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Investing in sporting success as a domestic and foreign policy tool: the case of Qatar

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This article investigates why the small Middle Eastern country Qatar is investing so heavily in the sport sector. The country is hosting prestigious sporting events such as the Asian Games, the handball and the football World Cup, promotes elite sport success by local and naturalized athletes and invests in famous sport clubs abroad. The article analyses how sport is used as a domestic policy tool, for example to develop a healthy society and to attract white-collar expats from abroad. Sport is also used 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.

Keywords: Qatar; mega sport events; FIFA World Cup 2022; elite sport success; soft power

Introduction

Since *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) announced in December 2010 that Qatar was to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, international media outlets (driven by losing bidding countries) have been criticizing the decision. At the beginning, the international press coverage focused on accusations that members of the FIFA executive committee might have been bribed to vote in favour of the small Middle Eastern country rather than for competitors like the US, England and Australia. Then the media attention shifted to the issue of the climate in the desert state and debates to move the event, which is traditionally held in summer, to winter. Finally, the abuse of migrant workers in Qatar became a widely discussed issue in the global media.

The international discussion on the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar is dominated from a Western perspective but lacks discussion of the host's motives to become a major player in the world of sport. A more balanced perspective that takes the views of all the involved actors and their interests into account might help to better understand the case. Therefore, the author decided to focus on the Qatari point of view by asking the following question: Why does the Gulf country invest so heavily in sporting success? Sporting success is defined in this work as a concept with three dimensions: first, hosting mega sport events such as the 2006 Asian Games, the handball World Cup in 2015 and FIFA World Cup in 2022; second, winning medals at international sporting events on continental and global levels such as the Asian Games, World Championships and the Olympic Games; and third, global sport investments in clubs such as Paris Saint-Germain and in the international talent project 'Football Dreams'.

This research is relevant because the world of sport is changing in two ways: mega sport events are increasingly hosted in emerging countries, with the FIFA World Cup 2010

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in South Africa, the Olympic Summer Games 2008 in China, the FIFA World Cup 2014 and the Olympic Summer Games 2016 in Brazil as well as the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar being recent examples. Furthermore, the number of countries winning medals at World Championships and the Olympic Games has increased significantly. This work on Qatar is a case study on a relatively new actor in the international sporting arena.

Many countries have recently heavily increased their spending for the elite sport sector, and the number of bidding nations for mega sport events has also significantly increased. Sport offers an arena for countries to compete with each other in a ‘global sporting arms race’ (De Bosscher *et al.* 2008) to gain international prestige by means other than military and economic power. For example, the number of Olympic medals a country has earned is included in the Soft Power Index as ‘variable that reflects a country’s global image’ (Ernst & Young 2013). The term soft power was developed by Nye (2008, p. 29) who defines it as ‘the ability to shape the preferences of others to want what you want ... by setting the agenda and attracting others without threat or payment’. The ability to persuade others by attraction aims at getting internal and external legitimacy. I will argue that translated to the case of Qatar’s promotion of sporting success this basically means contributing to the national security of the country and maintaining the power of the ruling family that governs a dictatorial monarchy. Soft power is not a concept exclusively used by democratic countries. According to Nye (2008, p. 43), ‘soft power can be wielded for good or bad purposes’.

In domestic politics, national sporting success can contribute to nation building, achieving unity, national identity and pride. This applies for highly divided countries such as Belgium, Spain and Lebanon and particularly for new nations such as those that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Once countries are recognized internationally – like Qatar, that became independent in 1971 – the branding of their nation-states is on top of their foreign policy agenda.

Investments in sporting success are also a developmental tool to improve the country’s infrastructure, particularly for emerging countries. This includes the infrastructure related to sports such as stadia and other physical infrastructure such as roads, railways, airports, ports, telecommunication, hotels and others that encourage foreign investment in the country and improve tourism (Cornelissen 2010, Tomlinson 2010). The recent FIFA World Cups in South Africa 2010 and Brazil 2014 have shown that some of the infrastructure build for the events was not needed anymore once the World Cup was over. This phenomenon is called ‘white elephants’.

Methodology

This research is based on a review of four bodies of literature: apart from the soft power theory (previously mentioned) and the related debate on motives for countries to become a successful sport nation, on sport in Qatar as well as on Qatar’s security and geopolitics. Apart from the academic literature, newspapers and magazines were reviewed. Among its other sources, this article relies on 15 semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher in person in January 2014 in Doha. According to Leech (2002), semi-structured interviews offer a combination of flexibility and structure that ‘can provide detail, depth, and an insider’s perspective, while at the same time allow[s] hypothesis testing’ (p. 665); as such, it was the method I adopted.

As I witnessed when doing research in the Gulf before (Reiche 2010, Khodr and Reiche 2012), it was difficult to get in touch with locals. However, some foreigners helped me to get access to different stakeholders, among them were the secretary general of a

successful Qatari sports club, representatives from the Qatar Olympic Committee and local staff from the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee who are organizing the FIFA 2022 World Cup. In addition, I talked to several expatriates, among them were scholars from Qatar University and Georgetown University, representatives from the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee, the counsellor for Political Affairs of the German Embassy, a sports lawyer, staff from the Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum, and coaches from male and female professional and national sports teams.

Most people were only willing to talk to me openly if the interview would be off the record. Freedom House rates Qatar as ‘not free’ (Freedom House 2013): ‘While Qatar’s flagship satellite television channel, Al-Jazeera, is permitted to air critical reports on foreign countries and leaders, journalists are subject to prosecution for criticizing the Qatari government, the ruling family, or Islam’.

As one football coach, who participated as player as well as coach in World Cups, said to me: ‘People come to Qatar because the country pays lots of money. How can you expect people telling you the truth if you quote their statements?’ Other interviewed people referred to the fact that expats in Qatar have only short-term contracts, which are in most cases renewed, but leave them with a feeling of insecurity. Therefore, according to Freedom House (2013), ‘self-censorship is ... widespread in Qatar’.

On the following four issues, social sciences research on sport in Qatar was elaborated: Amara (2005), Foley *et al.* (2012) and Khodr (2012) have conducted case studies on the Asian Games 2006 in Doha, so far the largest sporting event Qatar has ever hosted. Amara (2005) analysed the significance and impact of the 2006 Asian Games on the Qatari society. Foley *et al.* (2012) examined how Qatar used the Asian Games as a vehicle for securing a global profile and to set itself apart from its neighbours. Khodr (2012) investigated the drivers behind Qatar’s bid for the 15th Asian Games in 2006 in Doha. Campbell (2011), Adjaye (2010) and Poli (2007) have investigated Qatar’s policy of naturalization of foreign athletes. Whereas Campbell (2011) solely focused on Qatar, the both other authors put the Gulf country in a wider context as one out of several examples. Rolim Silva (2014) examined the process of the establishment of the Qatar National Olympic Committee (QOC) in the late 1970s. Finally, Harkness (2012) discussed the barriers to female sport participation in Qatar.

This article adds to the social science literature on sport in Qatar by providing a comprehensive investigation of the motives for the country’s aspiration to become a successful sport nation.

For the literature on the motives for sporting success, this work adds a unique case study. On the one hand, Qatar is only one out of many emerging countries that enter the international sporting arena and aim for sporting success. On the other hand, with its location in the Middle East, its small size and a population of only two million people that mostly consist of expatriates, Qatar significantly differs from other emerging countries that have recently successfully entered the world of sports. By comparison, around 50 million people live in South Africa, in Brazil more than 200 million people and China has a population of about 1.35 billion. Furthermore, Qatar has the world’s largest per capita GDP, which differs from other emerging countries that are investing in sport. For example, in Brazil and South Africa, poverty is still a mass phenomenon. The question is whether the motives for sporting success mentioned in the literature – for instance gaining international prestige, achieving national unity and improving the country’s infrastructure – can be also identified for Qatar in this work or whether there are also factors that depend on the local context and apply only to Qatar.

This work also links Qatar's investments into the sport sector with the literature on Qatar's national security and geopolitics. Fromherz (2012), Gray (2013), and Kamrava (2013) discuss Qatar's rapid economic development, how the country tries to diversify its economy beyond oil and gas and to attract foreign investments, its influence on regional politics and its role on the world stage as well as how the cultural, diplomatic, economic and political spheres are becoming tools to achieve the countries' national security goals. Sport was mentioned in some of these publications (usually reference was given to the FIFA 2022 World Cup), but a comprehensive analysis how Qatar is using sport to achieve its geopolitical goals is a unique contribution to the literature.

Following the formulation of the research question and the articulation of the research methods, the paper now provides an overview of Qatar's efforts to host mega sport events, to promote domestic elite sport success and to invest in sporting success abroad prior to discussing the motives of the country in aiming at success in sport. The article concludes with some critical reflections on Qatar's motives to invest in sporting success.

Hosting events

Qatar has successfully developed into a hub for sporting events. According to Rolim Silva (2014, p. 3), only five years after Qatar's independence, 'the hosting of the Gulf Cup in 1976 marked Qatar's first attempt to express its national identity among the countries of the Gulf region'. The Asian Football Cup, a continental football championship held every four years, was the first major Asian sport event in Qatar in 1988. Since then, several world and Asian championships in different sports such as athletics, table tennis and sailing took place in Qatar. Doha also became the host of several annual sport events with an ATP tennis tournament being the first in 1993. Qatar announced that a record number of 57 international sporting events will be hosted by the country in 2014 (The Peninsula 2013).

Assuming that Qatar will retain its hosting right, the most prestigious sporting event hosted by the country will be the FIFA World Cup in 2022. The country also tried to host the Summer Olympic Games, but was not successful in the bidding process for the 2016 or for the 2020 Games. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) cut Doha as a possible host for the 2020 Olympics, citing the heat, concerns over athletes' health and the effects rescheduling the games to October could have on the televised games. According to the IOC final evaluation report, '...in July/August, people have more leisure/vacation time. There is therefore a risk that an October Games would become a "weekend Olympics Games" and with a reduced demographic reach, broadcasters would have difficulties in attracting the same audience levels in terms of working people and youth' (Doha News 2012a). It has already been announced that Qatar will bid again for the 2024 Games (Doha News 2012b). However, after the 2020 Games were awarded to Japan, two Summer Olympics in a row in Asia might be unlikely. According to Horne and Whannel (2012, p. 9), 'some cities may nowadays take the view that the best value to be obtained from the Olympic Games lies in bidding but not winning – thus gaining some promotional value without taking on the enormous costs of major developments'.

Table 1 summarizes international sporting events taking place in Qatar, classified in past and future single events as well as events taking place on an annual basis in Doha. Failed bids are also listed in the table. The table might not be complete, but should cover the most important events that took place, or will take place in Qatar.

Table 1. International sporting events in Qatar.

Past events	Annual events (year of introduction)
1988 Asian Football Cup	ATP Tennis Tournament Doha (1993)
1995 FIFA U-20 World Cup	Qatar Masters Golf Tournament (2008)
1999 Handball World Junior C'ships	FIM Moto Moto Racing World C'ships (2004)
2004 Asian Handball C'ships	FEI Equestrian Global Champion Tour (2008)
2004 ITTF World Team T.Tennis C'ships	WTA Tour Tennis C'ships (2008)
2005 Asian Basketball C'ships	IAAF Diamond League (2010)
2005 World Weightlifting C'ships	IHF Handball Super Globe (2010)
2005 West Asian Games	FIVB Club World C'ships (2010)
2006 Asian Sailing C'ships	
2006 Asian Games	Failed bids
2008 Asian Indoor Athletics C'ships	2017 IAAF World Athletics C'ships
2008 Asian Youth Wrestling C'ships	2016 Olympic Games
2008 Asian Optimist Sailing C'ships	2020 Olympic Games
2009 13th Qatar Table Tennis C'ship	
2009 Asian Fencing C'ships	Future events
2009 FIVB Club World C'ships	2014 FINA Short Course World C'ships
2009 ISF World Gymnasiade	2015 IHF Handball World C'ships
2010 IAAF World Indoor C'ships	2016 UCI Road Cycling World C'ships
2010 ISAF World Junior 470 Sailing C'ships	2018 FIG Artistic World Gymnastics C'ships
2011 Asian Football Cup	2022 FIFA World Cup
2011 12th Arab Games	
2012 Asian Shooting C'ships	
2012 FINA/ARENA Swimming World Cup	
2013 FINA/ARENA Swimming World Cup	

Sources: Own elaboration based on Qatar Olympic Committee (2011b), Qatar Olympic Committee (2011c), Top End Sports (undated).

Elite sport success

Compared with other nations, Qatar started relatively late in developing an elite sport policy. The early oil company workers from abroad introduced sport in Qatar in the 1940s. The first sport club in the country was founded in 1948. Qatar's Olympic Committee (QOC) was set up in 1979 to coordinate the participation of national teams and athletes at international competitions (Doha Soq undated). In 1976, Qatar sent an administrative delegation to the Montreal Games. However, the country did not send participants to the Olympic Games before 1984. At the Los Angeles 1984 Summer Olympics Qatar participated with 27 male athletes in three sports: athletics, football and shooting (Qatar Olympic Committee 2013). According to Rolim Silva (2014, p. 10), 'the idea of having Qatar in the opening ceremony of an Olympic Games and raising the national flag of the country can be seen as a strategy of the Qatar government to assert their national autonomy on global stage'. The Olympics were used by Qatar in this case to win international recognition.

At the 2012 London Summer Olympics, Qatar sent for the first time female athletes to the Olympic Games, being one of the last countries – along with Saudi Arabia and Brunei – to include women in their Olympic squad (IOC 2012). Qatar has national sport federations in 21 out of the 28 summer Olympic sports, but due to its geographic location in the desert not a single federation exists in one of the seven Olympic winter sports. Until 2014, Qatar had won four Olympic bronze medals, all by men: the 1500 m race in Barcelona 1992, weight lifting in Sydney in 2000, and shooting and high jumping in London 2012 (Qatar Olympic Committee 2013).

Qatar claims to be the most successful Gulf country on a continental level at the Asian Games, having won far more medals than other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, among them Saudi Arabia, a country with 15 times more inhabitants than Qatar (General Secretariat for Development Planning 2011).

Qatar is putting a lot of resources into the sport sector, with a systematic policy of talent identification implemented in all Qatari schools and the Aspire academy for the promotion of male elite athletes at the core of its efforts. However, parts of Qatar's successes can be explained with the country's policy of naturalization, a fact that is not communicated in any Qatari policy document reviewed for this research. When I asked a leading representative of the Qatar Olympic Committee for the country's policy of naturalization, he was at first not willing to discuss the matter with me, telling me I would be impolite to ask and it would not be a relevant issue. After I gave several examples for Qatar's naturalization, he told me: 'Qatar is just doing what everybody is doing' (Qatar Olympic Committee representative, Doha).

For example, two of the country's four Olympic medal winners were not born in Qatar. Mohamed Suleiman, who won an Olympic bronze medal for Qatar in 1992, was born in Somalia. Said Saif Asaad, who won an Olympic bronze medal for Qatar in 2000, was born in Bulgaria as Angel Popow. International media and scholarly articles report about plenty of examples of foreign athletes who changed their nationality to become Qatari. According to Campbell (2011) there were over 38 nationality transfers to Qatar in 2005 from just one nation, Kenya. These transfers include the following athletes paired with their Qatari given name: Stephen Cherono: Saif Saeed Shaheen; David Nyaga: Daham Najim Bashir; Albert Chepkurui: Hassan Abdullah; James Kwalia Moses Chirchir: Al Badri Salem Amer; Thomas Kosgei: Ali Tharer Kamel; Daniel (Nicolas) Kemboi Kipkosgie: Salem Jamal; Richard Yatich: Musbarak Shaami. The reported salary is \$1000 per month for life, living accommodations, nationality transfer bonus and victory rewards.

Qatari club and national team coaches told me that naturalization does not mean that the naturalized athletes get the same privileges like other Qatari citizen. Naturalized athletes often get provisional passports that are only used for travel to international competitions and do not remain with them.

Naturalizations will most likely continue in the future, even if Qatar has heavily invested in domestic talent identification and elite sport infrastructure. The coach of a Qatari football team interviewed for this research told me: 'Without naturalization it is impossible that Qatar will have a competitive team for the 2022 World Cup'. The downside of hosting international sporting events is that the local team is automatically qualified. In sports such as handball there are only very few local players in Qatar and almost the whole national team consists of athletes not born in the country. International sport associations have started to complicate nationality transfer. The IOC introduced a three-year waiting period before an athlete can compete for a new country and FIFA made it mandatory that a player has lived at least two years consecutively in his new home country – a regulation that was implemented after Qatar wanted to recruit in 2004 Ailton, a Brazilian playing in Germany, for the Qatari national team (Poli 2007, Campbell 2011).

Campbell (2011, p. 52) comments on Qatar's policy of naturalizing foreign athletes: 'In the case of Qatar, where citizenship might be understood to be by blood, naturalizing transnational athlete migrants contradicts citizen criteria'.

International sport investments

A key actor for Qatar's global acquisitions is Qatar Sports Investment (QSI), a branch for sport investment of the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), the country's Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF). In 2011, QSI bought the French club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and immediately made costly investments in world-class players such as Zlatan Ibrahimovic; PSG's sponsor is the Qatar Tourism Authority (QTA). In the same year, Qatar started sponsoring the Catalonian club FC Barcelona; after being sponsored in the first two years by the Qatar Foundation, Qatar Airways became Barcelona's first commercial kit sponsor in the club's history (Conn 2013, Gibson 2014).

The 'Aspire football dreams' programme assesses every year about 500,000 13-year-old football players in 16 countries over three continents. Most of the countries are in Africa (11); two are in Asia and three in Central and South America. Those young football players selected in the trials are invited to live in the Aspire academies in Doha (which started operating in 2005) and Senegal (opened in 2008), with all costs for education and training covered for them. According to the 'Aspire football dreams' website it is 'the largest football talent project in history' (Football Dreams 2014). In 2012, the Aspire Academy bought KAS Eupen, a second division football club in the German speaking part of Belgium, to give experience to its graduates.

Domestic motives

According to the national sports sector strategy (Qatar Olympic Committee 2011a), there are three motives for Qatar's aspiration of sporting success: (1) developing a healthy nation, (2) improving relations between nations and (3) becoming a global sports hub. In the academic literature, factors such as gaining international prestige, achieving national unity and improving the country's infrastructure are emphasized. This section will discuss the motives given by Qatar as well as those identified in the academic literature in the introduction of this article and investigates to what extent they apply to Qatar. Roche states that 'mega events have been important points of reference for processes of change and modernization within and between nation-states' (Roche 2002). I will start with discussing the domestic drivers for Qatar's investment into sporting success (my analysis includes, different to Roche's definition, not only hosting mega sport events, but also elite sport success and international sport investments), before moving to the question how sport is used as a foreign policy tool by Qatar.

Maybe the most common explanation in the literature on motives for countries investments in sporting success is to achieve national unity, identity, pride, and nation-building. According to Rolim Silva (2014, p. 1), 'The establishment of the QOC [Qatar National Olympic Committee] can be seen as part of the process of nation-building experienced by Qatar after its independence'. However, if it comes to national unity, identity and pride, I argue this does not or hardly apply to Qatar's motives to invest in sporting success. People living in Qatar have a diverse background, but if it comes to the 225,000 Qatar nationals (only 11% of the total population), it's a relatively homogenous group. There are different tribal backgrounds and there is some competition between influential families, but a vast majority of Qatari nationals belong to the upper class of society and share the same religion, Sunni Muslim. Only 5–15% of the population is Shia Muslim (United States Department of State 2012).

Qatar, like other Arab monarchies, survives by exploiting the 'rent' revenues from the oil and natural gas industries. According to the rentier state theory, these revenues allow a

regime to provide its people with substantial material benefits (such as free education, health, pension and plenty other support) without the need for heavy taxation and does so in the absence of democratic representation (Abdelkarim 1999). There is, from the government's perspective, no reason to work on national pride, since the state already provides the Qatari nationals with almost everything they need. From the societal perspective, there is no major dissatisfaction with the government in Qatar. According to a public opinion survey, people are quite pleased with their life in Qatar and do not request any change: 'Qatar has seen no signs of the popular political mobilization witnessed elsewhere in the region' (Gengler 2011).

It is questionable to what extent recent Qatari sporting successes make the people proud and strengthens national identity. Many of the winning athletes were originally foreigners and in many cases do not speak Arabic. Sporting success of naturalized foreigners could contribute to identity building if there was a general policy of integrating foreigners, who comprise 89% of the Qatari population, into Qatari society. The reality is, however, that most foreigners living in Qatar are physically separated from the Qatari nationals. If it comes to sport, Philippines' migrant workers even run their own basketball league instead of competing in Qatari sports clubs.

There is hardly any chance for foreigners to get a Qatari passport, and usually they only live temporarily in the country. Blue-collar expats are treated with indignity. For example, these workers are forced to share small rooms with many people. The 'kafala system', which is common in Qatar as well as other Gulf countries, makes migrant workers dependent on sponsors, requiring approval for job change and emigration. Media reports in 2013 showed that a significant number of migrant workers died in construction sites in Doha (Pattison 2013, Aziz and Hussain 2014).

If Qatari people have a homogenous background, are happy with their life and there is no policy of integrating foreigners into society, there are no reasons to invest in sporting success as a tool to unite, integrate people and make those people proud. However, there are other domestic reasons that partly explain the huge investments Qatar is undertaking in the sport sector. This work moves on by explaining how the promotion of sporting success aims for changes within Qatar, particularly at developing a healthy society and a diversified economy. This is related to Qatar's ongoing modernization process at the domestic level as part of the country's overall target stated in the 'Qatar National Vision 2030' of 'transforming Qatar into an advanced country by 2030, capable of sustaining its own development and providing a high standard of living for all of its people for generations to come' (General Secretariat for Development Planning undated, p. 1).

The main reason for Qatar's wealth is revenues from the fossil fuels. The country has hardly any unemployment and the largest per capita GDP in the world. Due to these revenues, Qatar will be able to keep its current levels of public spending for many decades to come. It holds the highest natural gas reserves among the GCC members and possesses the third largest proven supply of natural gas in the world. Its technological advancements, especially in liquefied natural gas (LNG), make it the largest exporter of natural gas (Dargin 2009). However, one day Qatar will be confronted with the finiteness of fossil fuels: 'Even for those GCC countries such as Qatar that still have plenty of reserves it makes sense to begin to make changes; costly adjustments could be avoided in the future if an incremental transformation process were initiated now, rather than radical change later' (Reiche 2010, p. 2396). Developing into a regional, continental and international sports hub is a major step in diversifying Qatar's economy and gradually transforming into a post-hydrocarbon economy. Mega sporting events have the potential of stimulating Qatar's tourism industry and increasing the revenues of hotels, restaurants, and shopping

malls. Ticketing, merchandizing and TV rights are other potential income sources. Apart from such direct revenues, sports might also help to attract foreign investment in Qatar and help recruit foreigners for the Qatari labour market. With a Qatari population of only 225,000 people, among them approximately 100,000 people able to work, the country heavily depends on a foreign workforce. Whereas blue-collar workers are coming anyway to Qatar (as long as the salaries are significantly higher than in their home countries such as India, Sri Lanka and Nepal), attracting white-collar employees is more difficult and is not only a question of lucrative remuneration. Providing entertainment for these white-collar workers such as international sporting and other cultural events is a key to attract highly skilled employees from advanced industrialized countries to work in Qatar. It is also an attempt to distinguish Qatar from other Gulf countries.

If it comes to Qatar's economy, sport is on the domestic level also as a driver for the development of the country's infrastructure. In spite of the fact that Qatar has the highest per capita GDP, its development towards an advanced country started relatively late in the 1990s and is not yet finished. Apart from the stadium construction, all the infrastructure development in Qatar would also happen without the FIFA World Cup taking place in the country. But, as many people I talked to emphasized, 'the 2022 World Cup sets a timeline for the completion of Qatar's infrastructure development'. For example, the first out of three phases of metro construction in Doha will be finished before, and not after 2022 – as originally planned. The first phase of Metro construction includes the connection of all World Cup stadiums. The same applies to the Qatar-Bahrain causeway project, which aims to be ready right before the 2022 FIFA World Cup (The Peninsula 2012).

Qatar does not have the need for all the stadiums that have to be built for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. That's why the country promised to downscale or dismantle the majority of the stadiums and donate them after the World Cup to developing countries (Oxford Business Group 2011, IFP Group 2014).

There is also a societal dimension of Qatar's investments into sports. According to the national sports sector strategy, 'chronic diseases are a major cause of death [in Qatar], accounting for 47% of classified deaths in 2008. The primary drivers for the chronic diseases are inactivity and sedentary lifestyles' (Qatar Olympic Committee 2011a, p. 18). The national sports sector strategy states therefore the aim of 'increasing sports participation and active lifestyle practices' among Qatar's population 'to improve health outcomes' (Qatar Olympic Committee 2011a, p. 6). In the international press there were numerous articles that classified Qatar as not only the richest, but also 'fattest nation' on earth: 'With maids, nannies, and cooks, many Qataris sit in their air-conditioned villas all day getting fatter and ignoring serious health problems' (Edwards 2011). The classification of Qatar as 'fattest nation' contradicts empirical data, but obesity is certainly a huge problem that occurs above the global average. The World Health Organization (WHO) lists Qatar as the country with the 17th largest prevalence of obesity in the world (measured for the year 2008). One-third of the population (33.1%) is, according to the WHO data, obese (WHO 2011). However, this data is for both sexes. According to the national sports sector strategy the problem of obesity occurs particularly among women. The Qatar Olympic Committee initiated a study on women's participation in sports and physical activities: 'The study found that just 15% of Qatari women aged 15 and above regularly participated in sport ... Among Qatari women, the type of sport physical activity most frequently are walking, 58%, running, 11%, aerobic exercise, 14%, and swimming, 6%' (Qatar Olympic Committee 2011a, p. 18).

In his analysis on barriers to female sports participation in Qatar that is based on a case study of the Georgetown University Qatar women basketball team operating in the

mixed-gender environment of Education City, Harkness (2012, p. 2168) concluded that ‘families who do not support sports-related activity for women serve as a major barrier to participation’ as well as ‘the belief that women should not engage in heavy physical activity in front of men. It is thought that males who witness females involved in bodily motion will interpret these behaviours as sexual and be unable to control their lustful urges’ (Harkness 2012, p. 2170). The coach of the national female football team told me that she visited a local girl’s school and invited 30 girls to practice with the national team after watching an internal tournament. However, only one out of the 30 girls got approval by her family to play football in public.

The WHO data is only for the population above 20 years old. According to a study by a group of Qatar University students, obesity is even more widespread among Qatari teens than among adults: ‘The large cross-sectional study involving a total of 1167 female and male students (14–20 years) from 23 independent schools showed that 59.9% of Qatari adolescents were obese and 57% overweight against 40.1% and 43% of non-Qataris’ (The Peninsula 2014).

Foreign policy motives

Qatar’s investments into the sport sector have less to do with competing with other nations via the sporting sector in a ‘global sporting arms race’ (De Bosscher *et al.* 2008), at least not on the global level. It does apply to the regional GCC-level where sporting success gives the opportunity to develop a profile and prestige. The GCC was founded to counter Iranian influence. However, this does not mean that there is no disagreement among the GCC countries. An example is when three GCC countries (Saudi-Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain) recalled their ambassadors from Qatar in 2013 over Qatar’s support for Islamist movements (Reuters 2014).

The key to understanding Qatar’s sport investments is what the national sports sector strategy states as ‘improving relations between nations’ (Qatar Olympic Committee 2011a). However, in reality it is more about Qatar’s relations with other nations than about ‘relations between nations’. This absolutely has something to do with what the academic literature calls ‘gaining international prestige’, but it is more than that. According to Dorsey (2014), ‘soft power is a key Qatari defence and security strategy based on the realization that it will never have the military strength to defend itself irrespective of what hardware it acquires or the number of foreigners it recruits to populate its armed forces’.

According to Nye (2008, p. 28), ‘a person or group is powerful if it is large, stable, and wealthy’. Whereas Qatar is a stable and wealthy nation-state, it is also a small country with a population of only 2,040,000 people, among them only 11% Qatari nationals. Qatar has borders with Saudi Arabia and is in the neighbourhood of Iran. The land area of Iran is about 150 times larger, and Saudi Arabia approximately 200 times larger than Qatar. Saudi-Arabia’s population is about 15 times larger than Qatar’s; Iran’s population is almost 40 times larger than Qatar’s. In the past, Qatar was under Bahraini (1783–1868), Ottoman (1871–1916), and British (1916–1971) rule. Qatar wants to maintain its independence that it gained from the United Kingdom in 1971. A bad example is the Gulf War (1990–1991) when Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait, another small-populated Gulf country. To avoid a similar fate, Qatar has hosted a US military base since 2003 with about 10,000 servicemen. The US will continue to operate and maintain troops at Qatar’s Al Udeid Air Base through at least 2024, following the signing of a 10-year Defense Cooperation Agreement in December 2013. The pact also involves training Qatari forces (Khatri 2013). With 11,800 personnel, Qatar’s armed forces are the second smallest in the

Middle East (Congressional Research Service 2014, p. 5). By comparison, the Saudi Arabian Army has about 150,000 and the Iranian army has about 700,000 servicemen.

Another way of linking Qatar with the US is purchasing arms to counter Iran. An example is buying US Patriot missiles for the first time in a major arms deal worth \$11 billion, the biggest weapons deal for the United States in 2014 that ‘underscores the strong partnership between the United States and Qatar’, according to the US government (Agence France-Presse 2014). The deal with Qatar is expected to produce up to 54,000 jobs in the US (Agence France-Presse 2014).

According to Nye (2011), soft power depends on sympathy. Sport is a popular tool for gaining soft power because little else attracts the masses as much as sport. Once the masses of other countries feel attracted, this can also influence their political leaders and elites, as Nye emphasizes in his soft power concept. Organizing mega sporting events and investing into elite sport successes can be a ‘vehicle to global recognition’ (Cornelissen 2010) and to achieve geopolitical goals. Whereas other countries that were recently heavily investing into the sport sector, such as Brazil and South Africa, aim to become a regional power, in the case of it is Qatar more a matter of national security than of becoming a regional powerhouse, a role that is already with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Being a small country in the desert, without international sport events hardly anybody would travel to Qatar (and care about the country). Hosting mega sport events has put Qatar on the map of potential leisure travel destinations. Apart from ordinary tourists, usually heads of states also travel to events such as the FIFA World Cup and Asian Games to support their national teams and to benefit politically from the spotlight. When travelling to international sporting events, it is common to meet the president of the host nation or even sit next to him at the event.

Apart from the people and politicians who travel to Qatar, the global media coverage of mega sport events is the key for Qatar’s aim of global recognition.

Mega-sporting events provide immediate access to a global market of viewers from which the host nation can project images and knowledge to people of all nations of its culture and society ... and showcase the economic, political, and cultural power ... or as a signal that a country has arrived as a major figure on the international scene. (Chen 2008, p. 6)

Based on the relations built via the sport sector with people and governments worldwide, it might be easier to appeal to the international community for help if ever something happens to Qatar similar to what happened to Kuwait in 1990, since other countries will be much more familiar with Qatar and feel a deeper sense of commitment to protect it.

Hosting mega sporting events and investing in elite sport success is a major, but not the only tool Qatar uses to deepen the relations with other nations and to build relationships with as many people as possible from all over the world. For example, Qatar has invested in its capital in a site called ‘Education City’, bringing faculties from eight leading global universities with satellite campuses to Doha (Khodr and Reiche 2012). The universities are from the United States, the United Kingdom and France; the countries that represent 60% of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. With another permanent member of the Security Council, China, Qatar is closely connected economically with long-term contracts on the delivery of liquid natural gas (LNG).

Qatar is not only hosting mega sports, but also other international events. For instance, in the year 2014, 182 events are scheduled, apart from 57 sporting events, 56 conferences and 51 exhibitions (The Peninsula 2013). Among events hosted by Qatar in the past were

also high-profile conferences such as the 2012 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP18) in November/December 2012, marking the first time that UN climate change negotiations took place in the Middle East. The conference drew approximately 9000 participants, among them government officials, representatives of UN bodies and agencies, intergovernmental organizations and civil society organizations and members of the media (IISD 2012).

Qatar's Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF), the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), is Qatar's main tool to link it with the global economy. QIA was 'founded by the State of Qatar in 2005 to strengthen the country's economy by diversifying into new asset classes [and to] help complement the state's huge wealth in natural resources' (Qatar Investment Authority 2014). QAI invests in different asset classes and geographies such as Volkswagen from Germany, the second largest automotive company in the world; Sainsbury, the second largest chain of supermarkets in the United Kingdom; Credit Suisse from Switzerland, one of the largest and most profitable banks in the world; and the American entertainment company Miramax, bought from Disney.

Another link with the global economy is Qatar Airways. It is one of the fastest growing airlines in the world and has transformed Hamad International Airport in Doha into a transit hub for international flights: 'Travel retailers have introduced stopover packages in a bid to encourage tourists to see the country' (Euromonitor International 2013).

Politically, Qatar tries to have good relations with a broad range of groups and countries. The US Congressional Research Service describes Qatar's foreign policy 'as a multi-directional balancing act' (Congressional Research Service 2014, p. 8). For example, the Taliban opened an office in Doha in 2013 (Azami 2013); Qatar supports Hamas and had before the Syrian war good relations with Hezbollah, both considered by some Western countries as terrorist Islamic organizations. At the same time, the country established in 1996 trade relations with Israel and there are direct contacts with officials of the Jewish state, including Israeli leaders visiting Qatar and vice versa (Shackle 2013). According to the US Congressional Research Service, 'US officials have described Qatar's counterterrorism cooperation since 2001 as significant' and 'the Al Udeid airbase serves as a logistics, command, and basing hub for US operations in Afghanistan' (Congressional Research Service 2014, p. 2, 6).

During the Arab uprisings, Qatar supported revolutionary movements and the country has been a mediator for internal political conflicts such as in Lebanon and between Fatah and Hamas. Another main tool of Qatar's soft power strategy is the television network Al Jazeera, the Arab's world most influential news network with growing global outreach. Amara (2012, p. 56) refers to Al Jazeera as 'an alternative both to state-controlled news channels and to the hegemony of Western news channels such as CNN' to extend Qatar's influence beyond national borders. Al Jazeera launched in 2003 the Al Jazeera sports channels that are broadcasting major international sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup, the UEFA Champions League as well as major national football leagues. Amara (2012, p. 61) describes TV broadcasting of sports events 'as the best vehicle to secure a mass audience', particularly because '55% of the population living in the Arab region is under the age of 25' (Amara 2012, p. 58). In 2012, Al Jazeera Sports was renamed as beIN Sports. Al Jazeera introduced in 2006 an English news channel that is broadcast globally. According to the New York Times, this 'has helped at least partially change its image from that of a network used as a vehicle by Al Qaeda and hostile to the United States to that of a professionally run news channel that has won prominent US journalism prizes' (Reed 2013).

Some authors such as Gray (2013) use the term 'branding' for all the foreign policy efforts of Qatar: 'They want to send a message that Qatar is dynamic, cosmopolitan, open for business and willing to contribute to international stability ... to show that they are good international citizens'.

Conclusion

The case of Qatar shows that a wealthy country can successfully become a global sports hub from scratch. However, there is a need for significant changes in Qatar to successfully use sport as a domestic and foreign policy tool.

Articles in the international media on local practices such as the 'kafala system', a sponsorship system for migrant workers that is called by international human rights groups 'modern slavery', caused a lot of reputational damage. Nye (2011) emphasizes that soft power depends on credibility. If Qatar wants the world to feel responsible for the small state in case of a similar event like Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, it needs to be more receptive to the international critique and apply the standards of advanced countries in areas such as the labour market. Gaining soft power is not the result of short-term measures such as becoming the host of a specific mega sporting event. However, the FIFA World Cup and other international sporting events can be necessary – but not sufficient – elements in building long-term relationships with other countries. Building such long-term relationships relies on various measures also in other areas such as culture, education, economics and politics. They are, according to Nye (2011), the key for soft power in the world.

Whereas Qatar is very successful in hosting international sport events, it is facing more difficulties in accomplishing elite sport success. Successes achieved so far were often by people not born in Qatar. The practice of naturalization receives a very critical coverage in the international media. The global perception would be a different case if Qatar tries to broaden its small population base by integrating the kids of migrant workers better into the society, including the sport sector. This action would have more credibility than bringing foreigners to Qatar who neither speak Arabic nor live in the country. However, such an action is not very likely since Qatar is a very closed (or as some might argue, tribal) society.

If it comes to elite sport success there is a lack of strategic planning in Qatar. The small country is promoting many sports instead of focusing on few disciplines. The current promotion of team sports such as football and handball withdraws a large number of potential athletes from individual niche sports with better prospects for success.

It is doubtful whether hosting mega sport events and investing into the elite sport sector can increase sport participation in the country, as stated in the national sports sector strategy. The main obstacles for developing the grassroots sport sector in Qatar are cultural barriers, particularly when it comes to the low female participation rate in sport. To encourage people to regularly do sport is more challenging than building stadiums. It needs a major cultural change that might take generations.

It is also highly questionable whether the costly investments into the sport sector will contribute to diversify the Qatari economy and pay off one day. Single events like world championships and annual events like ATP tennis tournaments are not enough to operate costly world-class facilities at full capacity. The low attendance in the national professional sport leagues is proof of the lack of sufficient domestic demand. Concentrating on a few sports rather than investing in numerous professional leagues might contribute to the development of a professional sports sector that will also persist when Qatar's fossil resources run out and subsidies are not available any more.

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