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Research Article

Politics of Sports Investment in the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: This article investigates how the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia deploy global sports investments as instruments of political economy and geopolitical strategy. Rather than framing these activities solely through the "sportswashing" lens, the study asks how and why Gulf states are influenced by one another's sports policies, and to what extent these investments transform soft power into tangible diplomatic and economic leverage. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive design, drawing on policy documents, media sources, and secondary literature to trace the evolution of Gulf sports strategies from 2008 to 2024. Using the BeIN Media case during the 2017–2021 Gulf Crisis as a focal point, it illustrates how sports assets can operate as hard-power tools in interstate disputes. The analysis situates Gulf sports investments within theoretical debates on soft power, nation branding, and the geopolitics of sport. The findings show that sports serve the Gulf monarchies not only as a means of global image management but also as mechanisms for economic diversification, regime legitimation, and regional competition. Theoretically, the study contributes to understanding how authoritarian states convert symbolic capital from sport into political power within a competitive regional order.

Keywords: Soft Power and Sports Investments, Middle East Sports, GCC Investment, Gulf Sports, Gulf Sports Investment

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Introduction

The Gulf states, primarily the United Arab Emirates(UAE), Qatar, and, more recently, Saudi Arabia, have become prominent players in the global sports industry through sponsorships, club acquisitions, and hosting mega sporting events (BBC News, 2014; Abuamer & Nassar, 2023; Atkinson, 2013; Ozanian, 2020; Ramsay, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2025). High-profile investments such as Abu Dhabi's ownership of Manchester City, Qatar's expansion of BeIN Media Group, Doha's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and Saudi Arabia's takeover of Newcastle United have made headlines worldwide (Chulov, 2021; Cunningham, 2022; Reuters, 2024; Ford, 2023; Gambrell, 2016; Ingle, 2021; Ogden, 2023; Robson, 2025). However, much of the European media discourse on these investments focuses on accusations of sportswashing, often overlooking other crucial factors, such as economic diversification, nation branding, and regional competition (Conn,

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2017; Doward, 2018; Koch, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022c; Michaelson, 2021; Wallace, 2014). While soft power is frequently cited as a motivation for Gulf sports investments, scholars note that this framework alone cannot fully explain the full range of political and economic objectives at play (Abuamer & Nassar, 2023; Devendra, 2026; Koch, 2018, 2020).

While existing scholarship has examined sports diplomacy and Gulf investments largely through the lens of soft power and nation branding, less attention has been paid to how sports-related assets may yield geopolitical leverage during political disputes. In particular, the role of sports media rights, broadcasting markets, and global sports governance in shaping interstate conflicts remains underexplored. This article addresses this gap by examining how Qatar's sports media investments, particularly through BeIN Media, created legal and market leverage during the 2017–2021 Gulf Crisis. By analyzing two cases involving international legal institutions and global football governance, the article demonstrates how sports-related assets can function as instruments of economic and institutional influence beyond symbolic soft power.

This study begins from the premise that these investments are not simply image-management exercises but form part of a wider strategic competition among rentier monarchies seeking global relevance and domestic legitimacy. This article, therefore, asks how Gulf sports investments can generate geopolitical leverage and under what conditions sports-related assets translate soft power into economic and institutional influence. By situating the analysis within broader patterns of regional policy diffusion, the study also reflects the growing convergence of sports strategies across Gulf monarchies, particularly the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Theoretically, the paper draws on three strands of scholarship: (1) the soft power and sports diplomacy literature, which illuminates how states use attraction rather than coercion (Grix & Lee, 2013; Nye, 2004); (2) the nation branding framework, which links sport to state identity and market visibility (Abdi et al., 2019; Dubinsky, 2019; Griffin, 2023; Rein & Shields, 2007); and (3) recent work on the geopolitics of sport (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Devendra, 2026; Koch, 2018, 2020, 2021), emphasizing how sports arenas become spaces of power projection. By engaging in these debates, the study situates Gulf sports investments at the intersection of political legitimacy, economic diversification, and regional rivalry. Methodologically, the research employs a qualitative, comparative design. It draws on document analysis of official "Vision" plans (e.g., Saudi Vision 2030, Qatar National Vision 2030, Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030), media statements, and secondary academic sources. This interpretive policy analysis approach allows for an examination of how sports-related initiatives function as both domestic governance tools and foreign policy instruments. The empirical analysis focuses on two cases involving Qatar's BeIN Media during the 2017–2021 Gulf Crisis.

The article proceeds in four analytical steps. The first section situates sports within broader Gulf investment strategies. The second section examines how sports assets, exemplified by BeIN Media, can be weaponized in geopolitical disputes. The third section discusses the economic rationale for Gulf sports investments, focusing on diversification and market creation. The final section explores how sport serves as a platform for nation- and leader-branding, intertwined with the region's intense intra-Gulf competition.

Situating Sports in Gulf Investments

Sports have long been recognized as a tool of soft power. Joseph S. Nye (2004) highlights the global appeal of American sports as a significant source of U.S. soft power. Similarly, sports play a role in cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and identity construction, shaping a country's image in the international arena (Doğan-Akkas, 2026; Dubinsky, 2019). The Gulf states have embraced this strategy, with Dubai branding itself as the "Sports Capital of the Middle East" (Rein & Shields, 2007, pp. 80–81). Abu Dhabi is leveraging elite sports like Formula 1 to enhance its global standing (Henderson, 2017), Qatar hosted the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the first ever held in winter to accommodate its extreme climate. Saudi Arabia, a latecomer to sports investment, has rapidly expanded its footprint, hosting Formula 1 in 2021 and securing a $650 million deal to host future races (Michaelson, 2021). More recently, and most importantly, it has won the bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup (Baycar & Quadri, 2025). In addition to hosting events, Gulf-based corporations have become major players in sports sponsorship. Dubai's Emirates airline sponsors various sports, including football, rugby, and tennis (Koch, 2020; Emirates Airline, n.d.). Meanwhile, Qatar and Abu Dhabi have established high-profile partnerships with clubs like FC Barcelona and Manchester City (Harvey & Kimball, 2016). Beyond sponsorship, Gulf sovereign wealth funds and private investors have acquired stakes in European football, with notable examples including Abu Dhabi's Manchester City, Qatar's Paris Saint-Germain, and Saudi Arabia's Newcastle United (Baycar, 2021a).

While each Gulf state has pursued unique sports investment strategies, their approaches often influence one another. Saudi Arabia's recent acquisitions, such as Newcastle United, mirror earlier investments by Abu Dhabi and Doha in Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain. Similarly, the Saudi push to host major tournaments, including the Formula 1 and World Cup, and launch a sports media empire reflects the successes of its Gulf neighbors (Baycar, 2021b; Baycar & Quadri, 2025). These investments are also tied to broader state-driven development agendas (Abuamer & Nassar, 2023; Chadwick & Widdop, 2022). National strategies, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Abu Dhabi's Economic Vision 2030, and Qatar's National Vision 2030, emphasize economic diversification, social transformation, and the development of a vibrant private sector (Devendra, 2026; Mogielnicki, 2022). Encouraging youth engagement in sports aligns with these objectives, particularly as Gulf states face the challenge of integrating young populations into the private sector (Quilliam & Thompson, 2019). Gulf investments in sports, both at home and abroad, appeal to youth and encourage a healthier, more physically active lifestyle; this is also reflected in Vision programs such as Saudi Arabia's 2030 (Akkas, 2021; Chadwick & Widdop, 2022; Thompson, 2019).

Most sports hosting events, investments, and sponsorships are driven by state politics, as Grix and his colleagues (2019) demonstrate in the case of Qatar. This study examines why and how three Gulf states, the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, invest in European and global sports. It argues that, beyond the dominant sportswashing narrative, these investments are driven by multiple strategic motivations, including economic diversification, elite influence, and domestic social transformation, as examined by Devendra (2026) as well. At the same time, these states display significant convergence, shaped by shared economic structures, hydrocarbon dependence, geopolitical dynamics, and patterns of regional imitation. Understanding this combination of strategic diversification and structural similarity is essential for fully grasping the significance of Gulf involvement in global sports (Abuamer & Nassar, 2023).

Sports Investments as Geopolitical Leverage

While sports diplomacy is commonly analyzed through the lens of soft power, its effects may extend beyond the traditional logic of attraction (Koch, 2018, 2020). Soft power, as conceptualized by Nye (2004), refers to shaping others' preferences through appeal and legitimacy rather than coercion. In the context of sports, this has often been associated with improving national image and increasing international visibility (Grix et al., 2019; Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Grix & Lee, 2013). However, the growing integration of sports investments with media rights, legal institutions, and global sports governance suggests that these assets can also yield geopolitical leverage. In this context, the form of power generated by sports assets is not military hard power but rather institutional and economic leverage. Control over broadcasting markets, access to international legal institutions, and influence within sports governance bodies can enable states to exert pressure on rivals through regulatory, legal, and market mechanisms.

This dynamic became particularly visible during the 2017–2021 Gulf Crisis. Qatar's investments in sports media, especially through BeIN Media Group, provided resources that extended beyond image-building and could be used strategically within regional competition. Two cases illustrate this process. The first concerns the dispute over sports broadcasting piracy during the Gulf Crisis, where BeIN mobilized international legal mechanisms, including a case before the World Trade Organization. The second concerns the controversy surrounding Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund's attempted acquisition of Newcastle United in the Premier League. Together, these cases show that sports-related assets may function not only as instruments of image-building but also as sources of legal, economic, and institutional leverage in interstate rivalry.

The case of BeIN Media at the World Trade Organization during the Gulf Crisis

The use of sports as a soft power tool is well established in the literature, often discussed in the context of diplomacy, nation branding, and tourism promotion (Doğan-Akkas, 2023; Dubinsky, 2019; Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Grix & Lee, 2013; Korneeva, 2016; Rein & Shields, 2007). However, sports investments can also serve strategic geopolitical functions, as demonstrated by Qatar's BeIN Media Group, which played a significant role during the Gulf Crisis. The Gulf Crisis, a diplomatic rift between Qatar and its neighbors (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt), began in 2017 and lasted until January 2021. This crisis led to a land, sea, and air blockade of Qatar.

Due to the isolation it faced, Qatar sought any option to survive and avoid surrender. In such an atmosphere, BeIN media strengthened Qatar's case during one of the most troubling events since its independence. While Qatar sued these countries in different international organizations and courts, the BeIN case troubled Saudi Arabia before the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Chadwick & Widdop, 2022; Koch, 2022b). Following the announcement of the blockade, Saudi Arabia launched a pirate streaming service called BeoutQ (referring to Be Out Qatar) and illegally broadcast BeIN Media streams (Al Jazeera, 2020). This move was not merely economic but also symbolic, aiming to undermine Qatari influence in regional sports broadcasting. In response, Qatar filed a complaint with the WTO under the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Agreement (TRIPS) of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The case, with losses estimated at $1 billion, became a significant pressure point on Saudi Arabia (Cuthbertson, 2018; LaMay, 2022).

The dispute was implicitly addressed in the Al-Ula Declaration. As one of the active legal confrontations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia at the time, the WTO case over sports broadcasting piracy constituted part of the broader set of claims and disputes that the declaration committed the parties to suspend and ultimately terminate:

> All claims, complaints, measures, protests, objections, and disputes shall be terminated at the end of the first year from the date of signature of the present Declaration. Such claims, complaints, measures, protests, objections and disputes shall be suspended or frozen with the entities in question (i.e. the courts, agencies, committees, authorities and other domestic, regional and international entities) within one week of the signature of the present Declaration (UN, 2021, pp. 7–8).

Following the 2021 Al-Ula Declaration that ended the Gulf Crisis, Qatar and Saudi Arabia suspended their ongoing proceedings at the World Trade Organization. In January 2022, both countries notified the WTO that they were mutually suspending their remaining legal requests related to the piracy dispute. Saudi Arabia withdrew its appeal against the WTO panel's 2020 ruling, which had found that Riyadh breached international intellectual property rules by failing to take action against the pirate broadcaster BeoutQ, while Qatar suspended its request for the formal adoption of the ruling (Mills, 2022). This development illustrates how the sports broadcasting dispute had become intertwined with broader diplomatic negotiations, demonstrating that sports media assets could generate legal and reputational leverage within regional geopolitical conflicts.

The case of BeIN Media in the Newcastle United Case: Sports governance and market influence

BeIN Media's influence was further demonstrated during the attempted acquisition of the English Premier League (EPL) club Newcastle United by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF). As the holder of EPL broadcasting rights in the Middle East and North Africa, BeIN opposed the deal and raised concerns about Saudi Arabia's alleged support for the pirate broadcaster BeoutQ, which had illegally retransmitted BeIN's sports content during the Gulf Crisis (Koch, 2022b, 2022c). BeIN's chief executive, Yousef Al-Obaidly, wrote to Premier League clubs and league officials, urging them to scrutinize the takeover and to press the league to fully investigate the potential owners, arguing that the alleged facilitation of the BeoutQ piracy network had caused significant damage to the league's commercial revenues and the intellectual property rights of its broadcast partners (Kennedy, 2021; Roan, 2020).

These concerns carried substantial economic weight. At the time, BeIN was one of the Premier League's largest overseas broadcasting partners, holding a regional broadcasting agreement in the Middle East and North Africa worth approximately £400–500 million for three years (Carp, 2020; Roan, 2020). More broadly, television rights form the backbone of the Premier League's global revenue model, generating billions of dollars in income and making allegations of large-scale piracy a serious concern for league authorities (Dawkins, 2020).

Amid these controversies, the Premier League delayed approval of the acquisition, and in 2020, the Saudi-led consortium temporarily withdrew from negotiations (Liew, 2020). During this period, BeIN publicly argued that Saudi Arabia had enabled what it described as industrial-scale piracy of its broadcasts, further intensifying scrutiny of the proposed takeover (Ford, 2023). The acquisition was eventually completed only after diplomatic relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia improved, and Riyadh lifted its ban on BeIN Sports in 2021 (France 24, 2021). This episode illustrates how control over sports broadcasting rights can shape decision-making within global sports governance and influence major financial transactions in international football.

Moreover, upon examining the exact reasons behind Saudi Arabia's BeoutQ initiative, the importance of sports in the Gulf will become readily apparent. The importance of sports broadcasting in the Gulf is reflected in the deep integration of football into Saudi society. Football is not just entertainment but a key part of public life. As one Saudi football fan put it, "Soccer is what keeps us, supporters, together at all times. Once we start discussing soccer, we inevitably end up talking about education, life, and everything. It is like a starting point" (Castelier, 2021). The Saudi government's push for an alternative to BeIN Media underscores the need for regional control over sports content.

The two BeIN Media cases illustrate that Gulf sports investments extend beyond prestige and soft power projection, serving the state's strategic interests. Qatar leveraged its dominance in sports broadcasting as a diplomatic tool, influencing regional disputes and global sports governance. These cases challenge the simplistic notion that Gulf investments in sports are purely about whitewashing and highlight their broader geopolitical significance, as Qatar's investment in BeIN Sports has challenged Saudi Arabia in at least two cases during one of the crucial periods mentioned above.

Other sports investments can also serve as geopolitical gains for Qatar. As Dorin Rânceanu's (2015) study shows, hosting a mega event (in this case, the World Cup in Qatar) creates opportunities for the state to transform soft power into hard power. This transformation often takes place through network building with great power states and the accumulation of experience. Rânceanu (2015) argues that Qatar utilized soft power to ensure the safety of the 2022 mega event. Establishing interdependence with global powers to provide security and mitigate risks, helped Qatar grow stronger, which serves as an example of how soft power can complement hard power.

Sports Investments from an Economic Perspective

Aspects of sports investment and market diversification projects of the Gulf states

Beyond branding and soft power, Gulf states' investments in sports have significant economic dimensions (Al Naimi, 2022; Amara & Akindes, 2024; Henderson, 2017; Koch, 2022a). These investments are not just about prestige but also market diversification, real estate development, and long-term financial gains. Abu Dhabi's acquisition of Manchester City in 2008 for approximately $350 million is a prime example. Since then, the club has won multiple Premier League titles, and its value has skyrocketed. In 2018, Manchester City was valued at around $190 million and failed to make in to the Forbes' list of the top 20 most valuable clubs. Today, it ranks fifth, worth more than $5 billion (Teitelbaum & Knight, 2026). However, Abu Dhabi's investment extends beyond football through its ownership of Manchester City. Through the Abu Dhabi United Group, it has leveraged its ownership to secure major projects in Manchester, including a $1.2 billion real estate initiative (BBC News, 2014). The group has also expanded its football portfolio globally, owning clubs in New York, Melbourne, Mumbai, and beyond, creating a vast sports investment ecosystem (City Football Group, 2022).

Similarly, Qatar's acquisition of Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in 2011 (initially 70% of shares, later rising to full ownership) has significantly boosted the club's value. PSG was worth approximately $107 million at the time of purchase; today, it ranks as the seventh most valuable football club, worth $4.6 billion, with an annual revenue of $642 million (Teitelbaum & Knight, 2026; Rakipoğlu, 2021; Forbes, n.d.).

Koch (2020) also argues that Gulf airlines do not sign sponsorships randomly, but for economic interests. According to Koch, Gulf airlines are considering parallel routes to those of other airlines. For example, sponsorships in Manchester, Newcastle, and Asian cities are more closely tied to aviation terms and routes with growth potential.

Beyond football, Gulf states have heavily invested in sports and sports media rights. These investments are often framed as part of broader economic transformation strategies that seek to diversify national economies and enhance global economic integration (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008; The Government of Abu Dhabi, 2008; Vision 2030, n.d.). Qatar-based BeIN Media holds broadcasting rights for major global leagues across rugby, cricket, tennis, and handball. Securing these rights is significant; broadcasting the English Premier League in 24 Middle Eastern and North African countries alone has been estimated at $500 million (Hellier, 2020). While these investments are essential to economic growth and Gulf diversification plans, there are concerns about their profitability. Vincent Hogan and Patrick Massey (2021) examined whether PSG's acquisition was profitable for Qatar's sovereign wealth fund and found that the club had spent over $640 million more than necessary between 2011 and 2017. While PSG's spending secured trophies and global prominence, its direct profitability remains uncertain. Hosting mega events presents similar economic uncertainties (Koch, 2022b). Qatar projected a $20 billion boost from hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup. However, some analysts were skeptical, with critics calling the spending an "act of economic madness" unlikely to yield the expected returns (Foxman, 2021; Owen, 2021; Whiteaker, 2022).

Sports for branding

Sports have long been a powerful tool for state branding and reputation-building (Koch, 2022b, 2022a). Studies show that hosting mega sporting events significantly enhances a country's global prestige. For example, South Africa's 2010 World Cup improved its image among American audiences; the 2008 Beijing Olympics served as China's global "coming-out party"; and the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea attracted increased international attention (Abdi et al., 2019). These events illustrate how sports serve as an effective medium of diplomacy and soft power. Recognizing this potential, Gulf states have actively used sports to reshape their international image, positioning themselves as modern, progressive, and globally influential. Sports transcend socioeconomic barriers, making them an ideal platform for engaging foreign audiences. For instance, Qatar's hosting of the 2006 Asian Games was not merely about sports but also a strategic effort to shift perceptions, moving from being viewed as a small state to being recognized as an ambitious and responsible regional actor (Amara, 2005).

Beyond hosting events, Gulf states invest heavily in sports teams and media networks. Qatar has pursued an aggressive sports branding strategy, acquiring Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), launching BeIN Media, and securing hosting rights for over 20 major sporting tournaments, including the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Grix et al., 2019). Similarly, the UAE has strengthened its global presence through sponsorships and club acquisitions. Dubai's Emirates airline is often mistaken for a state entity, illustrating how sponsorships blur the line between corporate and national branding (Krzyzaniak, 2018). Through investments in Manchester City and other global teams, Abu Dhabi has also strategically positioned itself as a key sports investor, significantly boosting its brand value from $133 billion in 2011 to $403 billion by 2015 (Krzyzaniak, 2018). Sponsoring sports teams and athletes is a cost-effective branding method with high returns. Qatar's sponsorship deal with FC Barcelona, initially through the Qatar Foundation and later Qatar Airways, cost around $32 million annually but significantly enhanced the country's global visibility (Krzyzaniak, 2018). In 2014, Qatar's national brand value surged from $184 billion to $256 billion, a figure that this partnership also contributed to (Krzyzaniak, 2018). The choice of sponsors, Qatar Foundation, emphasizing education and culture, and Qatar Airways, branding the country as a global hub, demonstrates a strategic alignment between sports and national economic priorities. Qatar's selection of which company or organization to sponsor is strategic, as both sponsors, Qatar Foundation and Qatar Airways, have "Qatar" in their name and are also significant in branding the country (Abuamer & Nassar, 2023). Qatar Foundation helps brand Qatar as a state that invests in sport, culture, and education (just like UNICEF), and Qatar Airways positions the state as a tourist destination or transfer hub, both tools enhancing Qatar's aviation or tourism sectors.

Beyond economic investments, Gulf states brand themselves as sports-friendly nations through symbolic initiatives (Akkas, 2021). Qatar has observed a National Sports Day every February since 2012, with the Emir participating in public activities (Bukhari, 2018; Chung, 2022; Amiri Diwan, 2017; Hukoomi, n.d.). The UAE introduced a similar day in 2015, reinforcing its image as a nation that promotes sports (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education, 2016). These initiatives signal a commitment to sports and a modern, health-conscious leadership. Sports investments also play a role in leader branding. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman positions himself as a youthful, progressive reformer, appealing to the country's young population by bringing sports and entertainment into a previously restricted society (Thompson, 2021). This leader-branding strategy strengthens domestic legitimacy while enhancing Saudi Arabia's global image.

Gulf states leverage sports as a key branding tool to enhance their international reputation, attract investment, and reinforce national identity. However, while sports offer opportunities for soft power gains, they also expose states to increased global scrutiny, demonstrating the double-edged nature of sports diplomacy. For example, hosting major events invites global scrutiny, sometimes leading to what Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) term "soft disempowerment", where efforts to project soft power backfire. For example, Qatar's 2022 World Cup ignited increased criticism over human rights issues, labor conditions, and media restrictions. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's attempt to acquire Newcastle United faced resistance due to concerns over human rights abuses and "sportswashing" narratives (MacInnes, 2022; Michaelson, 2021; Smith, 2021; Amnesty International UK, 2021).

Regional Competition and Role Modeling

Gulf states closely observe and respond to one another's initiatives, producing a pattern of competitive emulation in sectors such as aviation, urban development, and sport (Koch, 2022b). Dubai has pioneered several diversification efforts due to its limited natural resources compared to those of Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Riyadh. The "Dubai Model" has set a precedent for regional development, emphasizing trade, aviation, logistics, real estate, and finance. According to Mishrif and Kapetanovic (2018b, p. 89), Dubai's model is unique due to "the scale of its economic activities, the efficiency of business and financial services, and tourism facilities". As a result, Dubai's economy is now 95% dependent on non-oil sectors, making it distinct from its Gulf neighbors (Baycar, 2020). One of the earliest diversification moves was logistics, particularly marine shipping and air transportation. Established in 1985, Emirates Airlines became the first Gulf airline to position itself as a global aviation hub. Qatar Airways (1995) and Etihad Airways (2005) followed, aiming to replicate Dubai's success (Ulrichsen, 2015). Today, Saudi Arabia seeks to enter the competition with its flagship airline as part of its Vision 2030, aiming to transform the Kingdom into a key logistics and transit hub (Cornwell, 2021). While Saudi Arabia is aggressively pushing to rival Dubai in sectors such as corporate headquarters, tourism, and real estate, analysts remain skeptical of its ability to challenge Dubai's dominance in the short term (Acar, 2021; Telci, 2021).

A similar pattern emerges in sports investments. Dubai was the first Gulf state to enter the sports sponsorship and event hosting arena, signing a sponsorship deal between Emirates Airlines and Chelsea FC in 2004 (Krzyzaniak, 2018). Abu Dhabi soon followed, acquiring Manchester City in 2008, primarily seen as a response to Dubai's growing influence in the global sports scene (Krzyzaniak, 2018). Likewise, Amara (2005) argues that Qatar's successful hosting of the 2006 Asian Games encouraged its neighbors to intensify their bids for mega events. Dubai remains a leading regional sports hub, hosting a diverse range of events, including cycling, horse racing, tennis, and cricket. The local sports industry now contributes approximately $1 billion to Dubai's economy, a significant figure given that 95% of its GDP comes from non-oil sectors (Baycar, 2021b). However, Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Riyadh increasingly position themselves as alternatives. Saudi Arabia's acquisition of Newcastle United in 2021 fits this competitive framework (Chadwick & Widdop, 2022). Mohammed bin Salman's broader strategy seeks to challenge the regional dominance of Qatar and the UAE in sports and event tourism. His ambitions extend beyond sports, Saudi Arabia has aggressively pressured multinational corporations to relocate their regional headquarters from Dubai to Riyadh or risk exclusion from state contracts (Turak, 2021). Additionally, Saudi Arabia is pursuing high-profile projects, such as the Jeddah Tower, which aims to surpass Dubai's Burj Khalifa as the world's tallest building, and its bid to host the World Expo 2030, a direct challenge to Dubai's successful hosting of Expo 2020 (Baycar, 2021b).

It can be said that Saudi Arabia's interest in capitalizing on sports was encouraged by Qatar's hosting the World Cup. Saudi Arabia recognized that a sports mega event could enhance its national branding, boost tourism, and reshape the country's global image. Moreover, it has been reported that Saudi Arabia uses Qatar's experience as a model and aims to host a similar event (The Guardian, 2023). In essence, sports investments in the Gulf are not merely about branding or soft power but are deeply tied to regional economic rivalry.

Conclusion

The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, have emerged as major investors in sports, both domestically and internationally. As one of the seven emirates of the UAE, Dubai integrated sports investments, including hosting mega events, team sponsorships, and infrastructure development, into its economic model. Unlike its neighbors Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Riyadh, which historically relied on hydrocarbon wealth, Dubai pursued a diversification strategy centered on non-oil industries. This model set a precedent, inspiring other Gulf states to adopt similar approaches. While economic diversification and regional emulation were key drivers of Gulf sports investments, soft power has also been a crucial motivation. Gulf states are seeking greater international visibility by leveraging sports to enhance their global image, attract elite networks, and solidify their reputations. However, this study also highlights that soft power is not merely about prestige, it can have tangible national security implications. The Gulf Crisis demonstrated this when BeIN Media, Qatar's sports broadcasting giant, leveraged its lobbying and legal influence against Saudi Arabia, showcasing how sports-related assets can serve as instruments of economic and institutional pressure in geopolitical conflicts.

Beyond diplomacy and branding, Gulf states also invest in sports as part of their long-term economic sustainability strategies. Their national vision projects outline ambitious plans for post-oil economies, with sports playing a crucial role in diversification efforts. These investments foster a self-sustaining sports ecosystem, stimulate new economic sectors, and enhance public health and youth engagement. In conclusion, Gulf sports investments serve multiple purposes: (1) They enhance the soft power of the states; (2) They contribute to national security by strengthening diplomatic influence; (3) They create an ecosystem that integrates sports into broader economic diversification plans; (4) They reinforce the branding of cities, states, and leaders as progressive, sports-oriented, and globally engaged. These dynamics suggest that sports investments in the Gulf are not merely about athletic competition, but are deeply intertwined with broader political, economic, and strategic objectives.

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