

Sports sponsorship and Gulf geopolitics

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Abstract. Elite sport sponsorship has become a significant trend in the Arabian Peninsula, where local leaders see investment in high-profile teams and events as a way to shape foreign relations beyond the region – primarily with Europe. Sports sponsorship also factors into intra-regional geopolitics among the Gulf countries, including both cooperation and competition. This article considers both sides of sports sponsorship geopolitics – beyond and within the Gulf – while also recognising that the two orientations are not separate.

I. Introduction

Companies and state-controlled sovereign wealth funds in four Gulf Arab monarchies – Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain – have been investing large sums of money to sponsor major global sports teams, programs, and events for more than a decade. Most Western interpretations of sponsorship deals funded by these actors, institutions, and their money have focused on how they relate to Gulf countries' position in global geopolitics. In these accounts, sports investments are read as a way for leaders in these countries to shape foreign relations *beyond* the region. A second, less commonly-discussed issue is how these investments relate to intraregional geopolitics *among* the Arabian Peninsula countries that actively sponsor elite sport.

This article considers both sides of sports sponsorship geopolitics – beyond and within the Gulf – while also recognizing that the two orientations are not separate. The Arabian Peninsula's intraregional and extraregional dynamics are intimately related, and conflicts and cooperation often ripple out across multiple scales. Indeed, it is precisely the inability to spatially fix the money, politics, and aspirations of Gulf actors to the Arabian Peninsula that infuriates critics of these high-profile sports deals in the West. And yet, sports sponsorships – like teams, governing bodies, competitions, coaches and athletes themselves – have always been implicated in transregional circuits of power.

II. Gulf boosterism and European sport

How does sports sponsorship relate to extraregional relations between the Gulf and other parts of the world? The most common – and unthinkingly – repeated answer in recent media and academic analysis of Gulf sports investment, is that actors in the region are using sports to exert some kind of “soft power” or to “sportswash” their unsavory political reputations. These clichés explain nothing about the actual networks of power that shape sponsor deals, but there is no doubt that Gulf leaders see a symbolic value to sponsoring sport.

Due to the developmentalist orientation of the ruling regimes, decisionmakers and their teams of consultants are keen to build positive associations with their country and help break down stereotypes of the Gulf – and the Middle East in general – as a backward region that is not part of the modern, globalized world. Countering the Orientalizing stigma that still prevails in Europe and other parts of the West has been a top priority of recent Gulf efforts at national boosterism.¹

Using sports for boosterist “nation branding” purposes is a decades old practice.² One early example from the Gulf was when the French football club Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), was acquired by Qatar Sports Investments, which is wholly owned by the Qatari sovereign wealth fund, Qatar Investment Authority. Shortly after the club's takeover in 2011, PSG signed a deal with the Qatar Tourism Authority to promote the country for up to €200 million per year.³ The suspicious terms of this deal aside, it is just

¹ Koch, *The Geopolitics of Sport Beyond Soft Power: Event Ethnography and the 2016 Cycling World Championships in Qatar*, 2018; Koch, *Capitalizing on Cosmopolitanism in the Gulf*, 2019.

² Hiller, Harry, *Mega-Events, Urban Boosterism and Growth Strategies: An Analysis of the Objectives and Legitimations of the Cape Town 2004 Olympic Bid*, 2000.

³ This amount was later downsized following a UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) investigation of the transactions violating the organization's Financial Fair Play regulations. See Panja, *In P.S.G. Case, Documents*

one example among many of how European football team sponsorships have been used to promote tourism and companies from the Gulf.

Other prominent examples include the recent Saudi Public Investment Fund's (PIF) acquisition of Newcastle United, Qatar Airways' sponsorship of FC Bayern Munich, Emirates' sponsorship of at least a dozen different European teams over the years. The list also prominently includes the Emirati royal family member Shekih Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan's control of Manchester City, which was made possible by funding from the country's sovereign wealth fund, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, and its state-controlled airline, Etihad.⁴

In addition to selling a positive image of the country in European areas and on television sets around the world, the teams also travel to the relevant country for training camps and other publicity tours, such as the recent PSG spring tour of Qatar with its superstars Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappé, and Neymar (da Silva Santos).⁵ These hyper-mediated tours are a way to broadcast a particular image of the country as modern, while also promoting the national airlines, Qatar Airways, Emirates, or Etihad respectively.

Beyond sponsoring European football teams, the Gulf airlines, sovereign wealth funds, and royal family members sponsor other sports along a similar pattern, including cycling, sailing, rugby, cricket, tennis, and wrestling. Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have are also now home to major Formula 1 and Formula E races. And, of course, Qatar will host the 2022 FIFA World Cup after more than a decade of building new stadiums and revamping the country's urban infrastructure. In all cases, the backers in the relevant country justify their investments at home as a way to grow local economies by promoting tourism and related business opportunities – including developing the new infrastructure needed to host events and tourists alike.

National boosterism is hard to assess, though, and concrete data about the “effectiveness” of sponsor deals is elusive. But even at the symbolic level, international media consistently cast doubt on the positive narrative that these Gulf sport sponsorships have sought to advance – most often using the exceptional reach of sports to reinscribe Orientalist ideas about the region.⁶ Indeed, the intense political fights that have embroiled teams like Bayern Munich and Newcastle as a direct result of taking Gulf money show that sponsoring sports has no reliable way of convincing the public of the positive image that the sponsors supposedly desire.⁷

The challenge of Gulf PR's uptake in the West has also been illustrated by Amnesty International's campaign “Qatar World Cup of Shame,” and the flurry of press the organization has continued to generate around workers' rights issues in Qatar through its sustained focus on the World Cup.⁸ Likewise, one *Guardian* newspaper article that attracted huge press in its own right, misleadingly implied that 6500 worker deaths in the country as being the direct result of World Cup preparations, whereas the numbers cited were actually from any and all work in the country since 2010.⁹ This misattribution may not change the political significance of the story for some, but the speed with which the story was picked up and recirculated in other outlets as thousands of *workers dying to build Qatar's stadiums* suggests that the country's boosterist efforts through sport have failed miserably. Indeed, the Western backlash against the Gulf sports sponsorship has been so intense that one begins to wonder, why do it all?

III. The sports sponsorship bandwagon

Show UEFA Surrendered Without a Fight, 2019; Ford and McKinnon, *Messi, PSG, Qatar, FFP, Sportswashing and Geopolitics: Quo Vadis, Football?*, 2021.

⁴ Koch, *The Geopolitics of Gulf Sport Sponsorship*, 2020; Koch, *Global Sport and Gulf's Sovereign Wealth Funds*, 2022,

⁵ *The Peninsula*, *Messi, Neymar and Mbappe Head to Qatar in May for PSG Spring Tour*, 2022.

⁶ Vora and Koch, *The World Cup and Migration: Looking ahead to Qatar 2022*, 2018.

⁷ Jones, *Bayern Munich AGM Gets Heated over Qatar Airways Deal*, 2021; Smith, *Saudi Arabia, Newcastle and Soccer's Worship of Money*, 2021.

⁸ Amnesty International, *Qatar World Cup of Shame*, 2016; Amnesty International, *Reality Check 2021: A Year to the 2022 World Cup – The State of Migrant Worker's Rights in Qatar*, 2021.

⁹ Patisson and McIntyre, *Revealed: 6,500 Migrant Workers Have Died in Qatar since World Cup Awarded*, 2021.

How does sports sponsorship relate to intraregional relations in the Arabian Peninsula? There has been relatively little research on this question, but initial insights have to begin with the question of why Gulf leaders even sponsor elite teams and global sporting events in the face of significant Western backlash. In large part, this has to do with the fact that the decisionmakers in the elite sporting world are not part of the same social and political milieu as the media critics. Rather, the relevant actors in Europe and in the Gulf are all part of an elite network of individuals that are more interesting in scratching one another's backs than cowing to public pressures.

To be sure, when the pressure of fan revolts or media shaming campaigns is too high, or if governing bodies cannot afford to look away from gross violations of their own rules, then elites might slightly change course. For the most part, though, sports sponsorship deals are a means of distributing political and financial capital among a tight-knit, insular group of connected individuals. As a recent Al Jazeera Investigates report has shown, getting a glimpse into this cloistered world is both incredibly difficult and dangerous.¹⁰

It is difficult to map the competition and rivalries among the Gulf countries that unfold behind the scenes in this black-boxed world of insider deals that connects the wealthy royal families, clubs, team directors, broadcasting companies, and institutions like FIFA, UAEFA, or UCI. The world got a unique view on some such divides, however, when Qatar was suddenly attacked by its neighbors in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2017 via a coordinated air, sea, land, and digital embargo (or “blockade” as it has been called in Qatar).¹¹ The crisis lasted until early 2021, but over the 3 ½ years that it lasted, Saudi and Emirati actors specifically targeted Qatar's interests in the sporting world. UAE leaders, for example, proposed (albeit unsuccessfully) that FIFA expand the 2022 World Cup to a 48-team tournament, such that it would make it impossible for Qatar to retain the event.

More significantly, the Qatari sovereign wealth fund-controlled sports media company, beIN Media, which held Premier League's broadcast rights in the Middle East, was kicked out of Saudi Arabia and then subjected to a coordinated pirate broadcast distribution network, “beoutQ.”¹² Qatar filed a claim with the World Trade Organization, which held Saudi Arabia responsible for infringing on intellectual property rights and helping to breach international piracy laws. Qatar's leaders also fought back against the Saudi aggression by using the beIN piracy issue to block the Saudi PIF acquisition of Newcastle United. After diplomatic ties between the two countries were restored in January 2021, Qatari opposition quickly dissipated and the deal eventually went forward.¹³ Of course, Qatari opposition was not the only thing standing in the way – the Premier League also had to (dubiously) decree that the PIF purchase did not amount to the Saudi state's control of the club.

As sensational as some of the recent intraregional disputes have been, it is notable that there has actually been far more cooperation and learning across the Gulf countries in terms of sports sponsorship. As in nearly all sectors of business and politics in the Arabian Peninsula, the sports industry has a dense network of consultants who work in all the Gulf countries and bring with them a standard repertoire of business plans, PR strategies, and of course, personal connections to service Gulf clients' demands. Whether it is for setting up a club acquisition or hosting a major event, elites and their allies learn from one another via these consultants, brand managers, and other event planners. Some of them also able to build a reputation on the basis of a high-profile deal, like the British businesswoman Amanda Staveley, who helped arrange Sheikh Mansour's acquisition of Manchester City, and was later brought in to help with the Saudi PIF acquisition of Newcastle.¹⁴

¹⁰ Harrison and Al Jazeera Investigative Unit, *Investigation Reveals How Football Can be Used to Launder Money*, 2021.

¹¹ For a concise introduction to the conflict, see Bianco and Stansfield, *The Intra-GCC Crises: Mapping GCC Fragmentation after 2011*, 2018.

¹² LeMay, *Politics and Pirates: Sports Broadcasting in the Middle East*, 2022.

¹³ Gardner, *Newcastle Takeover Edges Closer after TV Piracy Row is Resolved*, 2021.

¹⁴ Pollitt, *The Magpie Prince: Why Does MbS Want to Buy Newcastle United?*, 2020.

From the outside, the sports sponsorship bandwagon in the Gulf appears to many as local leaders egotistically wanting to copy the success of their neighbors. The PIF Newcastle news, for example, was described as evidence that “Riyadh wanted a piece of the action,”¹⁵ or that “Saudi Arabia has long been jealous of its arch rival Qatar’s involvement in Paris Saint-Germain football club, and the involvement of a United Arab Emirates consortium in Manchester City”¹⁶ or that “Mohammed bin Salman is very jealous of his counterparts in Qatar and the UAE.”¹⁷ It is impossible to say whether these statements are true or not, though they ring true because they resonate with the popular image of Gulf leaders as being a kind of backward nouveau riche that has been a perennial thread to Orientalist narratives about the region in the West.¹⁸ And of course, this conveniently excludes from the story the work of consultants and people like Amanda Staveley, as well as all the other European individuals and institutions that are involved in the sports industry, who are actually binding the Gulf actors together and sustaining the Gulf sports sponsorship bandwagon.¹⁹

IV. Conclusion

Viewing Gulf geopolitics through the lens of sport is also an exercise in viewing sports geopolitics through the lens of the Gulf. When we seek to understand the alliances, modes of cooperation or rivalries that shape the MENA region today, it is essential to see how intraregional and extra-regional dynamics relate to one another. The example of the Saudi PIF effort to acquire Newcastle United FC vividly illustrates this insofar as the deal’s turbulent path to approval was simultaneously about Saudi-European relations *and* Saudi-Qatar relations. As noted at the outset, intraregional and extra-regional dynamics ripple out across multiple scales.

Conflict and cooperation among Gulf actors are not always visible, though the sporting world can offer some fleeting glimpses into the elite circuits of power and money that bind the region with Europe and beyond. Included in these circuits are not just the Gulf elites, companies, and sovereign wealth funds, but also the many teams, governing bodies, competitions, coaches and athletes that have increasingly come to depend on Gulf sponsorship for their (more and less lavish) livelihoods. These actors are all implicated in the transregional circuits of power that define contemporary sports geopolitics.

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¹⁷ LSE, *Newcastle United, Mohammed bin Salman, and ‘Sportswashing’*, 2022.

¹⁸ Smith, *Market Orientalism: Cultural Economy and the Arab Gulf States*, 2015; Smith, *‘The Sheikh of Araby Rides a Cadillac’: Popular Geoeconomic Imaginations, Positional Anxiety and Nouveau Riche Territories*, 2016.

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