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The geopolitics of Gulf sport sponsorship

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Abstract. The names of two major Gulf airlines, Qatar Airways and Emirates, have saturated the European football scene for many years, sponsoring some of the most prominent European teams and FIFA itself. These state-backed airlines are also active in motorsports, rugby, cycling, tennis, golf, cricket, and equestrian sport, while several prominent Gulf elites and royal family members have recently taken over major sports franchises in Europe and elsewhere. How should we understand these far-reaching sponsorship agendas in the Gulf? What can they tell us about the politics and ethics of international sport on the Arabian Peninsula? Moving beyond the general readings of Gulf sport sponsorship as an exercise in 'soft power,' this article shows how these deals are strategic nodes for diverse actors in the Gulf and in the international sporting community to advance various interests: personal, political, financial, and otherwise. Informed by a critical geopolitics lens that questions the coherence of the 'state' as an actor, I ask what it means to say that 'the Gulf' sponsors sport, and more specifically investigate the relevant actors behind these sponsorship deals. To do so, this article examines regional and global political economy through a focus on three Gulf airline sponsors, Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways, and three elite sports sponsors – the UAE's Shekih Mansour, Qatar's Nasser bin Ghanim Al-Khelaïfi, and Sheikh Nasser of Bahrain. By decentering 'soft power' approaches to sport that unduly emphasize the 'state' as an actor, this article suggests a more grounded approach to the geopolitics of sport in the Arabian Peninsula, which simultaneously acknowledges the complicity of Western actors and institutions in the rise of Gulf sports sponsorship deals in the past decade.
Keywords: sports geography; political geography; soft power; critical geopolitics; Arabian Peninsula

1. Introduction

The names of two major Gulf airlines, Qatar Airways and Emirates, have saturated the European football scene for many years. In addition to sponsoring some of the most prominent European teams, such as Barcelona and Real Madrid, these state-backed airlines are prominent sponsors of a range of other international football clubs, while Arsenal's home field will bear the name Emirates Stadium until at least 2028. The companies are also active in motorsports, rugby, tennis, golf, cycling, cricket, rugby, equestrian sport, and more. The Gulf airlines are not acting alone, however, as seen when the formerly Italian-based cycling team, Lampre, lost its Chinese sponsorship just before the 2017 Tour de France. In a last-minute deal with First Abu Dhabi Bank, it was quickly renamed UAE Abu Dhabi, but subsequently became UAE Team Emirates when Emirates signed on as a naming-rights sponsor.

This seamless interchange between the emirate of Abu Dhabi, a state-controlled bank, and the Dubai-based airline over this short period highlights the intimate connection between Gulf governments and state-sponsored companies, as well as private and royal family investors and sovereign wealth funds (SWFs). This confluence is also seen with the case of international sports investments on the part of the Emirati royal family member Shekih Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who came to own Manchester City FC with help from the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority SWF in 2008, the Qatari businessman Nasser bin Ghanim Al-Khelaïfi, who has owned Paris Saint-Germain FC since 2011 via a Qatari SWF sports subsidiary, as well as the Men's World Tour professional cycling team, Bahrain-Merida, started by Bahraini royal family member Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa in 2016, with funding from the country's SWF, Mumtalakat.

The rapid rise of Gulf financing in foreign sports markets has led the media and scholars to reflect extensively on the meaning, motives, and boarder significance of these sponsorship agendas. What is the political significance of these new flows? How does it impact teams, players, fans, cities, local and national governments? Is there a risk of 'corrupting' the traditional values of sporting ethics, when receiving funds from autocratic states or state-owned companies? Do they help bolster the Gulf countries' alleged 'soft power' campaigns, whereby royal families and otherwise autocratic leaders seek to whitewash their image on the international stage, or otherwise buy political allies by creeping into sporting pastimes? As their very framing suggests, the questions swirling around Gulf sports sponsorship have induced no small amount of anxiety on the part of observers in Europe and North America. In writing on the subject, a kind of suspicion about ulterior motives or a corrosive effect of large sums of money is pervasive.

This article, by contrast, draws from the intellectual tradition of critical geopolitics and begins with a different kind of question – namely, what does it mean to say that 'the Gulf' sponsors sport? Or more specifically, who are the relevant actors behind these sponsorship deals, and how might a more grounded approach shed light on their role in the contemporary geopolitics of sport in the Arabian Peninsula? Through the cases of the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain, I explore the regional and global political economy, which can help to answer these questions. I focus on three Gulf airline sponsors, Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways, as well as the three individuals just named – the UAE's Shekih Mansour, Qatar's Nasser bin Ghanim Al-Khelaïfi, and Sheikh Nasser of Bahrain – all of whom have drawn from their country's sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) and their own royal fortunes to support large-scale international sporting investments. In each of the three countries, this article shows how these individuals work in tandem with their governments and various other financial and political elites to bring these sports sponsorships to life. And while I focus on Gulf-based actors, they represent only one side of the coin: as we shall see, it is equally important to understand the role of teams, individuals, and broader dynamics in the global sports industry to understand the contemporary geopolitics of Gulf sport sponsorship.

2. The geopolitics of sport beyond 'soft power'

The vast majority of reporting and academic scholarship on the relationship between Gulf financing and sport is permeated by a sort of impulse to *unmask* – corruption, social injustice, political machinations at any and all scales. In the media, for example, headlines are suggestive: 'A trophy hunt is under way as Gulf states spend on sport' (England 2008), 'Will Qatar's World Cup games be played over workers' bodies?' (NPR 2013), 'How Bahrain uses sport to whitewash a legacy of torture and human rights abuses' (Conn 2017). While many of the concerns about human rights challenges in the Gulf countries are real, the press coverage often conforms to broader caricatures of the Gulf states in the Western press, which dismiss them as nuveau riche 'upstarts' trying to insert themselves where they don't belong (see García and Amara 2013; Smith 2015; Vora and Koch 2018).

In the academic literature, the unmasking impulse tends to focus more on the political posturing of the Gulf states as an effort to exercise 'soft power.'[1] A number of recent article titles

[1] This writing is part of a broader literature on soft power as a 'tool' for smaller or less geopolitically-influential states to exercise international influence, first articulated Joseph Nye (1990). It has developed into something of a cottage industry among scholars researching sport and international politics, from diverse disciplines, who have sought to apply it in many other countries (which is too extensive to survey here, but see Grix 2016).

illustrate the centrality of this narrative: 'The rise of Qatar as a soft power and the challenges' (Antwi-Boateng 2013), 'The soft power strategy of soccer sponsorships' (Krzyzaniak 2018), 'The sporting way: Sport as branding strategy in the Gulf States' (Bromber 2014), and 'The 2006 Asian Games: Self-affirmation and soft power' (Attali 2016). The argument of a typical academic article on soft power in the Gulf frames it as part of an explicit, state-led effort to 'amass soft power' (Dorsey 2018, 185). Conforming to a rather narrow set of arguments, this is exemplified in Danyal Reiche's (2015, 490) assertion about Qatari sports promotion of sporting success as a means of 'contributing to the national security of the country and maintaining the power of the ruling family that governs a dictatorial monarchy,' or as Krzyzaniak (2018, 498) asserts, that 'states are strategically exploiting the beautiful game to gain an advantage in the great game.' Although much of the academic literature on sports and the Gulf countries is still dominated by those writing about it through the 'soft power' lens, a number of studies have taken a more disaggregated approach to the international sports sponsorship arising from Gulf-based firms and individuals (see Al Masari and O'Connor 2013; Amara 2012; Amara and Theodoraki 2010; Chanavat 2017; Chanavat and Desbordes 2017; García and Amara 2013; Ginesta 2013).

In an article from 15 years ago, Slack and Amis (2004, 259) called for a more critical lens to be applied to research on sport sponsorship, which they saw at that point to be largely 'devoid of any social and historical context, staunchly positivistic, exhibiting a low level of theory development and lacking in self-reflectivity.' While the situation may not be so dire today, even where scholars have fixed their attention on the international politics of sport, it often continues to rely on the facile explanations of the 'soft power' framework.[2] As I have argued elsewhere, the academic fixation with soft power in studying Gulf sports investments has become a discursive straightjacket, not only failing to offer new insights, but also misrepresenting the nature of power and geopolitics (Koch 2018). The associated challenges are multiple, but in this article, I will emphasize one that pervades nearly all popular and academic writing on 'sports diplomacy' or sport as a soft power 'tool' in foreign policy: that the 'state' is typically described as an actor, which is capable of 'doing' things, as if it is acting coherently, rationally, and autonomously.

Statist language is problematic for various reasons (see Martin 2009), but most significant for my arguments here is that treating the state as an actor obscures the fact that the 'state' as such does not exist. Rather, the state is made up of a vast array of actors, materialities, and narratives, which come together to produce it as a geopolitical imaginary (Kuus and Agnew 2008; Painter 2006). With respect to sports and Gulf-based financing, states are tremendously important. But to understand the geopolitics of Gulf sports sponsorship, the most salient questions revolve less around state policy and more around *who* the important actors are and how they work within, alongside, or against the state. This implies the need for a disaggregated approach to the geopolitics of sport, which moves away from the realist imaginary of geopolitics as a drama featuring states-as-actors (Koch 2015, 2018, 2019). Drawing from the discourse- and actor-centered methods of critical geopolitics, by contrast, allows scholars to analyze these geopolitical imaginaries themselves and examine the politics of representation by which specific actors 'designate a world

[2] More troubling, perhaps, is the fact that much of the popular and scholarly writing on sport and sports-related investment from the Arabian Peninsula is still shot through with (sometimes more, sometimes less) Orientalist language, all the while masquerading as critique. This frequently amounts to little more than a thinly-veiled normative statement about the ills of 'dirty' money infiltrating sport and/or the West, underpinned by myths of Western exceptionalism and noncomplicity in illiberal power dynamics (Koch 2017) and a nostalgic fantasy of sport uncontaminated by commercialism (Slack 2004; Smart 2007). One of the more egregious examples of this is found in an article titled, 'The ball may be round but football is becoming increasingly Arabic: Oil money and the rise of the new football order,' in which the authors consistently refers to the Gulf states as 'sheikhdoms' and refer to local sovereign wealth funds as 'their cashed-up SWFs' (Thani and Heenan 2017, 1017).

and ‘fill’ it with certain dramas, subjects, histories and dilemmas’ (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992, 194; see also Dittmer 2010).

Durbin and Descamps (2017, 2) advocate a similar approach to analyzing media narratives about sport, noting that as journalists represent sports events, ‘they create morality plays, send messages, sell products and role models, and even deconstruct the sports space as well as the game itself.’ Viewed thus, the mediated representations of sport – whether published in scholarly journals or mainstream media platforms – are essential parts of the drama. Academics and journalists are protagonists in this drama to the extent that they write geopolitical maps of meaning through deploying concepts like ‘soft power,’ which in turn reaffirm political abstractions, such as treating the state as an actor or implying that geopolitics is inherently antagonistic. To get beyond such essentialisms, the following section returns to the questions I posed above: what does it mean to say that ‘the Gulf’ or Gulf ‘states’ sponsor sport? Or rather, who are the relevant actors in the recent rise in sponsorship dollars flowing outward from the Arabian Peninsula?

3. Global political economy and Gulf sport sponsorship

Obviously ‘the Gulf’ as such does not sponsor sports. Rather, a vast array of state and parastatal agencies, individuals, and companies based in the Gulf states are involved in directing funding to international sporting teams, events, and international organizing bodies. Regionally, actors in Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been the most involved in international sports sponsorship over the last decade. None of the Gulf countries are democracies – but neither are their corporate partners. Some states, sports governing bodies, and clubs have a stronger commitment to transparency than others, but in the broadest brush, it is fair to say that it is incredibly difficult to discern how much money is truly changing hands in many major financial deals related to sport – let alone the motives of actors on either side of the equation. Some observers have nobly tried to map these complicated networks and quantify the financial flows. I shall not attempt that here, but will instead sketch a handful of the most prominent Gulf actors engaged in sports sponsorship, and contextualize their activities in the region’s a broader political economy as it has evolved over the last 10 years.

Three major airlines have become the most visible Gulf-based sponsors of international sport: Qatar Airways, Etihad, Emirates. All are state-owned, though because the UAE is a federation of semi-autonomous emirates, Etihad and Emirates belong to different emirates: Abu Dhabi and Dubai, respectively. Each airline has a unique and important history that cannot be detailed here, but as Ulrichsen (2016, 160) succinctly notes, ‘the three Gulf airlines fall within the nebulous state-business landscape in the Gulf where the line between public and private enterprise (as well as state and ruling family wealth) can be opaque at best’ (see also Colonomos 2017; *Economist* 2010). He gives the example of Qatar Airways, which became fully state-owned in 2013. When the transition was completed, it was unclear how much the state had paid to buy out a royal family member, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, and whether Qatar’s then-ruling Emir Sheikh Hamad ‘had purchased the shares in this capacity as a member of the ruling family, a private businessman, Qatar’s Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, or head of the Qatar Investment Authority’ (Ulrichsen 2016, 160). The other two airlines also have royal family connections: Etihad was set up by a royal decree in 2003 issued by the current UAE President and ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who wanted the emirate to have its own airline. The oldest of the three, Emirates, was founded in 1985 by one of Dubai’s wealthiest royal family members, Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, who is still the company’s Chairman and CEO. Emirates is a subsidiary of the Emirates Group, an aviation holding company also headed by Sheikh Ahmed, which is in turn a subsidiary of the Investment Corporation of Dubai – one of a dense network of SWFs in the UAE.

The rapid rise of these three airlines is intimately connected with the growing financial power of the Gulf states over the last 10 years. Thanks to high oil prices since the early 2000s, the oil- and gas-rich countries of the region were handling windfall profits until their most dramatic and sustained drop in mid-2014. This led to the growing financial centrality of the Gulf states in capital markets, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of an ultra-elite group of individuals at the helm of these states. Ruling families and state planners developed a wide range of investment strategies. Profits were channeled into a number of SWFs across the region, state-backed enterprises (a number of which were wholly or partly owned by the SWFs), as well as into the local and offshore bank accounts of the ruling families and their allies. Among these key investments were the airlines, which endowed them with deep pockets and embedded a mission to promote the vision of their respective state (or emirate) in their corporate strategy. Both the financial wherewithal and the state's promotional aims made international sporting sponsorships a logical target for the airline's advertising campaigns.

Yet their decision to focus on international sports sponsorship was not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it must be understood as an outgrowth of the deepening commercialization of international sports, and football in particular, that had been ongoing for decades since the rise of television broadcasting (Silk 2004; Smart 2007; Whannel 2009). The commercialization of international sport was seen in many realms, but especially in the world's largest sports governance organizations such as FIFA and the IOC, the leaders of whom came to realize the large financial rewards of engaging sponsors. The explosion of corporate sponsorship is often associated with the deals made by Brazilian João Havelange when he took over as FIFA president in 1974 (Tomlinson 2000). Leaving aside the substantial riches he managed to coordinate for himself and allies, Havelange had campaigned on the promised of vastly expanding FIFA's reach and programming. But, as Slack and Amis (2004, 263) point out, Havelange needed money to fulfill his promises. Here, he turned to his connections at major corporations like Adidas and Coca-Cola to develop worldwide sponsorship campaigns, which would simultaneously fund his initiatives and meet the companies' own global marketing strategies to reach new markets in Africa and Asia.

From early initiatives like this, new corporate advertising tactics quickly ossified into a 'symbiotic' relationship fusing media, sport and advertising, wherein the audience itself became a commodity that teams and media were selling corporate advertises (Silk 2004, 225). The rise of the 'audience commodity' (Jhally 1984) thus became a major source of value-generation, just as much as the athletes themselves. And it was this audience commodity that the Gulf airlines and other state-based actors were seeking to purchase as they worked to expand their reach – and their profit margins – from the early 2000s on. Amara and Theodoraki (2010, 136) describe this development as part of an 'interpenetration between the local and the global, where (globalised) sport becomes a means for multinationals to expand the global reach of their products, and for international sports organisations to maintain their global monopoly on sport. Whilst for the local ruling elites and businessmen, sport becomes a means for them to globally expand and diversify investments.'

In addition to entering a global marketplace already dominated by this symbiotic media-sport-advertising nexus, the Gulf boosters' true arrival on the sponsorship scene came at another pivotal moment: the 2008 world economic crisis. Since the Gulf states, SWFs, banks, and other major financial players had been accruing tremendous wealth in the decade before, they were well positioned to capitalize on the meltdown and they have since been central to reshaping the post-

2008 global political economy. Indeed, seemingly paradoxically, Gulf elites saw their personal wealth expand dramatically in the years after the financial crisis (Hanieh 2018, 233). More than that, it became a turning point for intensifying their foothold in global finance as the SWFs and other Gulf investors seized the opportunity to acquire substantial new investments on the cheap, using the 'conjunctural crisis as a means to transform and deepen the general conditions of capital accumulation' (Hanieh 2018, 201; see also Haberly 2014; Hatton and Pistor 2011). What Hanieh (2018, 2) terms a 'buying spree,' these investments have been far reaching, touching nearly every country and economic sector – including elite sport.

For European football clubs, the dire fiscal environment following the 2008 recession looked even more grim in 2009, when UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) adopted new Financial Fair Play (FFP) rules, which were fully implemented by 2013 (see Schubert and Lopez Frias 2019). A 2009 report had shown that many European clubs had been suffering significant financial losses over years, which UEFA's then-president Michel Platini underscored when the rules were adopted, 'Fifty per cent of clubs are losing money and this is an increasing trend. We needed to stop this downward spiral. They have spent more than they have earned in the past and haven't paid their debts' (quoted in Homewood 2009). Ostensibly to promote the 'financial health' of professional football teams, the rules imposed various sanctions to prevent them from spending more than they earned, including the possibility of being disqualified from European competitions. For many clubs to remain viable in the new regulatory environment created by FFP, vast new sources of revenue were needed. This bleak situation was when Gulf capital flows began to look like a promising rescue. Indeed, Gulf financing did not just flow to sports teams in distress, but across the world and especially to major European and North American companies. Daniel Haberly (2014) shows how Gulf SWFs played a pivotal role in rescuing a number of major German corporations after the 2008 financial crisis, but strategically positioned themselves as 'white knights to distressed firms.' For a number of football clubs, Gulf investment through sponsorship deals, as well as acquisitions, were precisely what they needed to survive at this critical juncture.

4. Actors and networks in Gulf sport sponsorship

4.1. The Airlines: Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways

Emirates has the most diverse profile of international sports sponsorships, with a presence in football, cycling, rugby, tennis, motorsports, horse racing, golf, cricket, and Australian Rules football. On the company's sponsorship website (Emirates 2019), they catalog the various teams they support, always emphasizing any superlative possible – such as the oldest, best, or most prestigious team or event, or the most star-studded roster. It is this association with 'the best,' that Emirates itself positions itself as a leading brand via its prestigious 'portfolio' of football partnerships, explaining: 'Through the acquisition of sponsorship rights with governing bodies and leading teams, Emirates has become one of the most prominent brands within football' (Emirates 2019). These cannot all be covered here, but in the case of Arsenal – one of the biggest names in professional football – it is notable that Emirates signed on at something of a crisis moment for the team, which needed a large sum of money to complete its new stadium. In 2004, just as the airline was beginning its high-profile sports sponsorships, it agreed to a £100 million deal for the team's new stadium and a 7-year shirt sponsorship (BBC 2004). Called Emirates Stadium, the 15-year stadium deal was renewed in 2012, extending the naming rights until 2028.

While the Emirates name raised some skepticism in Britain at the time, the club and its supporters were primarily focused on the size of the company's pledge: 'The sheer size of this deal is an amazing opportunity,' the Arsenal managing director Keith Edelman, stated at the time, while the club touted the impressive size of the deal in an official statement: 'The combined value of both elements of the sponsorship is by far the biggest deal ever undertaken in English football.' For his part, Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al-Maktoum, Emirates Chairman of Airlines and CEO framed the decision as an opportunity to connect with customers, asserting: 'There is no greater vehicle for this than through English football and we are looking forward to a long and very happy relationship with Arsenal' (quoted in Amara and Theodoraki 2010, 144). Sheikh Ahmed has made similar statements rationalizing the airline's large investments in leading sports teams elsewhere, including when the company announced its Formula 1 Global Partner sponsor status in 2013: 'This is an exciting global opportunity to align two world leading brands. The ambitious, cutting-edge technological standards and worldwide reach of Formula 1 goes hand in hand with Emirates' vision and ambition' (Emirates 2019).

Emirates clearly understands these sponsorships to go well beyond mere 'nation branding,' as many observers are wont to remark; the official publications and actual strategy of selecting investments consistently underscores how the company's sponsorship activities do not just reach a large quantity of fans, but also demographically, geographically, and generationally diverse populations. The sponsorship website has dedicated pages to the individual sports, which list a dizzying array of fan engagement activities and promotional activities that reach tens of thousands or millions of spectators, as the case may be. The page explains that Sheikh Ahmed sees sponsorship as 'vital' to the company's marketing strategy and quotes him saying: 'We believe sponsorships are one of the best ways to connect with our passengers. They allow us to share and support their interests and to build a closer relationship with them' (Emirates 2019). It is unclear what a 'closer relationship' actually entails, but there is no question that the 'Fly Emirates' slogan on countless team jerseys and competition billboards and runners has given the company a wide-reaching brand recognition throughout the world.

As the official airline of numerous events, the company also secures a substantial amount of business in many of its target locales, whether in South Asia, the Middle East or the Americas. Through strategic sponsorship choices, Emirates also solidifies certain relationships, such as with its Official Sponsor status for the Boeing Classic, a PGA Champions Tour golf tournament. The company explains it thus:

> Emirates' relationship with The Boeing Classic provides a valuable platform to raise awareness and engage with existing and potential US customers, following the launch of the airline's non-stop service linking Seattle and Dubai in March 2012. The sponsorship deal also further demonstrates Emirates' commitment to Boeing as the largest 777 customer, and recipient of Boeing's 1000th 777 aircraft. Emirates currently flies to eight US gateways: Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington, DC and Boston. (Emirates 2019)

Emirates, like the other airlines, tends to focus its sponsorships in the locales they wish to target for their existing or planned routes. Some of its investments in European football clubs are evidence of this strategy, especially given its early emphasis on 'secondary' markets, such as Manchester or Newcastle in the UK, and numerous cities across South Asia poorly served by the major European carriers (Economist 2010). So while it may be the case that the airline's sponsorship programs serve certain reputational interests of the Dubai elites, it is hardly appropriate to reduce the overarching corporate strategy of investing in sport to 'a multibillion-dollar charm offensive' (Gillis, Oliver, and Briggs 2007) on the part of Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum.

The other UAE-based airline, Etihad, has a lower profile in sports sponsorship than does Emirates. In general, people from nearly every sector in the UAE, private and public, reference a more tempered approach to large projects or investments in Abu Dhabi – and that their initiatives tend to aim for a higher prestige factor than what is perceived as Dubai's louder and more enthusiastic approach. In many ways, this narrative has become a self-fulfilling policy, but it is certainly visible in terms of the airline sponsorships. One of the earliest of Etihad's limited football sponsorships came in July 2011, when it signed a deal with Manchester City FC, which included stadium naming rights and shirt sponsorship for 10 years. City of Manchester Stadium was thus renamed Etihad Stadium, and the team was given a much needed boost in revenue at a critical moment (BBC 2011). The team had been acquired in 2008 by one of Abu Dhabi's most prominent royal family members Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who had injected huge sums money from his personal fortune and funds from the emirate's sovereign wealth fund, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), to support the struggling team (Thani and Heenan 2017, 1019; Ulrichsen 2016, 58). The team had nonetheless posted a £123.3 million loss in the season prior to the 2011 Etihad deal. Since Etihad is also a government entity, the deal essentially just opened up yet another channel of money to flow to the team from Emirati state coffers.

The lucrative Etihad agreement was again acclaimed by the recipients of the financing as a godsend, recognizing that it would help to prevent them from violating the FFP regulations set to take effect in the near future (BBC 2011). Recent reports suggest that, over the past decade that Sheikh Mansour has owned the club, he has invested £1.3 billion from his personal wealth – though the club is now pulling in much higher revenues and is beginning to post millions in profits (Conn 2018). Indeed, one of Sheikh Mansour's earlier statements on his investment decisions are largely taking hold in the international football scene: 'We have given a good impression of the Arab investor,' he has asserted (quoted in Keegan 2013). So while Etihad itself is part of the package, as I discuss below, it is Sheikh Mansour's role as a conduit that is critical to the success of the whole arrangement.

Beyond Manchester City, Etihad has taken a targeted approach to its other sports sponsorships, including serving as the Official Airline of Major League Soccer (MLS) since 2014. The decision to sponsor MLS clearly raised eyebrows because there was an explicit press campaign to justify the decision, with both the company and state-controlled newspaper, *The National* explaining that football is one of the fastest-growing sports in North America. Etihad's then-president and CEO, James Hogan is quoted saying that 'sports is in our DNA,' and 'Etihad Airways has a growing portfolio of sports properties that cover the globe and we're delighted to now add Major League Soccer, a leading international sports brand, to this group' (Ahmed 2015). The reporting notes that Etihad flies to US cities, which have a large football base, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York City, San Francisco and Washington D.C. – though it is difficult to assess whether these spectators are among those to be flying to the UAE. In any case, the same message is reiterated in the company's current web description of the company's support: 'Etihad and MLS share the same spirit of global connectivity through sports, and together, are committed to celebrating soccer's rising popularity in the U.S., Canada and beyond' (Etihad 2019).[3]

In addition to sponsoring one US football team, New York City Football Club, Etihad has backed the Abu Dhabi World Triathlon since 2015, and is the Official Airline of Monumental

[3] This is elaborated in a video on the Sponsorship page of the website, also available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=002lcCxXGvs

Sports & Entertainment, which owns three Washington, D.C. teams: the NBA's Washington Wizards, NHL's Washington Capitals and WNBA's Washington Mystics. According to the company's website, 'Together, Etihad and Monumental Sports are creating unique access, experiences and content for both sports fans and travelers from the Washington, D.C. area' (Etihad 2019). Just as with the US football sponsorships, references here justify targeting one of Etihad's hubs in the United States – though the fact that the UAE's capital city is targeting the US capital's sports team is certainly notable, if quietly unremarked upon. Also silent in much of the reporting on Etihad's sponsorship is the fact that it has actually pulled back on its involvement in the sector. The reasons for this are diverse, but it is notable that the company just underwent a restructuring in mid-2018, after posting a staggering $1.95 billion loss in 2016 and another $1.52 billion loss in 2017 (Diaa 2018). This has come at a difficult time for the state's investors and planners, as the crash in oil prices after 2014 led to a region-wide push for more responsible investing and such losses – even on the part of a company now being branded as *the* national airline – are not being tolerated at the highest levels of the government (Hanieh 2018, ch. 7). So regardless of whether the narrative about Abu Dhabi's more tempered approach is true or false, the recent pull-back of Etihad's sponsorship agenda is well served by it, if it truly is rooted in financial woes.

The last of the three Gulf airlines involved in sponsoring major international sports teams in Qatar Airways, which offers various levels of support for prominent European football clubs, FIFA itself, the US NBA's Brooklyn Nets, equestrian sport, tennis, squash, and Australian Rules football. Like the UAE airlines, the company's official statements suggest that sponsoring sport is largely about marketing itself to a wider and more diverse audiences: 'Qatar Airways proudly supports a wide range of sporting activities and initiatives around the world, expanding our brand visibility and establishing lasting and loyal relationships with our customers' (QA 2019). Indeed, the website lists four key sponsorship criteria. Teams seeking support must demonstrate the that it would (1) have a 'tangible impact on the community,' (2) lead to brand enhancement through 'long-term partnerships with other prestigious brands,' (3) have 'clearly identifiable benefits return on investment, media exposure and publicity,' and (4) have revenue-generating potential in target markets (QA 2019). This agenda was visible when Qatar Airways Group CEO Akbar Al Baker announced the airline's new deal with the Brooklyn Nets in 2018, emphasizing the prominence of the team, its strategic venue, and the ability of the partnership to 'provide Qatar Airways with maximum exposure to the rest of the world, echoing our belief in bringing people together' (quoted in Peninsula 2018a).

Similarly, this prestige element is key to Qatar Airline's choice of football clubs to sponsor, such as Germany's most prominent club FC Bayern Munich – albeit as a shirt sleeve sponsor only. Previously, Doha's Hamad International Airport was a shirt sleeve sponsor – in fact, the club's very first and something Al Baker commented upon at the time, saying: 'The strengthening of this fantastic sponsorship between Qatar's award-winning airport and FC Bayern München truly demonstrates the State of Qatar's role as a global leader in sports. The HIA-Qatar logo on the sleeve of every FC Bayern Munich jersey helps display the importance that we as a nation place on sports as a means of bringing people together' (quoted in Dudley 2017). When announcing the new Qatar Airways sleeve sponsorship in 2018, he framed it as a natural transition, remarking:

> Qatar Airways is delighted to be supporting Germany's most-winning team, FC Bayern Munich. We look forward to working with, and engaging with, the club, the fans, and the people of Germany to help make a real difference through this exciting new partnership. Sport is a key pillar of the long-term vision of the State

> of Qatar, and as Qatar's national carrier, we welcome the opportunity to use sport as a means of bringing people together. FC Bayern Munich is a club that exemplifies ambition, innovation and integrity at its core. These are values we share, admire and are fundamental to Qatar Airways. (quoted in Peninsula 2018b)

Al Baker's emphasis on Bayern as 'Germany's most-winning team' suggests the alignment with Qatar Airways' priorities in investing for 'brand enhancement' for the company, though he here also draws on the nationalist language found across Qatar, which positions elite sport as a point of pride and modernity (Bromber and Krawietz 2013; Koch 2018, 2019).

Challenging this narrative, though, some critics were outspoken in their opposition to the German team dealing with Qatar Airways because of their concerns about the company's treatment of workers and the country's human rights record writ large (Melnæs 2018; Wildhagen 2018). Yet the deal was appealing for FC Bayern Munich because it would mark an increase on the €10 million received annually from the Hamad International Airport sponsorship (AFP 2018). Team managers clearly did not see any significant problems raised by opponents, and in fact their critiques have largely failed to garner much attention in Germany or elsewhere. Here again, the financial rewards from the European side are significant. This is also readily apparent in the World Cup sponsorship that Qatar Airways signed with FIFA in 2017. Though FIFA was hoping for a $1 billion profit from the 2018 World Cup in Russia, it lost $391 million in 2016 and $192 million in 2017 – and was in serious need of more sponsorships going into 2018. The amount of the 2017 deal was not disclosed, but a FIFA statement asserted that it represented 'one of the biggest sporting sponsorships in the world and the largest in the history of Qatar Airways' (quoted in Cornwell and Homewood 2017).

These sponsorship arrangements, regardless of the Gulf airline, all illustrate that they are just as much about the needs (or desires) of European teams, institutions, and individuals, as they are about the Gulf actors involved. While this may seem obvious, the writing about such deals that frames them almost exclusively through the lens of 'soft power' shifts the attention toward the Gulf side of the equation and quietly silences the politics of those on the receiving end of the financing. The unfortunate effect of this analytical focus is that it reinforces a sort of Western exceptionalism, sanitizing the exercise of agency on the part of European and American actors who chose to accept this support – oftentimes quite willingly and with great pleasure. A similar dynamic is borne out with the handful of Gulf elites, who own international sports teams.

4.2 The men: Three team backers

Several Gulf elites own or otherwise control the financial futures of international sporting teams – three of whom I will discuss here: the Emirati royal family member Shekih Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan owns Manchester City FC, Qatari businessman Nasser bin Ghanim Al-Khelaïfi owns Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), and Bahraini royal family member Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa has sponsored the Bahrain-Merida Men's World Tour cycling team. These are not the only cases of Gulf elites backing elite sport internationally, especially when one widens the scope to consider horse racing or motorsport, while the Qatari royal family member Sheikh Abdullah Al Thani also owns the Spanish Málaga football club. Given space limitations, I will briefly sketch the role of the three men, who have invested the most in their teams, and who are otherwise representative of this kind of individual sponsorship.

One of the first things to note about it, though, is that it is not individual at all. Rather, each of these men has drawn from multiple sources of state money to support their team, including mobilizing personal connections at state-owned companies, directing funds from their country's sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), as well as pulling from their own royal fortunes. All sources, the latter included, are ultimately derived from the monarchies' control of resource extraction revenues in three of the most hydrocarbon-rich countries in the world. This money gets channeled to different actors through various means, but much of the revenue from resource rents that does not directly fund the government goes into SWFs (see Haberly 2014; Hanieh 2018; Hatton and Pistor 2011; Seznec 2012; Ulrichsen 2016). Over the past 20 years, the coffers of Gulf SWFs have swelled. Beyond becoming incredibly significant actors in international finance, they are also key to domestic politics in the Gulf countries because SWF investments are tied to state-defined priorities. Ruling families define these priorities, so those in their inner-most circles have immense discretion in how these funds are allocated. As such, grounding the geopolitics of Gulf sport sponsorship means that the decisions of the individual team backers cannot be divorced from this unique political economy of financial flows between the state and the ruling families and political elites.

The case of Shekih Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan is exemplary. Born in 1970, is the half brother of the UAE's current President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and serves as the Minister of Presidential Affairs. He sits on numerous key government boards, including the Supreme Petroleum Council, the International Petroleum Investment Company, the Abu Dhabi Investment Council, and he is the Chairman of another Emirati SWF, the Emirates Investment Authority. As noted above, he took over Manchester City FC in 2008. To do so, he founded a private equity group, the City Football Group, which he owns (and which in turn owns several other international teams, including the New York City FC, mentioned above as another team sponsored by Etihad) (Bray 2018). There are discrepant accounts, but some sources suggest that the acquisition was financed with $240 million from one of the UAE's SWFs, of which he was (and still is) a board member – the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA).

However the acquisition actually worked, it is clear that Shekih Mansour is intimately tied to the most important institutions for allocating the UAE's vast resource wealth and has long been in the position to influence key investment decisions. In addition to tapping into ADIA funds, Shekih Mansour was instrumental in securing Man City's 2010 sponsorship deal with Etihad. In fact, in early 2008, the airline was actually in discussions with Chelsea FC to become a shirt sponsor in 2010. But when Sheikh Mansour purchased Manchester, 'Etihad immediately adapted its strategy and opened discussions within two month's of the club's purchase' (Al Masari and O'Connor 2013, 73). And while the Emirati royal has since drawn heavily from his personal wealth to finance the team at times, he has also managed to open up further channels for personal enrichment. For example, after setting up the City Football Group in 2008, he technically purchased it for £265 million – but in 2015, he sold a 13 percent stake to a consortium of Chinese investors for the very same price, reflecting a meteoric inflation in its value (Wilson 2015). The complicated layer of holding companies and investment vehicles make the workings of Sheikh Mansour's Man City financial acrobatics quite obscure, but it should be noted that the man takes clear pride in the celebrity status his ownership has afforded him. And, like the two other elite sponsors I will discuss, he considers himself to be a sports aficionado, as an avid runner and horse rider.

The owner of PSG, the Qatari businessman Nasser bin Ghanim Al-Khelaïfi is not a royal family member, but he does have a close personal relationship with Qatar's current Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Both men are young (the former born 1974, the latter in 1980), and in Sheikh Tamim made him a Minister without Portfolio in the Qatari government in 2013. Al-

Khelaïfi has a keen interest in sport and from 1992-2002, he played tennis professionally. More recently, he has been active in a host of sporting associations in Qatar and internationally, including serving on the FIFA Club World Cup Organizing Committee and as President of the Qatar Tennis Federation. He came to acquire Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) Football Club in June 2011, arranged in a similar fashion to Sheikh Mansour's Man City holding arrangement. In this instance, another sports-specific investment vehicle, Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), which is a subsidiary of Qatar's primary SWF, the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) was responsible for the acquisition (see Chanavat 2017; Ginesta 2013). Also like Sheikh Mansour's control of City Football Group, Al-Khelaïfi is the owner of the QSI, which claims on its website to be 'a private shareholding Organization with the ambition to invest in profit-bearing sports related projects within Qatar and also internationally, whilst becoming a globally recognized and leading sports and leisure investment company' (QSI 2019).

QSI has an extremely thin portfolio and its website suggests that it does little besides owning PSG (though it did once sponsor the Spanish football club FC Barcelona). This limited scope notwithstanding, as Ulrichsen (2016, 58) points out, Al-Khelaïfi's role as Chairman of QSI and longtime ally of the ruling Al Thani family 'illustrates how the purchase of individual teams can also fit into a bigger picture,' since the QSI 'takeover followed a lunch hosted by French President Nicholas Sarkozy for Qatar's Heir Apparent, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and the French president of the European football association, Michel Platini, at the Elysee Palace in November 2010.' Furthermore, the deal was reached only a few months before Al Jazeera Sports, then headed by Al-Khelaïfi, purchased the broadcasting rights for the French Ligue 1, which was facing a crisis when the previous rights holder could no longer pay (Ulrichsen 2016, 58). In bringing together the acquisition of these broadcast rights with the PSG deal, Al-Khelaïfi deftly secured Qatar's prominence in the French football scene. He also continued to carve out a special role for himself when, in 2013, Al Jazeera Sports was transitioned to the beIN Media Group, a new subsidiary of Al Jazeera network dedicated to sports media. Again like Sheikh Mansour in Manchester, Nasser Al-Khelaïfi's PSG project did not just appeal to the recipients in France for the financial salvation the Qataris seemed to promise, but the sponsorship also served as an important conduit for additional political and economic ties across the countries, and across industries.

As we have already seen, official rhetoric such as this circulates widely in this sponsorship sphere. Part of the problem with the 'soft power' narratives in academic and media commentary rests with how it is uncritically regurgitated by European sports leaders, such as when Chanavat (2017, 4) quotes the Deputy General Manager of the Qatari-owned football club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), Frédéric Longuépée, saying: 'Paris Saint-Germain is part of the global strategy of Qatar 2030 to promote the country and diversify the economy, shifting from the oil and gas industry to a tourism and knowledge economy. Hence, Qatar has chosen sports, through different activities, as a vehicle to promote and protect the emirate.' Obviously, as I have been arguing, 'Qatar' has not 'done' anything with regard to this sponsorship: there are only grounded actors making specific choices. Yet these men, Al-Khelaïfi and Longuépée alike, benefit from the 'state' as such, insofar as it affords access to particular financial and political networks that simultaneously transcend and reinforce territorial borders, as suits their interests best. While these individuals have an exceptional position within these networks, it would be inaccurate to assume that they are in complete control of successfully achieving those interests. As with the activists' critiques of FC Bayern Munich for its Qatar Airways deal, they may face opposition from various quarters.

Furthermore, there is always an element of surprise in the realm of international affairs. This is best illustrated when Qatar was suddenly subjected to an embargo in June 2017 by its Gulf neighbors, spearheaded by leaders in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The fallout is ongoing, but there have been a number of immediate effects in the sporting world. The full extent of these cannot be covered here, but with respect to Al-Khelaïfi's business, his beIN Media Group became an immediate target of Saudi and Emirati attack. The company had invested billions of dollars into securing sports broadcasting rights across the Middle East region, but their broadcasts were then blocked and pirated in the countries involved in embargoing Qatar, and beIN's reporters were suddenly preventing from covering events and forced to remove company logos at various events (the former now being the subject of a WTO investigation) (Bassam 2018; Panja 2017, 2018).

The politics surrounding the Qatar-Gulf rift has also played out with PSG, since its shirt sponsor has been Emirates – a company closely tied to the UAE as one of primary antagonists in the feud. Since Al-Khelaïfi is a prominent member of the Qatari elite, it was clear from the beginning that the Emirates sponsorship would not last. Some of the Emirati assaults on Qatari interests since June 2017 have been quite harsh and dramatic, but cooler tempers seemed to prevail and Emirates committed to fulfilling its contract until its expiration in 2019. There was initial speculation that Qatar Airways might take over as the PSG shirt sponsor (joining other state-owned companies, Ooredoo and Qatar National Bank, on the sponsorship roster), but the deal was ultimately awarded to the French hotel chain, Accor (Chadwick 2019; Sharma 2018). However the dispute between Qatar and its neighbors is eventually resolved, the important point is that the individuals involved in promoting their sporting interests – financial, political, or otherwise – are never in full control of an inherently unpredictable system. This is often lost in 'soft power' framings. Some scholars, such as Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015), note a kind of 'soft disempowerment' that takes place when imaging agendas are contested, but these readings all tend to imply that they work through a unidirectional and rationalist logic – that these sponsorship arrangements are calculated decisions made on the basis of factors that are not only under the control of decision-makers, but actually *knowable*. The Qatar embargo and the diverse and unexpected responses to it from all range of actors (team owners, sponsors, fans, media commentators, hackers, etc.) suggests a much more dynamic and multidimensional field of power relations.

This multidimensionality is also visible with the last example: Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, a young Bahraini royal family member. Born in 1987, Sheikh Nasser is like the other two men in his love of sport. He is a fan of professional cycling, competes in triathlon, leads the Bahrain National Endurance Team, and is President of Bahrain's Olympic Committee. But he is also the son of the King of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, and has served in Bahrain's Defense Force and is the Commander of Bahrain's Royal Guard. In an ebullient Instagram post in 2016, Sheikh Nasser announced that he would sponsor a new Men's World Tour professional cycling team, Bahrain-Merida. The post read: 'Its real!!! I would like to officially announce the birth of Bahrain cycling team. Our main effort is to introduce the cycling sport, encourage and support young athletes, to maintain a healthy life style in our region, and to compete with the best teams in the world' (quoted in Farrand 2016). The team's website proudly describes how the idea was born during 'a casual bike ride in the desert of Bahrain between His Highness Shaikh Nasser and Vincenzo Nibali,' an elite Italian cyclist who subsequently became the central figure around which they would build a team of riders, 'carefully selected from young, talented riders to experienced, professionals with heavy trophy cabinets' (TBM 2019).[4]

In a now familiar pattern, the team received financing from Mumtalakat, the government's sovereign wealth fund, as well as a consortium of other partners stretching from Bahraini state and parastatal companies to the Taiwanese bicycle manufacturer, Merida. From 2019, the team will be sponsored by McLaren – an elite automobile group, of which Bahrain's Mumtalakat SWF owns 63 percent – and will potentially take over as title sponsor in 2020 (Brown 2018). Like the other cases noted above, Sheikh Nasser serves as a conduit linking the sporting team with key financial backers, controlled by or otherwise associated with the monarchy's assets. In his statements about the team, Sheikh Nasser has consistently emphasized that it aligns with the overarching agenda in Bahrain to promote sport (see Amara and Theodoraki 2010, 148; Ulrichsen 2016, 55).

Yet his intent from the outset was to create an elite cycling team that could 'compete with the best teams in the world' (quoted in Cycling News 2016). In top-level cycling today, this essentially means an international roster, even though he does make the obligatory rhetorical gestures about promoting domestic sport, which are common to such elite sport projects (Koch 2013). 'Our participation in these competitions will affirm our desire to take part in various sporting events, and will help also expand the number of practitioners to this sport in the Kingdom of Bahrain,' he stated in 2016 (quoted in Frattini 2016). Garnering support was not necessarily an easy sell, though, as he detailed in a 2017 interview:

> At first, the sponsors did not even understand, they were like, 'A cycling team? Why?' But those people who think about the indirect benefit to Bahrain and saw the vision that we saw, actually stayed committed to us. Slowly with time, they will understand the importance of this sport, the outcome of this work for Bahrain. If they all walked away, then I would still be thinking of how can we create this team. We had backup plans, and one of my plans was if it failed was to go to Abu Dhabi and present the team to them because I wanted to have this team. (quoted in Brown 2017)

It is notable here that Sheikh Nasser was aware that he could not unilaterally implement the project, and that he had to work within a range of institutional constraints, both within his own country and outside of it. His back-up plan to approach possible supporters in the UAE is also notable because he is married to the daughter of the Dubai's Emir Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, demonstrating his willingness to pull on all personal connections he could to bring the sponsorship project to life.

Another point of resistance was the media campaign launched against him by human rights activists after the team was announced. The Bahraini government and allies from the UAE and Saudi Arabia had violently cracked down on protesters, who were calling for change during the wave of Arab Spring protests (see Rabea 2018; Matthiesen 2013; Shehabi and Jones 2016). Related to the long-running human rights abuses in Bahrain since then, as well as Sheikh Nasser's direct involvement in the Bahraini armed forces, activists have accused him of 'throwing money at the international cycling to use it as PR to whitewash his past' (Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, quoted in Fletcher 2016). In one particular instance, Sheikh Nasser publicly called for protesting athletes to be punished – stating in an April 2011 television address: 'To everyone that demands the fall of the regime, may a wall fall on their heads. Everyone involved in such issues and networks will be

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[4] An Instagram photograph of the ride is available at Cycling News 2016. The origin story is also narrated on a team video YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrmuvSx2epM

punished. Whether he is an athlete, an activist or a politician, he will be punished in this time. Today is the judgment day … Bahrain is an island and there is no escape' (quoted in Conn 2017). Activists lobbed the UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale, the cycling governing body) to revoke the Bahrain-Merida license, while numerous critical reports detailed human rights violations in Bahrain.

Sheikh Nasser has fought back against these criticisms, emphasizing his love of sport as guiding his motives with the team and otherwise denying any involvement in abuse. His representatives have also filed legal action against the press: at least one negative report in *The Guardian* has been made 'the subject of a legal complaint made on behalf of Sheikh Nasser Bin Hamad Al Khalifa' **(**Gibson 2016). Sheikh Nasser has even noted how the attacks redoubled his enthusiasm for the project, as he became more aware of the need to reshape the negative image of Bahrain after the Arab Spring protests. In 2017, he affirmed his innocence and asserted: 'We are in a position now where we want to showcase our country. We needed this. We really needed this. And actually it is working very well' (quoted in Brown 2017). Ultimately, his judgment may not be far off: like the other cases of opposition already discussed, the actions of opponents have done little to stall the sponsor deals or truly tarnish the reputation of the Bahraini royal family and its government. Sheikh Nasser has not achieved the celebrity status of Sheikh Mansour through the Bahrain-Merida cycling team, but his jubilant social media posts make it clear that he is very proud of having put together the team, while various corporate, sporting, and government elites within his circle have likewise reaped the financial, political, and personal rewards of his sponsorship activities.

5. Conclusion

Sport offers a unique lens on geopolitics in the Arabian Peninsula. Tracing the various actors who enact and embody the political relations that constitute geopolitics, in this case through transnational sports sponsorships, the shortcomings of statist thinking become readily apparent. The reductionism of 'soft power' frames cannot adequately capture the complexity of the political economy and political geographies of the rise of major sponsor deals funded by institutions and individuals in the Gulf states. The examples of airlines, elite backers, and their allies are not at all exhaustive. But by disaggregating 'the Gulf' and considering specific actors, I have aimed to show how the contemporary geopolitics of sport in the Arabian Peninsula works through a dense web of networks, which enlist actors from the Gulf and abroad. All of these actors are operating with multiple motives, aspirations, desires, constraints, and opportunities. As such, scholars would be remiss to dismiss this complexity through the now-hegemonic shorthand of 'soft power.'

What, then, specifically can these cases tell us about the politics and ethics of international sport on the Arabian Peninsula? As I have shown, some of the most prominent sport sponsorships are rooted in the private sector, but these deals involve significant investments from Gulf state funds – directly and indirectly. In challenging the statist frames that prevail in the 'soft power' literature, I have traced how airlines, sovereign wealth funds, banks, and other financial backers of the massive sporting investments considered here are key actors in the drama of sporting geopolitics – but so too are city planners, spectators, event staff, small businesses, and ordinary citizens of all backgrounds, in the Gulf and abroad. While sporting investments do, in various ways, reflect and advance the efforts of government visionaries to promote a positive image of their countries abroad, they are much more than this. They are also strategic nodes for diverse actors in the Gulf and in the international sporting community to advance various interests:

personal, political, financial, and otherwise. Any search for a singular motive for Gulf sport sponsorship is therefore necessarily in vain – there can only be *motives*, in the plural.

Simple as this point may be, a major challenge with statist language is that when we say 'Qatar' or 'the UAE' is pursuing a particular policy or financial reward for investing in sport abroad, we lose sight of how so many different actors are involved in bringing these deals and partnerships to life. Not only are these actors guided by different motives, but they are more likely than not to have mixed motives themselves – at the same moment in time and over longer stretches of time. But of course, this mix of motives, cutting across and linking actors and institutions at different scales is what geopolitics is *always* about. Indeed, one of the perennial features of Western commentary about Gulf sporting agendas – whether in terms of hosting or sponsoring events or supporting foreign teams – is the very fixation with motives. Seldom are the sporting investments of the ultra-wealthy in the *Anglo-European core* questioned in terms of motives. Yet when Gulf elites engage in the same practices, their decisions suddenly become suspect. The close ties between state-based wealth and the sheen of Arabian monarchies, of course, have long been looked upon skeptically in the West. But to the extent that 'critiques' focus only on the *giving* side of the equation, they reproduce the Western exceptionalism that sanitizes the agency of those *receiving* sponsor funds. The geopolitics of Gulf sports sponsorship is, however, one of cooperation and coordination that does not only implicate the giving and receiving parties, but also a state system writ large that structures visions of global space – and which specific actors strategically use to channel symbolic and financial capital alike.

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