

Sporting cities and economic diversification in the Arabian Peninsula

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Introduction

The Arabian Peninsula has hosted an impressive array of major sporting events in recent years. To do so, local leaders and their allies have transformed the urban fabric of several cities in the region – most notably Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai, but also including Manama and Riyadh. Branding these places as “sporting cities,” urban boosters hope, is one way to diversify local economies for the “post-oil future” – a looming concern that has organized a great deal of state development in the past decade (see Ulrichsen 2011). The idea is that by hosting these events and investing in a wholesale makeover of urban infrastructure to accommodate a sports-oriented “visitor class” (Eisinger 2000), they will serve as an engine to fuel growth in the future – even if funding them relies on the same hydrocarbon-dominated economic system in the present.

The events themselves are framed as economically generative, expected to increase numbers of tourists during and after the events, create business for the travel and hospitality sectors, improve name recognition and prestige of the city and country alike, retain expatriate workers who are needed to keep local economies whirring, and of course, distribute rewards to corporate and political allies through lucrative construction deals, jobs, and more. With these objectives in mind, leaders in the Arabian Peninsula have targeted elite sport – those globalized sports that attract more affluent participants and spectators. These have recently included high-profile events in tennis, cycling, sailing, golf, polo, horse racing, and Formula 1 and E, as well as mixed sporting events like the Asian Games (Doha 2006, 2030 and Riyadh in 2034) and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022. To make this possible, local governments have invested heavily in public transport infrastructure and venues, like the Bahrain Grand Prix racetrack, the UAE’s Yas Marina Circuit, and Qatar’s many new World Cup stadiums.

Hosting globalized sports are not the only ones being promoted in the region, however, as Gulf leaders have also promoted heritage sports like falconry and camel racing. This reflects an awareness that globalized sports – often read as *Western* sports – threatens to offend the nationalist sensibility of some citizens, who are anxious of local cultural loss (Koch 2015, 523). Heritage sports are systematically promoted across the Arabian Peninsula, such as in falconry festivals found in many countries. They do not typically require the development of new urban infrastructure, however, so they do not figure prominently in economic diversification schemes. Catering to an affluent visitor class interested in globalized sports, by contrast, does. These sports are therefore harnessed by public and private leaders to promote huge investment programs in select Gulf cities – but especially those already targeted by far-reaching “spectacular urbanization” campaigns for many years.

Sporting cities in the Arabian Peninsula have been explicitly positioned as part of national-scale efforts to diversify their economies beyond resource extraction, but they also reflect leaders’ keen awareness that recruiting investors, residents, and short-term visitors demands a major effort to reshape how their cities and countries are perceived by foreigners. As Thomas Carter (2011, 133) puts it, in the international event circuit, “spectacular performances become a prerequisite for each city’s economic performance. They have to be *seen* to be dynamic, progressive, modern – in a word, ‘global’ – before actually becoming so economically. Globalized sporting events are thus a key part of the symbolic politics that public and private elites see as necessary to constructing

their cities as “modern, “cosmopolitan,” and “globalized” (Koch 2018c-d, 2019a-b). They are, in short, examples *par excellence* of urban boosterism.

Urban boosterism and sporting events

Research on sporting mega-events has grown dramatically in recent years, but event-based boosterism and its effects on the urban fabric has long been a topic of academic analysis for much longer (see Bale 1993; Boyle 1997; Chalkley and Essex 1999; Gratton and Henry 2001; Hiller 2000). This early work grew out of a broader interest in understanding and explaining the phenomenon of “urban boosterism.” Urban boosterism is the active promotion of a city to advance its economic development. It usually involves large spending projects to develop or redevelop urban landscapes, including constructing iconic buildings, revamping or expanding infrastructure, and creating a new brand for the city. The pro-growth logic of boosterist policies hinges on development not in response to demand – but out of speculation based on the cliché that “if you build it, they will come.”

For the past several decades, urban boosterism has played a central role in conveying neoliberal modes of government and market capitalism. Boosterist tactics now circulate globally, typically with the support of global consultancies, architects, and others with a vested interest in the financial opportunities of urban development. Forming agglomerations of actors, that have been alternately labeled as a “transnational capitalist class” and “growth machine coalitions,” they bridge state and non-state interests (Boyle 1997; Jonas and Wilson 1999; Harvey 1989; McCann and Ward 2011; Prince 2012; Sklair 2006; Valiyev 2014; Vogelpohl and Kemp 2018).

The Gulf region is famous for its fuzzy if imperceptible line between state and non-state, but this blurring has always been a staple of large-scale urban development schemes all around the world. In the Arabian Peninsula, though, recasting a city as a “sporting city” takes knowledge and expertise. State-based planners have thoughtfully sought out and implemented professionals from many different sectors to implement the infrastructure projects to bring in major sporting events, as well as a range of ancillary experts who are needed to bid for, supervise, and run these events. As one might imagine, the material and immaterial investments, in the built and the human infrastructure, to craft a sporting city is expensive. Many observers have puzzled over why any country would want to spend so much money on hosting a mega-event or even smaller, “second-tier” events (Black 2008; Koch and Valiyev 2015; Müller 2015). Whatever the size, sporting events create long- and short-term financial opportunities in the cities that make them appealing to growth machine coalitions.

Scholars have examined economic diversification schemes enacted through sports-centered urban development in many places around the world (e.g. Alberts 2009; Bélanger 2009; Broudehoux 2016; Carter 2011; Dawson 2011; Gaffney 2010; Gogishvili 2018; Grix 2014; Horne 2011; Koch 2018b; Lee 2017; Maenning and du Pleiss 2009; Müller 2011; Müller and Gaffney 2018; Ren 2009; Poynter and Viehoff 2015; Wise and Harris 2017). In this sense, sporting cities of the Arabian Peninsula are not at all unique. Yet research on high-profile sports investments in the Arabian Peninsula has rarely stressed economic diversification as a major motive for regional sporting investments (for exceptions, see Henderson 2017; Khodr 2012). Instead, where these countries are considered, sports investments are typically read through a cultural and political lens, which focuses on how the events are used to broadcast and “brand” Gulf states and cities and project international influence abroad (Amara 2005; Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015; Bromber 2014; Bromber and Krawietz 2013; Eggeling 2020; Koch 2018d, 2019b, 2020; Reiche 2015; Scharfenort 2014). But even where this politics of prestige and influence carries great significance,

local leaders understand that selling the Gulf's sporting cities has immediate economic objectives as well.

Selling the Gulf's sporting cities

Extending well beyond the most prestigious sporting mega-events – primarily the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup – Gulf leaders have been able to promote their urban-centered economic diversification schemes through a constant cycle of events. Even smaller events afford significant financial opportunities in that they can nonetheless be used to justify large state-spending on new facilities or transportation infrastructure or hotels, as well as generating a steady stream of visitors into the city. The nationalist framing of putting a country or a city “on the map” for foreigners is thus an important part of the broader set of boosterist policies that aim to diversify a local economy and open up opportunities for future development. As Thomas Carter explains:

The re-imagining of cities is now central to the successful bidding for and actual hosting of mega-event spectacles in which the recasting of the city leads to economic profit (for some), urban regeneration (gentrification), and global media exposure. The economy of appearances therefore depends on the self-conscious making of spectacles necessary for gathering/attracting investment funds. This economy transcends the more straightforward commoditizing image- and place-making strategies of a city's civic and business leadership. Those brand-making exercises are only part of the economy of appearances in which the dependence on spectacle is a regular feature of the search for financial capital (Carter 2011, 132-133)

The more abstract symbolic elements are, in short, intimately connected to the more material financial elements. They are especially connected insofar as certain public and private elites can capture the narrative and use it to their advantage – such as with growth coalition members who supervise major infrastructure developments (like new metro lines or new peri-urban communities) or large-sale architectural projects (like stadiums).

While many such projects are readily written off as “white elephants” by outside observers, they represent a significant opportunity for regime insiders or allies. Regardless of whether they are “inside” or “outside” the government structure, these investments allow elites to tap into major financial reserves of the state. In the Gulf region, these are states with vast natural resource reserves that might be tapped. In developing their sporting cities, states like Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia retain control over event planning and contracts for everything related to hosting events and infrastructure development. By centralizing investment, government leaders are thus able to construct an image of what Fernando Coronil (1997) famously describes as a “magical state” flush with resource wealth, pooling funds from resource rents and systematically distributing them to regime allies. Embracing the neoliberal logic of urban boosterism thus enables these leaders to selectively engage with market capitalism, while also bolstering authoritarian political configurations built on elite patronage (Koch and Valiyev 2015). This includes funneling contracts to major elite- or state-owned development entities, such as Qatari Diar, Saudi Bin Ladin Group, or Mubadala in the UAE, as well as forming partnerships with many sponsoring airlines, telecom, and other major business conglomerates (see Hanieh 2018, Ch. 3).

Elite networks of patronage permeate nearly all sports and sporting events, regardless of whether they happen in ostensibly democratic or authoritarian states. In the Gulf, though, growth coalitions are working against pervasive Orientalist stereotypes that cast the region as somehow backward or uncivilized (Koch 2019a; Smith 2015). As such, to sell their sporting cities – whether

to win a bid or to recruit visitors and investors – boosters and event organizers have overwhelmingly focused on a narrative of social, economic, cultural, and political “transition,” which the event is supposed to help advance. In 2016, for example, Doha hosted the UCI World Road Cycling Championships. A major theme in the official presentation of the city was a place transitioning to a knowledge economy and a forward-looking “world sports hub” (Koch 2018d, 2019b). Amani Al Dosari, the Managing Director of the organizing committee, explained how positioning Doha as a sporting city helped in the country’s broader diversification efforts:

Doha has become an important hub in term of Sport Events Organisation. The organisation of an event such as this fits in with the Qatar Vision 2030 program, that aims to diversify the economy and reduce our economic dependence to oil and gas. The goal is to develop the knowledge economy but also to develop key economic sectors such as the sport industry. (quoted in *Eurosport* 2016)

As elsewhere across the region, all major projects in Qatar must be justified in line with the national development plan, the Qatar National Vision 2030. Sport is only mentioned once in this document, but economic development is one of four “pillars” of the plan (the others being human, social, and environmental development). As the text explains, building a “vibrant Qatari economy” requires optimizing its resource use to “create a balance between reserves and production, and between economic diversification and the depletion of non-renewable hydrocarbon resources” (MDPS 2017, 24). It continues:

Qatar’s bountiful hydrocarbon resources can be leveraged to make sustainable development a reality for all its people. Converting these natural assets into financial wealth provides a means to invest in world-class infrastructure; build efficient delivery mechanisms for public services; create a highly skilled and productive labour force; and support the development of entrepreneurship and innovation capabilities. If attained, these achievements would in turn provide a broader platform for the diversification of Qatar’s economy and its positioning as a regional hub for knowledge and for high value industrial and service activities. (MDPS 2017, 24)

Urban boosters from all economic sectors need to find ways to hitch their industry-specific visions to this broader national vision. Sporting cities, as seen in Al Dosari’s language above, are supposed to demand many of the items put forward in Vision 2030 – world-class infrastructure, skilled labor, and ancillary opportunities for entrepreneurship – and so they are positioned as advancing the broader economic development pillar.

In the UAE, similar objectives are at work in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, which have also been developed as hubs for globalized sport. Government platforms link sporting investments to its Vision 2021 plan and explain that building modern sports facilities reflects the leadership’s dedication to “the growth, welfare and institutionalisation of sport sector in view of the significant role it plays in the development and advancement of the nation” (UAE 2020). Perhaps more than some other countries in the region, the Emirati focus has not just been to host certain established events, but to develop their own series to ensure a recurring pool of visitors. According to the official accounting, these “involve renowned international players, big rewards and huge public following,” and include Arabian Gulf Football League, Abu Dhabi Golf Championship, Dubai Desert Classic Golf Tournament, Mubadala World Tennis Championship, Dubai Tennis Championships, Dubai Rugby Sevens, and the thoroughbred Dubai World Cup (UAE 2020). For urban boosters, having events like these on a regular schedule ensures that the UAE can capture tourism revenue, but that collectively, developing Dubai and Abu Dhabi as modern sporting cities

helps to develop their wider reputation as “world class” hubs for international events, business, and entertainment. The events are thus interwoven with aspirational language about modernity and creating an image of the UAE as an economically diverse country beyond the oil industry.

Saudi leaders have developed a similar understanding of sporting cities as well. Sport has figured prominently in narratives of transition in the country, where recent changes in the sporting landscape have featured prominently in Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman’s effort to rebrand the country as modern and reformist through his Saudi Vision 2030. As in Qatar and the UAE, the Saudi development plan foregrounds the economy, but says somewhat more about sport – here emphasizing a story of transition: “A healthy and balanced lifestyle is an essential mainstay of a high quality of life. Yet opportunities for the regular practice of sports have often been limited. This will change” (Saudi Vision 2016, 22). The vision statement suggests the need to develop new facilities and programs and since it was announced in 2016, this has included a series of high-profile boxing matches, the introduction of Formula E racing on a street circuit in Diriyah (on the northwest outskirts of Riyadh), permitting women to attend football matches and then the introduction of its first women’s football league in 2020. Riyadh was also awarded the Asian Games for 2034 and its first Formula 1 Grand Prix race in Jeddah in 2021 (Luckings 2020).

Speaking about all these developments together, Saudi Arabia’s Sports Minister, Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal, explained: “when we say the games are a national priority, we mean it. It has unwavering political and public support. Sport has changed social life in the kingdom, especially for women” (*National* 2020). Regarding Jeddah’s slot on the Formula 1 circuit in 2021, the president of the Saudi Automobile and Motorcycle Federation, Prince Khalid bin Sultan Al Faisal, also referenced Vision 2030 and promised that the event will “enrich the lives of all who attend.” These officials’ enthusiasm might be dismissed by some observers as merely PR, but they reflect a growing awareness in Saudi Arabia that its international image problem has deleterious economic consequences. And, like the other Gulf states with high-profile sporting cities, Saudi leaders are facing the stark quandary of trying to diversify an economic system thoroughly dominated by hydrocarbons.

In a world increasingly focused on issues of environmental sustainability, hydrocarbon dominance has also presented serious image problems itself. Here again, urban boosters have used the sporting events to advertise their supposedly progressive, “green” credentials – a shift in branding that has been core to the Arabian Peninsula’s recent economic development plans (Abdelraouf and Luomi 2016; Koch 2014, 2018a; Luomi 2012; Rizzo 2017). In Saudi Arabia, for example, the Formula E choice was strategic in that it could highlight the economic opportunities the government has been trying to develop around sustainability. Sports Minister Prince Abdulaziz noted the impressive new sustainable technologies on display and underscoring how this reflects Saudi Arabia’s green transition:

In 2018 the ancient historical city of Diriyah made history in hosting the first fully-electric race on the streets of the region. The debut event sparked so much joy and energy to our sporting journey and was one of a number of major sporting firsts that have since inspired our people and helped to shine a spotlight on Saudi Arabia’s massive transformation under the Kingdom’s vision 2030. (quoted in FIA 2020)

In a similar fashion, Qatar has conspicuously highlighted the country’s “green” initiatives for the FIFA World Cup stadiums, under the Sustainability Strategy of the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy – promising to “deliver a tournament that sets new benchmarks for social, human, economic and environmental development” and, allegedly, the first “carbon neutral” World Cup (SCDL 2020; see also Meza Talavera et al. 2019). Whether these objectives are

actually fulfilled, the sustainability branding is an important part of Qatar's broader economic diversification story: that it is moving beyond a hydrocarbon-dominated system and into the realm of green technology and a knowledge economy. Positioning Doha as a sporting city here helps to sell that story, and the story helps to sell Doha. This circularity is a hallmark of urban boosterism and, regardless of whether its grander objectives are achieved, growth machine coalitions can still reap short-term financial rewards from participating in selling the sporting city.

Conclusion

As in so many other places where sports have been used in economic diversification efforts, sport-focused boosterism in the Arabian Peninsula is a dual project of creating a positive image of their cities and funneling economic rewards to growth coalitions and their allies. Promotional materials highlight the region's rapid transformation as a way to lure events, visitors, and longer-term investors, while the sparkling, hypermodern sporting venues and public infrastructure that is photographed and circulated internationally is also an end in itself. Globalized sport is an important way to broadcast an image of Gulf cities as modern, but also places ripe for investment. The challenge, as with all such major state spending schemes, is that the huge state subsidies themselves are liable to run out. The "magical state" built on resource rents can only last so long, and when those rents dry up, the growth coalition boosters may be richer, but a loss in revenue can easily break "the magical spell of the indebted state, delegitimizing its parochial authority and constraining its power over the nation" (Coronil 1997, 392).

Academic research has consistently highlighted the fact that the transformative expectations of boosterist projects – of revamping a city's economy overnight – are seldom realized. In the Arabian Peninsula, however, they do line the pockets of some. As with other aspects of urbanization in the region, drawing on resource extraction rents and other funding controlled by the state, parastatal entities, and sovereign wealth funds, state planners have overseen ambitious urban development agendas – largely absent a bottom-up popular demand. Rather, the "build it and they will come" logic that defines urban boosterism globally is a staple of urban boosterism in the Gulf too. The crux of their economic challenges, as they see it (or as their consultants tell them), is not that there *is* no demand; it's that they have not *created* the demand. Sporting events are just one part of this broader puzzle to create the demand for visitors to come and spend time and money in their cities, and perhaps also to invest in the longer run. Whether the state is working toward a vision for 2021 or 2030, it is as yet unclear whether sport will help them realize their ambitious diversification plans – and how "sustainable" the Gulf's sporting cities will be, however they choose to define that concept.

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