countries that have so far belonged to the sporting peripheries of the world are now challenging historical centres, such as the United States which lost its bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup to Qatar. However, it cannot be denied that both Qatar and Turkey have an excessive percentage of naturalised athletes. Domestically, however, there is not much criticism of this practice. One reason for this, in the case of Qatar, might be that athletic migration reflects that the Qatari economy is highly dependent on a foreign workforce. Another reason that applies to both Qatar and Turkey is that the authoritarian environments of the two countries leave very little room for critical public discussion on naturalisation, though our interviewees revealed some scepticism, particularly in Turkey, towards the sustainability of this approach. We argue that the non-democratic environments of both countries (and of other nations with high rates of naturalisation, such as Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Kazakhstan) are key to understanding the scale of naturalisation happening to an extent far above the global average.

The authors believe that naturalisations are a legitimate transformation strategy to raise the domestic sports sector to a higher level. However, the authors noticed that the only criteria for accepting naturalisations are often aimed toward achieving short-term international sporting success and gaining prestige for the country. The authors suggest there should be other criteria as well. For example, naturalised athletes should live permanently in their new home countries.

## Table 2. Reasons behind naturalisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder</th>
<th>Qatar</th>
<th>Turkey</th>
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| Government  | • To raise international profile for gaining soft power and as a means of national security  
• To develop sports for a healthier society  
• To fast-track elite sport development  |
| Federation  | • Low number of local athletes due to small population size  
• Developing local athletes needs more time than naturalisations  
• Imported athletes may aid domestic athletes’ improvement  
• To increase the level of local leagues and national teams  |
| Club        | • Low number of local athletes due to small population size  
• To increase competitiveness at national and continental levels  
• Easier and faster than raising local athletes  
• Imported athletes may aid Qatari club athletes improvement  |
| Athlete     | • To upgrade lifestyle (better income and living conditions)  
• One of the most modern sporting infrastructures in the world  
• To avoid high competition in the home country in becoming a national athlete  
• To be able to participate in international championships  
• Citizenship and related significant benefits  |

Western criticism of naturalisation can also be explained by the fact that countries that have so far belonged to the sporting peripheries of the world are now challenging historical centres, such as the United States which lost its bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup to Qatar. However, it cannot be denied that both Qatar and Turkey have an excessive percentage of naturalised athletes. Domestically, however, there is not much criticism of this practice. One reason for this, in the case of Qatar, might be that athletic migration reflects that the Qatari economy is highly dependent on a foreign workforce. Another reason that applies to both Qatar and Turkey is that the authoritarian environments of the two countries leave very little room for critical public discussion on naturalisation, though our interviewees revealed some scepticism, particularly in Turkey, towards the sustainability of this approach. We argue that the non-democratic environments of both countries (and of other nations with high rates of naturalisation, such as Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Kazakhstan) are key to understanding the scale of naturalisation happening to an extent far above the global average.

The authors believe that naturalisations are a legitimate transformation strategy to raise the domestic sports sector to a higher level. However, the authors noticed that the only criteria for accepting naturalisations are often aimed toward achieving short-term international sporting success and gaining prestige for the country. The authors suggest there should be other criteria as well. For example, naturalised athletes should live permanently in their new home countries.
and serve as role models for local youth. Naturalisations should happen in sports that already have some domestic popularity and potential rather than in sports that cannot be played well in the country (such as long-distance running in desert countries). Naturalisations can be advantageous in team sports because a few strong athletes may help large groups improve overall performance.

The main obstacle to sporting success in both Qatar and Turkey is the shared non-active leisure culture. Turkey and Qatar will further depend on naturalised athletes if they fail to make progress in sport participation rates and the development of elite athletes in their own countries. Changing current trends could take generations and require considerable effort. In Turkey improvements are needed in the areas of school sport and sports facilities, while in Qatar the main challenge is the acceptance and promotion of female sports. As opposed to Turkey, Qatar has the disadvantage of a small population size and extreme climate conditions. Thus, as a desert country it should strategically focus on improving a few indoor sports if it aims to develop a local talent pool and reduce reliance on imported athletes. Easing the process for Qatar-born foreigners to become Qatari might also help the country improve in international sports and at the same time modernise a society that depends heavily on a foreign workforce. With its large population size and Mediterranean climate, Turkey can develop a more extensive variety of summer and even winter sports.

We suggest that future research investigate the lived experience of those athletes naturalised by Qatar, Turkey, and other countries active in recruiting migrant athletes, such as Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Kazakhstan. Each naturalised athlete has an individual story, and future research could look more closely into the full histories of migrant athletes by analysing why and at which point of their careers they switched nationality, the extent to which they integrated into their new home countries, and how they were perceived by their new fellow citizens. Another interesting angle would be a look at the long-term impact (on sports participation, for example) of naturalised athletes in their new home nations. Finally, a look at the topic from a governance perspective and how international federations and the IOC review their eligibility criteria in light of excessive naturalisations would be another interesting topic for future research.

It is likely that some international sporting federations will make it harder to change one’s citizenship. However, as the history of doping shows, prohibitions always lead to ‘creativity’ in the

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3. Processes of naturalisation.</th>
<th>Qatar</th>
<th>Turkey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship law – General characteristics</td>
<td>Restrictive. Citizenship requires applicants to have a Qatari father.</td>
<td>Liberal. Multiple pathways (marriage, residence, etc.) exist to becoming a Turkish citizen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a cap for naturalisations?</td>
<td>Yes. Limited to 50 per year.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there an official strategy or policy document for the naturalisation of athletes?</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of citizenship acquired by naturalised athletes?</td>
<td>In many cases athletes get temporary passports. Full citizenship only awarded after international sporting successes.</td>
<td>Regular citizenship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes of foreign to local names?</td>
<td>Common in the past but not at the 2016 Summer Olympics.</td>
<td>Yes, including several cases at the 2016 Summer Olympics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do athletes have to move to their new home country?</td>
<td>No. In some sports, such as equestrian, athletes train and live abroad.</td>
<td>No. In some sports, such as athletics and swimming, athletes train and live abroad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a preference to naturalise athletes from specific linguistic, religious, or geographic backgrounds?</td>
<td>No evidence found.</td>
<td>No evidence found.</td>
</tr>
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quest to find new loopholes. The first international federation, the IAAF, has begun to challenge the practice of granting temporary passports. Asking athletes to represent another country and then, in the case of low success, forcing these athletes out of the country should not be tolerated in any sport.

A general problem in international sports is that it is dominated by nationalism rather than internationalism. Naturalisation of foreign-born athletes is a response to the nationalistic architecture of international sports. As long as countries are unwilling to change this architecture, granting citizenship to foreign-born athletes will continue.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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