

LEVERAGING SPORTS FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OUTCOMES: THE CASE OF QATAR'S FIFA WORLD CUP 2022

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Abstract

In 2008, Qatar launched its "Qatar National Vision 2030" which aimed to transform the country into a sustainable and thriving knowledge-based economy. The Middle Eastern country aimed also to be attractive and to upgrade its global status. With this in mind, Qatar focused on Sports and Football in particular, to produce soft power, and the FIFA World Cup 2022 was the key element of this strategy. Therefore, this article analyzes Qatar's sports diplomacy and in particular, the strategic reasons behind the host of the FIFA World Cup 2022. There is still a lack of academic studies pointing out the interesting framework of the use of sports and Football in particular, as a diplomatic tool, and the World Cup in Qatar is a case that deserves to be studied in depth. Using descriptive analysis, this article underlines the strategic objectives and tools behind Qatar's sports diplomacy and the World Cup, by focusing on official statements, documents, speeches of Qatari leaders, and journalistic resources. The article argues that Qatar leveraged Football and the 2022 FIFA World Cup as public diplomacy tools to improve its global image. Media and broadcasting, ambassadorship, Sponsorship, the French club of Paris Saint-Germain, infrastructures and technology, and naturalizing talent were key instruments of Qatar's Football and World Cup diplomacy.

Keywords: Sports diplomacy, Qatar, Soft Power, FIFA World Cup, Country Branding

KAMU DİPLOMASİSİ SONUÇLARI İÇİN SPORDAN YARARLANMA: KATAR'IN 2022 FIFA DÜNYA KUPASI ÖRNEĞİ

Özet

2008 yılında Katar, ülkeyi sürdürülebilir ve gelişen bilgi tabanlı bir ekonomiye dönüştürmeyi amaçlayan "Katar Ulusal Vizyonu 2030" u başlattı. Orta Doğu ülkesi aynı zamanda çekici olmayı ve küresel statüsünü yükseltmeyi de hedeflemiştir. Bu amaçla Katar, yumuşak güç üretmek için spora ve özellikle de futbola odaklanmış ve 2022 FIFA Dünya Kupası bu stratejinin kilit unsuru olmuştur. Bu nedenle, bu makale Katar'ın spor diplomasisini ve özellikle de 2022 FIFA Dünya Kupası'na ev sahipliği yapmasının ardındaki stratejik nedenleri analiz etmektedir. Sporun ve özellikle de futbolun diplomatik bir araç olarak kullanılmasının ilginç çerçevesine işaret eden akademik çalışmaların eksikliği devam etmektedir ve Katar'daki Dünya Kupası derinlemesine incelenmeyi hak eden bir vakadır. Betimsel analiz kullanan bu makale, resmi açıklamalara, belgelere, Katarlı liderlerin konuşmalarına ve gazetecilik kaynaklarına odaklanarak Katar'ın spor diplomasisinin ve Dünya Kupası'nın arkasındaki stratejik hedeflerin ve araçların altını çizmektedir. Makale, Katar'ın küresel imajını iyileştirmek için futbol ve 2022 FIFA Dünya Kupası'nı kamu diplomasisi araçları olarak kullandığını savunmaktadır. Medya ve yayıncılık, büyükelçilik, sponsorluk, Fransız kulübü Paris Saint-Germain, altyapı ve teknoloji ve yeteneklerin vatandaşlığa alınması Katar'ın futbol ve Dünya Kupası diplomasisinin kilit araçlarıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Spor diplomasisi, Qatar, Yumuşak Güç, FIFA Dünya Kupası, Country Branding

1. INTRODUCTION

Qatar's diplomatic proactiveness during the recent decades logically attracts the attention of IR scholars. This small country located in the Gulf created a diplomatic paradigm that enable it to "survive" and emerge among international relations actors. In 2008, Qatar launched its "Qatar National Vision 2030" which aimed

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to transform the country into a sustainable and thriving knowledge-based economy (Jewell, 2022). Qatari political leaders shaped a proactive foreign policy that not only opened opportunities to diversify the country's economy but also to strengthen its reputation and prestige. With this in mind, Qatar particularly focused on Sports and the host of sports events as diplomatic tools. The "diplomatization" of sports is not new in countries' foreign policy. The literature on this issue already emphasized the use of "ping-pong diplomacy" for the United States to restart diplomatic ties with China in the middle of the Cold War. "Cricket diplomacy" also was a tool of peacebuilding between India and Pakistan. Recently, the use of sports became more strategic for countries' reputation and international prestige. Sports are now a soft power tool that enables a nation to display its attractive values to shape the perception of others for foreign policy purposes. Football has itself potential of soft power for gathering people, showing values, promoting peace, and drawing attention, through players' and teams' performance. This article aims to analyze Qatar's sports diplomacy and in particular, the strategic reasons behind the host of the World Cup 2022. There is still a lack of literature sources pointing out the interesting framework of the use of sports and Football in particular, as a diplomatic tool, and the World Cup in Qatar is a case that deserves to be analyzed in depth. This article argues that Qatar leveraged Football and the World Cup 2022 as public diplomacy tools to reinforce its attractiveness and improve its global image. Using descriptive analysis, it underlines the strategic objectives behind Qatar's sports diplomacy and the World Cup, by focusing on official statements, documents, speeches of Qatari leaders, and journalistic resources. First, this literature analyzes the concepts of public diplomacy and sports diplomacy. Second, it examines the general framework of Qatar sports diplomacy, from the objectives expressed by Qatari leaders to the organization of international sports events. The third point focuses on Football and the 2022 Football World Cup as the main manifestation of Qatar's sports diplomacy strategy and the means used to successfully leverage this event. Media and broadcasting, sponsorships and ambassadorship, the club of Paris Saint-Germain as a vitrine, infrastructures and technology, and naturalizing talent were key instruments of Qatar's Football and World Cup diplomacy. The fourth part evaluates this strategy and the diplomatic outcomes of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Sports Diplomacy can be analyzed under the umbrella of Public Diplomacy. It is conceptualized as "an element of cultural diplomacy, falling within the more general framework of public diplomacy" (Murray, 2012). Sports diplomacy swims in the strategic realm of diplomacy that enables countries to target foreign public and shape their perception. To better analyze this conceptual link, it is worth starting to examine the concept of public diplomacy across the literature.

2.1. Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy differs from the traditional secret diplomacy that was between political leaders behind walls. Traditionally, diplomacy is used to ensure state-to-state communication, solve a conflict, or strengthen peace-building. The "new diplomacy" is less state-based diplomacy and aims to be more public; it targets foreign peoples more than foreign states and involves the engagement of civil society (Chahine, 2010). For Jan Melissen, "the basic distinction between traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy is clear: the former is about relationships between the representatives of states, or other international actors; whereas

the latter targets the general public in foreign societies and more specific non-official groups, organizations, and individuals”(Melissen, 2005). The concept of public diplomacy, first emphasized by Edmund Gullion in 1965(Chahine, 2010; Özsari, 2018), became recently more fashionable and gained a more strategic camisole. Public diplomacy is firstly the way states communicate and vehiculate information to shape the perception of the foreign public or to state their position on international issues. Manuel Castells defines it as the “diplomacy of public opinion, that is, the projection of the values and ideas of the public onto the international sphere”(Castells, 2008). Communication and information are the most important elements of public diplomacy. But the latter falls also in the realm of “soft power”. Soft power is one’s ability to coopt others through culture, political values, and foreign policy(Nye, 2004). Some scholars even confuse soft power and public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is a key instrument of soft power and “tries to attract by drawing attention” to a country’s soft potential resources “through broadcasting, subsidizing cultural exports, arranging exchanges, and so forth”(Nye, 2008). But Joseph Nye emphasized that these soft power resources such as culture, values, and policies should be attractive to the target to be effective(Nye, 1990). Public diplomacy aims to brand, strengthening a country’s global reputation, its image, and its attractiveness to endear other societies and states. Alexander L. Vuving emphasized attractiveness as more determined through the soft power currencies that are: beauty (the neat resonance that is evoked when you represent ideals, values, causes, or visions), benignity (the positive attitudes that you express when you treat people, especially when you treat the client) and brilliance (the high performance that you accomplish when you do things)(Vuving, 2009). Benignity produces sympathy from the target and depends on the positive image and action you show to. Brilliance produces consideration and appreciation from your economic and technologic success for example, and reinforces also global reputation. Indeed, states need to improve their international image to not only shape a receptive environment for their foreign policies but also to brand their nation and to attract people. In this postmodern world, power is more the ability “to win hearts and minds”(Nye, 1990) than to use of hard power traditional resources as military force, economic sanctions, payments or any other coercion tools. It is less costly and more successful nowadays for state to use their positive and attractive image to achieve their objectives of national interest. Communication and information are important to shape this global image. “Information is power”, more importantly in this era of technology. “Politics in an information age ‘may ultimately be about whose story wins’”(Nye, 2008). The management of this information to broadcast is crucial to a country's reputation and determines its credibility. As abovementioned, a state needs to shape a receptive environment abroad and this purpose depends on its global reputation.

Security issues, economic attractiveness, or tourism outcomes are now linked to a country’s soft power potential that public diplomacy leverages. Thus, states need strategic tools to improve their branding and gain visibility for their public diplomacy. Sports is one of these strategic tools falling in the field of cultural diplomacy and upon which states rely to strengthen their attractiveness and visibility.

2.2. Sports Diplomacy

Sports diplomacy is underlined across the existing literature as one element of cultural diplomacy, which belongs to the field of public diplomacy(de-San-Eugenio et al., 2017; Murray, 2012; TES Diplomacy, 2022;

Trunkos & Heere, 2017). Trunkos and Heere argued that “sports diplomacy falls under public diplomacy, which is used to improve intermediate and long-term relations between states by influencing the public abroad to accomplish foreign policy goals”(Trunkos & Heere, 2017). This definition highlights the use of sports as a tool of communication in foreign policy. Joseph Nye himself argued that “popular sports can play a role in communicating values”(Nye, 2004). The Olympic games, since Ancient Greece have been used in this standpoint, allowing countries to strengthen peaceful relations through sports and the diffusion of common values (Trunkos & Heere, 2017). It is also a tool for promoting peace and strengthening or restarting diplomatic relations. In 1971, a Ping Pong tournament in Beijing enabled the United States and China to restart their diplomatic ties decades after their dissensions on the Taiwanese issue(de-San-Eugenio et al., 2017). Henri Kissinger outlined this episode of “ping-pong diplomacy”, quoting the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai when he welcomed the American players to an official reception of this tournament: “You have opened a new chapter in the relations between the American and Chinese peoples. I am sure that your budding friendship will be supported by the majority of our peoples’. The American athletes were speechless, which led the Chinese Prime Minister to conclude with ‘don't you think so?’ that triggered a round of applause”(ESSEC Sports, n.d.; Kissinger, 2012). “Cricket diplomacy” has also emerged throughout history as a key tool in the pacification of the relations between Pakistan and India(Gilani, 2021). Kobierecki & Strożek conceive sports diplomacy as “the attempts of states to normalize relations in a manner similar to the famous ping-pong diplomacy or to communicate negative messages towards other actors, for instance by boycotting sports events”(TES Diplomacy, 2022). Indeed, the boycott of sports events was used as a tool of public diplomacy throughout the Cold War and more recently. In 1956, Western countries boycotted the Sydney Olympics due to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary. The competition was also boycotted by the Arab nations of Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon after the joint British-Israel-French invasion of the Suez Channel(TRT World, 2021). In 1980, 65 nations with the United States boycotted the Olympic Games in Moscow to protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979(*The Olympic Boycott, 1980*, 2008).

Nowadays, the use of sports diplomacy is more strategic and arises from the concept of soft power. Sports is one of the most successful tools to leverage a country’s soft power potential. “As a tool of soft power, sports diplomacy is an important staple of foreign policy—used by great powers or middle powers. Sports diplomacy takes many forms. Previous research has looked at different types of sports diplomacy, for example, by examining the role of the Olympics or the World Cup”(Nygård & Gates, 2013). Sport offers a framework to share international values, to expose cultural appeal and attractive assets. It is a powerful tool to “broadcast” soft power potential that is the main purpose of public diplomacy.

“Sports can be a powerful medium to reach out and build relationships...across cultural and ethnic divides, with a positive message of shared values: values such as mutual respect, tolerance, compassion, discipline, equality of opportunity and the rule of law. In many ways, sports can be a more effective foreign policy resource than the carrot or the stick,” said the former United States Ambassador to Denmark, H.E. Jim Cain(Murray, 2012).

The use of sports as a soft power tool can be summarized into three dimensions: first, it is a strategic tool to draw attention to a country’s attractive assets to strengthen its nation branding; second, it is a means to

promote national interests; third, the potential of soft power that sport itself produces, through sports events, ambassadors and institutions allow a country to boost its international prestige and reputation.

For the first dimension, Murray argued that “by employing sports as an indirect means to foreign policy ends, the image of a state’s foreign policy can change among a public from aloof, hermetic and irrelevant to one that is innovative, effective and public (and fun even)”(Murray, 2012). China particularly used the Olympic Games in 2008 and 2022 to send the world a better image than the one he reflected on before, tarnished by human rights and democracy issues. Countries can also gain more visibility through sports media. They help anchor the construction of a national brand by conditioning media production or surpassing it through new forms of production, narration, and participation(Hutchins & Rowe, 2013). Not only broadcasting gives more visibility to a country’s narrative but also, the unprecedented growth of social media strengthened this powerful asset.

The second dimension is the use of sports as a means to influence diplomatic, intercultural, social, economic, and political national interests. Sports can be leveraged as important means for economic outcomes, for example. Not only sports are currently in an economic booming but also, they enable a country to show its economic assets, attract sponsors and investors, or promote its tourism sector. Rwanda has used its partnerships with the European clubs of Arsenal and Paris Saint-Germain to promote its tourism sector through the mention of “Visit Rwanda” on their kits(Lô, 2021). That is also the case for Azerbaijan which leverages international sports events to improve its touristic attractiveness. The country hosted the inaugural European Games in 2015, the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Baku since 2017, and the final of the UEFA Europa League in 2019. “Each of these events strengthens Azerbaijan's place on the world map and creates the conditions for boosting tourism,” said Azerbaijan's Minister of Sport Azad Rahimov(France 24, 2019).

The third dimension is the own soft power potential of sports through its means. Sports events are the most popular and watched events. The Super Bowl, the NBA finals, the Olympics, and the FIFA world cup are sports events followed around the world and offer to host countries and participants platforms to show their cultural attractiveness. Also, through sponsors, government and private contracts, and tourism, these events can earn lots of money for both the government and private businesses(Trunkos & Heere, 2017). Athletes and teams are also important. FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, or Manchester United, for instance, are attractive and possess fans around the world. They act as ambassadors of their countries and reinforce their branding. Popular athletes are also key elements of sports diplomacy. Athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo or Neymar influence young people and serve as role models(Özsari, 2018). They have the potential of endearing people to love what they love, to wear what they wear or to go where they go, and the power of gathering people from different countries. “The consultancy firm Portland considers the amount of Olympic hardware of a country’s athletes in its *Global Soft Power Ranking 2019* as an indicator of the nation’s socio-cultural prestige”(Elias, 2021). Performance is also important both for athletes/teams and their nation. In 2002, Senegal for example, gained in attractiveness after its victory against France (0-1) in the opening match of the World Cup and its achievement to reach the quarterfinals for its first participation(World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2004). Another sports element that reinforces its influence is sports organizations. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), which organizes the modern Olympic Games; the Fédération

Internationale de Football (FIFA), which organizes the largest, most well-known global sports event, the Football World Cup; and International Tennis Federation (ITF), which includes 205 national tennis federations, are prominent sports organizations that can have greater international influence larger than states. The former FIFA president Sepp Blatter said:

“FIFA is no longer merely an institution that runs our sport. It has now taken on a social, cultural, political, and sporting dimension in the struggle to educate children and defeat poverty. At the same time, it has also become a powerful economic phenomenon.... Football can move mountains.” (Murray, 2012).

To summarize this potential influence of Sports, Hamad Ben-Khalifa Al-Thani, Emir of Qatar, said in 2010: “It is more important to have a reputation at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) than at the United Nations (UN)” (ESSEC Sports, n.d.). These words show to what extent sports became important in the vision of Qatar and its foreign policy. Since the early 2000s, Doha has strengthened its image as a sports hub. Qatar notably hosted important international sports events and reinforced its sportive infrastructures. Behind these efforts, there is the strategic standpoint of leveraging sports for public diplomacy outcomes. The following part draws a general framework of Qatar sports diplomacy from the objectives expressed by political leaders to the manifestations.

3. GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF QATAR’S SPORTS DIPLOMACY: OBJECTIVES AND MANIFESTATIONS

As a small country frequently under the shadows of its neighbors in the Arabic Gulf, Qatar aimed since the early 2000s to go out of its “autarchy” and increase its global prestige, through economic and diplomatic outreach. The political shift can even be dated to the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 by Iraq (Dorsey, 2022). The country was only able to be liberated after the intervention of a US-led military international coalition. This war showed the hard power limits of these small countries and the then Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani thought that the best strategy to survive for Qatar was to invest in soft power. “Mr. Al Thani recognized that, like Kuwait, his country with a citizenry of 300,000, sandwiched between two regional behemoths, Iran and Saudi Arabia, would never be able to fend off a conventional military attack on its territory, no matter how much and how sophisticated the weaponry is that it acquires. To ensure that Qatar was relevant to the international community and had the necessary public empathy to support intervention on the Gulf state’s behalf in a time of need, Mr. Al Thani concluded that Qatar’s defense strategy would have to focus on soft rather than hard power” (Dorsey, 2022). Alongside this political purpose, Doha also aimed to diversify its economy which is mainly boosted by its natural resources such as oil and gas.

In 2008, Qatar launched its main foreign policy strategy named “Qatar National Vision 2030” (QNV30). “Qatar’s National Vision aims that – by 2030 – Qatar becomes an advanced society capable of sustaining its development and providing a high standard of living for its people. Qatar’s National Vision defines the long-term goals for the country and provides a framework in which national strategies and implementation plans can be developed,” (Qatar National Vision 2030, 2008). The key objectives of this new Vision are economic growth, social development, and environmental management. Behind the scene, Doha implemented a multidimensional diplomacy that aims to upgrade national branding, and its global image

and to gain diplomatic prestige. To achieve these goals, the government clearly identified Sports as a diplomatic niche. “Sport is an integral part of our drive to strengthen the brand Qatar. Sports diplomacy is an important part of our diplomatic work, insofar as sport is a powerful communications tool that can support international efforts to strengthen and renew diplomatic relations in times of crisis,” said Dr. Al-Muftah the Ambassador of Qatar at the United Nations (Jewell, 2022). Qatar also implemented its Sports Sector Strategy 2011-2016, which is included as one of 14 key sectors in the QNV2030. According to this strategy also, Qatar sees sports as an important tool to achieve its goals both domestically and internationally (Søyland & Moriconi, 2022). As a tool of public diplomacy, sports offered the country the opportunity to strengthen its soft power. The goal is to show to the rest of the world the attractive side of the country through sportive events and tools, far from the image of a state linked to terrorism¹, lack of democracy, and human rights issues, as is the case of most of Middle East countries (CEP, 2022). “Qatar wants to acquire certain glamour to differentiate itself from its neighboring countries by being a center of sporting excellence” (Almaskati, 2014). The strategy also lies in gaining an important level within international organizations, to be a key player in international peace-building, promoting universal values without hiding its own Islamic and conservative culture. “The State of Qatar is one of the sponsors of the UN resolution on sports for development and peace, highlighting the importance of Sports in enhancing development, peace, respect, and tolerance, achieving an active and healthy community. Therefore, the State of Qatar gives greater importance to sports, through hosting numerous international sports events,” said the Government (MFA, n.d.). Behind this goal for Qatar branding, there are also economic and sportive expectations. Qatar has identified sports as an industry for investment but wants to be also an international sports hub. “For Qatar, sports diplomacy is a major contributor to the economy, job creation, and the international appeal of Qatar. The investments we have made and the projects we are rolling out in the sports sector, reinforce our national brand, and are bolstering our global position,” said Dr. Al-Muftah (Jewell, 2022). Thus, Qatar implemented its sports diplomacy in general through: hosting sportive events, naturalization of athletes and investing in formation for sportive performances, and linking its images to sportive ambassadors and clubs.

Since 2005, to strengthen its status as an international sports hub, Qatar hosted more than 500 sports events, including the 2006 Asian Games, the 2015 Men’s Handball World Championship, the 2015 AIBA World Boxing Championship, the 48th Artistic Gymnastics World Championships, the International Handball Federation Super Globe, the 2019 ANOC World Beach Games, the FIFA Club World Cup Qatar 2019 and 2020, the IJF Masters 2020; annual international tournaments such as ExxonMobil Qatar Open (tennis), the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters (golf) and the MotoGP Superbike Championship. (GCO, n.d.). The country was also the venue of the FIFA Arab Cup in 2021, as a repetition before the Football World Cup 2022. Qatar also hosted its first Formula One Grand Prix in November 2021 and will host the FIA World Endurance Championship from 2024 to 2029.

With a small population and a restricted potential of Qatari-born athletes, the country has tremendously bet on naturalization and investing in the long-term development of athletes. For instance, the Qatari delegation

¹ Qatar’s role as the FIFA World Cup’s host has been the subject of international criticism because of Qatar’s ties to international extremists and terrorism sponsors such as the Taliban, Hamas, and Iran.

at the Olympic Games of Rio in 2016 was composed of 39 athletes of which 23 were not Qatari-born athletes (13 from Nigeria and Senegal)(Elias, 2021). Article 6 of the emirate's nationality law states that Qatari citizenship "may be granted to those who have rendered great service to the country, or who have particular skills the country needs, or students who excel by showing promising scientific ability. Based on the requirements of the public interest, Qatari nationality may be granted in such cases to the persons concerned, who may also retain their original nationality"(Elias, 2021). This mechanism enabled the country to improve its performance at international tournaments. The 2015 Men's Handball World Championship that Doha hosted, showed the success of this strategy. Qatar has never been among World's best Handball nations but finished at second place in this tournament, thanks to the naturalization of international performant athletes that already played for Spain (Borja Vidal), France (Bertrand Roiné) among others(Elias, 2021). On the other hand, in addition to modern infrastructures, Qatar relies on the Aspire Academy created in 2004 and which focuses on the training and education of talented young players. "To drive progress in sport and to support Qatar's global sports ambitions, in 2008, the Emir's Resolution N°. 1, established the Aspire Zone. It consists of three institutions, namely, the Aspire Academy, Aspetar, and Aspire Logistics," said Dr. Al-Muftah(Jewell, 2022). "Each year, Aspire engages more than 6,000 young children (ages 6–12) through sport and football skill development and talent identification programmes throughout the country. The most talented children are offered scholarships to join Aspire between the age of 12 to 18 and develop in the Academy's "core" sports (football, athletics, squash, table tennis, and fencing) as well as in federation sports"(GCO, n.d.). The strategy of naturalization, even though it was successful for Qatar's performance, was differently perceived. Indeed, it raised some criticisms and damaged Qatar's credible success story. The success of Mutaz Essa Barshim a Qatari-born athlete, who won the silver medal at the London Olympics in 2012 and Rio Olympics in 2016, questioned also the effectiveness of the naturalization policy. Thus, the development of talented young players through the Aspire Academy became more supported by the country.

The main reason for Qatar's use of sports as a diplomatic tool is to increase its visibility. For this purpose, hosting sports events and improving performances were not enough. Doha has built a commercial and marketing empire to improve its visibility, attractiveness, and credibility, notably through Qatar Sports Investment, a branch of Qatar's sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA). Qatar Airways and Qatar Foundation also became part of Qatar's branding strategy, particularly through the sponsorship of important football clubs and events(Søyland & Moriconi, 2022). Qatar also linked itself to famous stars of different sportive disciplines, to surf on their attractiveness and generate sympathy from world sports fans. This strategy is more felt in Football and around the World Cup 2022 that Qatar leveraged as the key element of its sports diplomacy.

4. LEVERAGING FOOTBALL AND THE 2022 FIFA WORLD CUP FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OUTCOMES

Qatar won the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup in December 2010. This bid was the main sign of the entry of Qatar into the world of football. As the most famous sport in the world, football is a showcase for every nation to gain visibility, display its values and internal touristic assets, but also to attract large scope

of fans and international attention. The World Cup 2022 was thus the milestone of Qatar's sports diplomacy strategy through which the country would improve its international image and global reputation. But as a Middle East country with a monarchic political system and having links with radical Islamist groups in addition to the issues of human rights, Qatar's objective was first to secure the bid to host the competition and to respond to criticisms by improving its policies through the World Cup. Thus, Doha invested in media and broadcasting, sponsorships and ambassadorship, the club of Paris Saint-Germain as a vitrine, infrastructures and technology, and naturalizing talents.

4.1. Sponsorships, ambassadorship, and Paris Saint-Germain as an international vitrine

Qatar has notably surfed on the own soft power potential of sports from players and clubs to legitimize its bid to host the World Cup and to be a credible international sports hub. Qatar Foundation and QSI were key elements of Qatar's branding and legitimacy by linking its image to important clubs and ambassadors. In May 2011, QSI bought 70% of the club of the French capital Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), before acquiring the total shares of the club in 2012. PSG became the vitrine of Qatar in world football and a tool to reinforce the Qatar brand. The emirate showed through the club its unlimited economic potential, recruiting stars like David Beckham, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Javier Pastore, and later, Kylian Mbappé and Neymar, breaking even the transfer record with a transfer cost of 222 million euros to recruit the Brazilian from Barcelona. Finally, Leo Messi joined also the club from Barcelona in the summer of 2021. According to *Transfermarkt*, PSG has purchased players for more than one billion euros under the Qatari direction. All of these stars became a part of Qatar's branding, wearing the PSG kits with the mention of "Qatar Airways" as the main sponsor. In addition, Qatar recruited famous footballers in its national League, such as Xavi Hernandez, Samuel Eto'o, and Wesley Sneijder. The Spaniard, 2010 World Cup Champion who played in Al-Sadd (2015-2019) before becoming the coach (2019-2021), supported the promotion of the World Cup 2022 in Qatar. "It will be a historic Cup, without a doubt. People are going to be surprised at what the country is like. In general, there are a lot of prejudices and a lot of unfounded criticism. Qatar has everything; it is a small, hospitable, and generous country," he said (Eltayeb, 2022; Søyland & Moriconi, 2022). Sneijder also plaided in favor of Doha. "From the moment I arrived here, I was really impressed. I'd already been told all the stories from the people that I know who have lived here or still play here (...). They told me a lot about Qatar, but since day one I have been impressed", he said (Søyland & Moriconi, 2022). In addition, Qatar Foundation, Qatar Airways, and Qatar Tourism Authority have become sponsors of FC Barcelona (2011-2017), AS Roma (2018-2021), and Bayern Munich (2018-2023). In addition to these partnerships, Doha also engaged Global Qatar Legacy Ambassadors. "Each ambassador plays a unique role in communicating our vision for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™ and its legacy programmes. They embrace the opportunity to bring east and west together by showcasing the beauty of Qatar and the Arab world, the warmth of our people, the richness of our cultural heritage and our abundant hospitality" (*Global Ambassadors / Qatar 2022™*, n.d.). For such a role, in addition to Xavi, David Beckham, and Eto'o, football celebrities like Tim Cahill, Cafu, Ronald de Boer and Zinedine Zidane have been chosen. To improve its legitimacy, Qatar has also gained important role at the international sportive organization. In 2018, the Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al -Thani was re-elected as a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Nasser Al-Khelaifi, CEO of PSG since 2011 and Chairman of QSI became the Chairman of the

European Club Association (ECA) in April 2021. He is also the Chief Executive of BeIN Sports which became an influencing sports media channel.

4.2. Media and broadcasting

In 2012, Qatar launched BeIN Sports to succeed Al Jazeera Sports. The media became the main sports broadcaster in the Middle East and North Africa across 24 countries. BeIN sports holds the broadcasting rights for the FIFA World Cup, the FIFA Clubs World Cup, UEFA Champions League Europa League, English Premier League, Spanish La Liga, Italian Serie A, French Ligue 1, German Bundesliga, and several other football leagues and cups(Søyland & Moriconi, 2022). The main purpose of this media was to acquire the rights to the FIFA World Cup 2022 and to be also a key media in the sports channel maps. It also holds other major sports competition rights in France, Canada, and USA. Youssef Al Obaidly, CEO of BeIN Media Group in France, expressed the aim to go beyond the World Cup 2022. “The World Cup is just the beginning of our ambitions. We’re in this for the long haul. Anyone who says otherwise is out of touch with this industry. You only have to look at our acquisitions and rights buyouts, he said”(Cassini & Martel, 2022). The FIFA World Cup in Qatar broke all media records. BeIN Sports reached a billion cumulative views with the opening ceremony and first round of group-stage matches. The media revealed at the end of the competition a record of more than 5.4 billion cumulative views throughout the month-long tournament in the MENA and 1.1 billion views on its official social media channels(Zawya, n.d.).

4.3. Investing in infrastructures and technology for brilliance

Qatar’s purpose through the host of the World Cup, the first one in the Arabic world, was to show a face of a modern Arab Middle Eastern country, capable to be a sports hub, and that enjoys technological modern facilities. “In light of our continuous preparations for the tournament, we are sure that fans here in Qatar and around the world will enjoy an impressive and unparalleled version of the World Cup”, said Maryam Hamad al-Muftah, Executive Director of ICT at the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (SC), before the World Cup(Chacko, 2022). The economic embonpoint of the country enables it to not only meet the challenge of organizing the World Cup in this region but also to offer high-level technological comfort and facilities. Qatar spent more than 200 million dollars for this World Cup, largely the most expensive one, more than 15 times what Russia spent for the 2018 event(Craig, 2022). It was also the first one organized during winter due to soaring summer temperatures in Qatar. Nevertheless, even during winter the temperatures could reach more than 25 degrees Celsius and the construction of infrastructures had to deal with it. Climate challenge was also one of the concerns of Qatari leaders and could further erode the image of this event.

For the competition, eight venues have been prepared. “Thanks to the investments made over the last 15 years or so, Qatar is now home to a suite of world-class, ultra-modern sports venues,” said Dr. Al Muftah (Jewell, 2022). The Stadium 974 for example, owes its name to the number of shipping containers with which it was built (with modular steel frames also) and was able to be easily dismantled after the competition. Through this stadium, Qatar not only tried to show its commitment to sustainable construction but also expressed the aim to offer part of the infrastructure to developing countries after the World Cup, especially in Africa. Also, seven of the eight stadiums feature Advanced Cooling Tech, a revolutionary

technology that kept the atmosphere inside the stadium cooled. The atmosphere inside the stadium was at an optimum temperature for both the players and the fans(Muralidharan, 2022). Furthermore, Qatar's strategy was also to modernize its transportation infrastructures during the preparation for the World Cup. This enabled fans to travel easily to multiple venues in a single day. The stadia were within an hour of each other(Jewell, 2022). In addition to the new stadiums, a new metro system in Doha, roads, a new airport, hospitals, and hotels were built for the event. Technology in football was also improved during the competition. The semi-automated offside technology appeared with the official ball of the competition named "Al Rihla ("the journey")". A sensor installed inside the ball's center accurately determined the location of the ball at all times, and therefore is able to acknowledge the occurrence of an offside position or not(Chacko, 2022). In addition, Qatar also launched the "Bonocle device" which helped the blind and visually impaired to maximize their engagement with – and their enjoyment of – the World Cup(Chacko, 2022). The fans also enjoyed the Hayya App, which facilitated their orientation and service choices during the tournament.

4.4. Naturalization to improve performance

Qatar never participated in a World Cup before 2022. As it did with Handball, Qatar also invested in training and naturalization to build a competitive national team for the World Cup. Performance is a key element to produce soft power from football. But the national team of Qatar was not insured to be at the expected international level for the World Cup when it won the bid and before. "I had pointed out that we were limited by demographics, and he replied, 'We want players with 100% Qatari blood.' But they eventually realized that it was impossible to get results with Qataris only", said Pierre Lechantre, a French former coach of the Qatari national team in 2001-2002(Pedro, 2022). Since Qatar implemented an aggressive run to naturalization. But FIFA changed its rules in 2004 and stipulated that a player to be eligible must have been a citizen living in that country for not less than 10 years. Then, the Aspire Academy was the alternative to early detect new talents and attract them to Qatar. The academy awarded scholarships to several players to study in Qatar thus beating FIFA's 10-year- residency rule(King, 2022). There was also controversy among immigrant players that all carry "mission passports" documents that confer citizenship for sports competitions purposes(Burton, 2022). "These passports give the holders none of the benefits Qatari citizens hold: no housing assistance, no interest-free loans, no cash assistance for newlyweds, no sinecure government jobs beyond the soccer stadium", argued John McManus(Burton, 2022). However, at least ten of the national team squad during the World Cup were not Qatari-born players.

Finally, despite all these efforts, Qatar finished last of its group, with three defeats against Ecuador at the opening match, Netherlands, and Senegal. The expected performance was not achieved. But behind this failure, the challenge for Qatar was to successfully organize the World Cup and to shape a positive image in the eyes of the World. Therefore, the effectiveness of Qatar's sports diplomacy through the World Cup is analyzed below.

5. EVALUATING QATAR'S WORLD CUP DIPLOMACY

"People of different races, nationalities, faiths, and orientations will gather here in Qatar, and around screens on all continents to share the same exciting moments. How beautiful it is for people to put aside

what divides them in order to celebrate their diversity and what brings them together at the same time,” said Emir Al Thani in the opening day of the 2022 FIFA World Cup(SCDL, 2022b). The prior challenge for Qatar was to organize the event with brilliance despite all criticism since it was chosen as the hosting country. In 2021, in addition to the suspicion of corruption, an article of *The Guardian* revealed that “6500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup was awarded”(Pattison et al., 2021). This announcement completed a panoply of criticism towards the monarchy regarding the conditions of workers in general in Qatar. Amnesty International, Human Right Watch, and many Western media denounced these issues, and even some voices such as Phillip Lahm (Germany) and Eric Cantona (France), former football stars boycotted the event(Crafton, 2022). “Of the approximately 685 World Cup-related articles, 454, or 66 percent, were critical, 201, or 29 percent, were neutral, and 33, or five percent, were positive. Most of the negative articles focused on human rights”(Dorsey, 2022). The well-known “Kafala” system in Qatar was also pointed out. This system gives to the employer the right to confiscate a migrant employee’s passport and the latter has no right to change a job without the authorization of the employer(ESSEC Sports, n.d.). However, the World Cup was the pretext for Qatar to make changes that would attract attention. The government launched reforms to its Labor Law in 2020, eliminating a large part of the Kafala system(Reuters, 2020). Thus, employees can change a job without the permission of their employer and a minimum monthly wage of 1000 Qatari riyal (275 dollars) has been introduced.

However, despite criticism, Qatar successfully maintained the organization of the World Cup at home and “washed” its tarnished image. It even achieved its objectives in gaining attractiveness for touristic and diplomatic purposes, despite negativity from the Western media. The country has notably relied on the support of celebrities like David Beckham to strengthen its legitimacy. In 2019, Beckham visited Qatar’s World Cup facilities, praising the country’s “great” and “safe” stadiums and hotels(Ganji, 2022). He even appeared in a video in September 2022 to promote Qatari tourism, outlining the beauty of the country and its culture(Newmedia, 2022). Zinedine Zidane called for the focus on football before the competition. “I think we need to leave the controversy aside and let the game and the World Cup take place. For all the passionate people who just want to see soccer,” he said(Lebreton & Jamin, 2022). Giani Infantino defended also Qatar and even criticized Westerners for their “hypocrisy” just before the start of the World Cup.

“I’m European. For what we Europeans have been doing around the world in the last 3,000 years, we should be apologizing for the next 3,000 years before starting to give moral lessons to people (...) How many of these European or Western business companies, who earned millions and millions from Qatar and other countries in the region – billions every year – how many of them addressed the rights of migrant workers with the authorities? I have the answer for you: None of them! The one-sided moral lesson is just hypocrisy,” Infantino said(Mohamed, 2022).

The success story of the Qatar World Cup emanated more from the competition and visitors. Despite criticism and concerns about a “conservative autocracy”, the country welcomed one million visitors and many from western countries(Goldman & Lewis, 2022). During the competition, through social media, fans largely underlined the beauty of the country, the ambiance between people of different nations, and the amazing level of technology and infrastructures. “I just think there’s been a lot of scaremongering in the media. We’ve had a fantastic time”, said Terry John, a Wales fan(Noble & Kerr, 2022). Chris Ayres, a

financial analyst from the US, agreed that the World Cup had “brought a lot of people together”. “It’s been a fantastic experience, everything has been clean and I’ve felt completely safe everywhere,” he said (Noble & Kerr, 2022). But the competition itself generated more sympathy and seduction for Qatar. Saudi Arabia beat Argentina on the second day of the competition, creating incredible reactions around the world; Morocco eliminated Spain and Portugal to be the first African team to reach the semi-finals of the World Cup; favorite teams like Germany and Belgium did not even reach the round of sixteen. However, the bemoled for Qatar was also the elimination of its national team during the group stage. Nevertheless, Qatar could rely on the performance of the competition in general and those of the players of Paris Saint-Germain. PSG’s stars Kylian Mbappé and Leo Messi played in the final between Argentina and France. Kylian Mbappé even scored a hat-trick to enable his team to reach the penalties. But the key point of Qatar’s success story in this World Cup is the success of Leo Messi, one of the greatest of all time, who plays for PSG and won his long-awaited World Cup in Qatar. The symbol was the traditional tunic called “Besht” that Messi wore to receive the Cup from the Emir as Argentina’s captain.

This 2022 World Cup revealed Qatar as an Arab Middle East country capable to host an international event with a high level of brilliance. This success changed the view that reflects not only Qatar but all the MENA region and even Muslim countries. Qatar has successfully constructed a success story in football and gained international legitimacy and credibility. “With a staggering 78% of the vote, Qatar 2022 in Qatar has been selected as the best FIFA World Cup of this century in a BBC Sport poll” (Mukhopadhyay, 2022). Not only Doha has gained in attractiveness, but the sympathy and admiration which it generated despite criticisms strengthened its global reputation and its brand. Some scholars might call this use of the soft power of sports: “Sportswashing” (Ganji, 2022; Søyland & Moriconi, 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

Sports diplomacy consists of leveraging sports tools to generate diplomatic outcomes. In a globalized world, soft power is less costly and can be more effective than hard power and sports are among the most efficient tools to produce soft power. In its quest for international prestige and sympathy, and to shape an attractive global image, Qatar has bet on sports. Thus, the article analyzed the use of sports diplomacy as an important tool of soft power and public diplomacy in Qatar’s foreign policy. It pointed out how Qatar has leveraged Football and the FIFA World Cup to produce soft power for its branding. The Middle Eastern country built its sports diplomacy through the host of sports events, ambassadorship, sponsorships, and naturalization of talented players. Qatar has hosted more than 500 sports events in less than twenty years, becoming an international sports hub. It also built a marketing empire through the use of sportive brands like clubs and players to improve legitimacy and credibility. The 2022 FIFA World Cup was the central point of its strategy, aiming to generate, benignity, brilliance, and beauty from one of the most watched international sportive events. The high-level infrastructure and technology shown during the FIFA World Cup created admiration and sympathy from visitors and spectators around the world. Qatar enjoyed the mediatic success of the tournament broadcasted through BeIN Sports and gained in attractiveness as an Arab Middle Eastern Country. However, the issues of human rights and its political regime have earned Qatar a lot of criticism and seriously impacted its global image. Some scholars even argued that this World Cup was used by Qatar

for “Sportswashing”, that is the use of sports to frame a better image than the one its policies generate. But despite this negativity, mostly from Western media, Doha was able to appear to the world as an example of a Muslim country that reached a high level of technology and reinforced its soft power. Qatar shaped its position as a credible actor in the modernization of the Middle East and improved its global prestige. The diplomatic story success of the Qatar World Cup settled the relevancy of sports as a credible public diplomacy tool.

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