

Regional Sport Governance in West Asia

Rahim Zare

Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism Management, School of Management and Accounting, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.


r.zare@atu.ac.ir

 0000-0000-0000-0000

Mahdi Shariati Feizabadi

Assistant Professor, Department of Human Sciences, Technical and Vocational University, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding author).

mshariati@tvu.ac.ir

 0000-0000-0000-0000

Fernando Delgado

Professor of Communication, Lehman College, NY, USA.

Fernando.delgado@lehman.cuny.edu

 0000-0000-0000-0000

Abstract

The Islamic Awakening and the power vacuum after 2012 have been key factors motivating Arab states to invest in sport as a soft power tool to assert regional dominance. While Qatar hosted the 2022 FIFA World Cup, Saudi Arabia is set to host the 2029 Asian Winter Games and the 2034 FIFA World Cup for the first time. This study aims to explore the role of sport in governance within West Asia. In recent years, an expanding body of literature has deepened our understanding of sports in the Middle East. Under the leadership of Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia has entered a new era of sports investment but has faced accusations of 'sportswashing.' Meanwhile, Qatar and the UAE, two smaller states in the region, have played pivotal roles in supporting high-profile sporting events. This study employs qualitative content analysis to assess the achievements of the Persian Gulf States-namely the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar-in soccer. The analysis draws from articles and reports published between 2000 and 2024, sourced from scientific databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, DOAJ, and Web of Science. While sport plays a crucial role in enhancing the international prestige of the Persian Gulf States, soccer has emerged as the primary focus. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which has sought to dominate the region through soft power initiatives, particularly in soccer, Qatar has pursued a distinct strategy, positioning itself as a peacemaker and friendly nation in the Middle East.

Keywords: Middle East, Sport, Governance, Public diplomacy, Arab states.

Introduction

The Middle East is dubbed the “heart of the earth,” given that it supplies 63% of the world’s energy source (crude oil) (Shariati, Ranjbar & Monazzami, 2023). Chaos in this region is the result of soft disempowerment in the past. Soft disempowerment most commonly manifests as a result of three primary sources: (i) a nation’s contravention of international laws and rules; (ii) that nation failing to uphold international conventions or standards on global development; and (iii) the state acting in ways that have direct and negative impacts on other individual nations or communities of nations (Chadwick, Widdop & Goldman, 2023).

Sport and art are the main sources of soft power (Nye, 2011, p. 6). Nations have sought to secure the hosting rights of mega-sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup for geopolitical means, seeking to alter both internal and external audiences’ impressions and perspectives of the nation by aligning with global sporting bodies and thus growing the nation’s reputation internationally (Alhor et al., 2016).

Nye listed Switzerland and Norway as examples of states adept at “smart” power (Nye, 2011, p. 6). Norway deployed military force in addition to diplomatic and humanitarian instruments of power as part of the NATO-led intervention in Libya that ousted the Gaddafi regime in 2011. Like Norway, Qatar participated in Operation Odyssey Dawn and Operation Unified Protector, the two phases of the air campaigns, and Qatar co-chaired (with the UK) the inaugural meeting of the International Contact Group on Libya in April 2011 in the closure of the Ministry of Information and the creation of Al Jazeera in 1996, which sought to position Qatar as a nation distinct from its regional neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia (see Fig. 1).

Whilst Saudi Arabia’s sporting investments have been strategic as a mechanism for exploiting soft power and achieving geopolitical objectives, in line with prior efforts by Qatar and the UAE, both the purchase of Newcastle United and the Saudi investment firm’s creation of a new men’s professional golf circuit (amongst others) have been met with active resistance and forceful opposition within sport and media (O. Madichie, 2013). Media, Amnesty International, and athlete participants have been vocal in condemning the Saudi royal family’s perceived sportswashing, the murder of journalist *Jamal Khashoggi*, and its efforts to conceal and cleanse the nation’s human rights record. Sportswashing is the deployment of sport by a state entity for the purposes of laundering a country’s image and reputation. Countries like Qatar and Saudi

Arabia make attempts to distract people's attentions away from their crimes, political ideology, and misdemeanors by staging a global sports mega-event, buying a high-profile sports team, or engaging in a high-profile sponsorship deal (Conn, 2017). This paper addresses the primary issue of identifying the most significant soccer achievements of Arab states.

1. Soccer as a Strategic Tool: The Rise of Major Sporting Events in the Persian Gulf Region

The golden age of Kuwaiti excellence in sports came to a close with the Iraqi invasion in the 1990s. After the invasion, the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) countries shifted their tools to reposition themselves in the international arena. As a unique strategy, this projected image functioned as an alternative identity marker, distinguishing these countries from unstable states in the broader region. Hosting Sport Mega-events (SMEs) represents the first instrument to achieving this purpose. The starting point for achieving this aim was launched by Bahrain, followed by the UAE. In 2004, Bahrain started hosting Formula 1 races in Manama. In 2009, UAE's Abu Dhabi began competing with Manama in hosting Formula 1 races, followed in 2021 by KSA and Qatar, which signed partnerships with Formula 1 to host, respectively, Jeddah and Doha Grand Prix (Chadwick, Widdop & Goldman, 2023).

The emergence of sport cities and zones in Arab states, such as the UAE's Zaid Sport City and Qatar's Aspire Zone, to name just two Arab states promoting themselves as recuperative zones for sports medicine and injuries, helps attract foreign investments and well-known sports stars. Investing in sport abroad demonstrates the third strategy pursued by PGCC countries (Koch, 2020). Over the last two decades, countries in the Persian Gulf region have spent considerable sums of money investing in sport—domestically, regionally, and globally. Indeed, the Qatari government has spent US\$240 billion on preparing to stage the 2022 FIFA men's World Cup; Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund has instigated the highly controversial LIV golf series, which pays total prize money of US\$25 million per event; Abu Dhabi owns the soccer club Manchester City of the English Premier League, which has spent US\$1.7 billion on acquiring talent; it is a crucial aspect when it comes to sport participation and development of elite soccer sport in particular. Moreover, the variables of economy and different sources of revenues of countries in the region are to be taken into account in shaping countries' national and international strategies in

sport (Reiche, 2015).

The Middle East is the future of soccer; this region's soccer triangle (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) has sought to present a different image of the Middle East in the new millennium as a soccer hub rather than the cradle of energy (Miller, 2017). Soccer is viewed as a competitive advantage among the Persian Gulf states in the new millennium; the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, as Arab states of the Persian Gulf, have invested heavily in soccer (Shariati, Zare, 2022). Soccer in this region is a political tool for them to strengthen their image in the minds of the world's people.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have invested in sports to pursue the following objectives: 1) to use sports as a suitable tool to strengthen their soft power; 2) to consider investing in sports as a good lever to make themselves independent of oil revenues; and 3) to reduce the health costs and public health issues they are fighting (Karimi Firouzjaei, 2018). Adoption of a development-centered approach and use of public diplomacy tools, including sports in the Middle East, during the present century have shifted the world's perception of this region as an economically and politically turbulent region to a tourist destination for sporting events, particularly soccer matches. Prosperous states like the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have distanced themselves from the other Middle Eastern countries by developing advanced infrastructure and using soccer as a tool to attract tourists in their post-gas/oil future.

1-1. Saudi Arabia's Strategic Investment in Soccer: Enhancing Global Recognition Through Sport

Amongst the most prominent recent examples of soft power exertion through sport, Saudi Arabia's approach has been multifaceted, comprising a diverse array of property partnerships and event hosting, strategic investment in foreign sport, and new property creation. Nation branding is an important factor in international reputation management, which has gained increasing importance for nations worldwide. Since 2018, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a journey to enhance its global recognition and reputation by strategically investing in soccer (Satish, 2024).

Aramco, the world's second-largest energy company, has not only been driving Saudi Arabia's development since World War I, but its USD 700 billion investment in the Saudi Pro League and efforts to rank it among the leading ten soccer leagues in the world have encouraged some of the greatest soccer players like Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, Roberto Firmino, Kalidou Koulibaly,

N’Golo Kanté, Edouard Mendy, and Riyad Mahrez to participate in the 2023 season of this league (Amara, 2011). High-ranking members of the royal court have further extended Saudi state-funded involvement in sport through various club ownership agreements, including Spanish soccer club UD Almería (owned by royal advisor Turki Al-Sheikh), English club Sheffield United, French club FC Chateauroux, Belgian team KFCO Beerschot Wilrijk, Kerala United of India, and Al-Hilal United in the UAE (all owned by Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud).

In addition, Mohammed bin Salman’s new policies in developing sports infrastructures (including the development of NEOM as an entertainment and sports city at an estimated cost of 500 billion dollars) (Do et al., 2021) and the ever-increasing Aramco’s support of Saudi Arabia’s soccer clubs (e.g., its financial support of soccer clubs like al-Ittihad, al-Ahli, al-Nasr, and al-Hilal, and the purchase of al-Qadsiah Soccer Club) indicate the daily increase in the attention Saudi Arabia pays to its political policies on soccer. Along with Konami and Molten, Neom has recently been recognized as one of the three main financial sponsors of the AFC Champions League, demonstrating a share of Saudi Arabia’s soft power in advancing the country’s goals in soccer, especially in relation to this league. Al-Hilal Saudi FC, boasting five championships in the AFC League, is Asia’s most decorated soccer club. Indeed, bin Salman’s focus on expanding the infrastructure for sports tourism is expected to boost the Saudi Pro League’s profits to USD 480 million in 2030 (Shariati, Ranjbar & Monazzami, 2023) and change the international image of Saudi Arabia from a conservative oil-producing country to one that is open, modern, and free of ethno-religious prejudices.

1-2. Qatar’s Strategic Use of Soccer: From Global Gas Giant to World Cup Host and Beyond

While Qatar became a fully sovereign state only in 1971, since the 1990s its leadership (under the hereditary rule of the Al Thani family) has developed the country’s enormous reserves of natural gas to become a global gas giant that in 2006 surpassed Indonesia as the world’s largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG) (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022). Qatar is a gas- and oil-rich state that is going through a period of economic, political, and social transformation, driven by its long-planned staging of the World Cup. What some have seen as nation-building on an epic scale, others have dismissed as ostentation driven by vanity. Qatar is now

a prominent and legitimate member of the global sport community, having staged many of sport's biggest international events and gained decision-making influence within sport's governing institutions (Chadwick, Widdop & Goldman, 2023).

Sport emerged alongside diplomacy, mediation, Al Jazeera, and educational initiatives as a key pillar of Qatari efforts to present and narrate itself to the world (Kamrava, 2015). Winning the bid to host the 2022 World Cup placed Qatar firmly "on the map" of global consciousness in ways that went far beyond the state's early attempts at branding itself as a mediator in regional conflict zones (Reich & Sorek, 2019). Qatar is the first Middle Eastern country to distinguish itself from the other Muslim and Arabic-speaking countries in the world by hosting the biggest and most prestigious soccer tournament in the world, the FIFA World Cup in 2022. In fact, despite having a population of only 2.8 million (mostly consisting of migrant workers mainly from South Asia and also from other countries such as Egypt and the Philippines), Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup literally put it on the global map. As a result of investing some of its natural gas and oil revenues in soccer, not only did it win the 2019 and 2023 AFC Asian Cups, but it also bought some of the most prestigious soccer clubs in the world (Blake & Calvert, 2015). Since Aspire Academy, which is a globally recognized national sports academy, was established in Doha in 2004, many major international soccer clubs have held their training camps in Qatar and used the cutting-edge facilities at this academy. The country is hosting prestigious sporting events such as the Asian Games, the handball and the soccer World Cup, promotes elite sport success by local and naturalized athletes, and invests in famous sport clubs abroad (Reich & Sorek, 2019).

In 2013, the "Qatar Foundation," later renamed Qatar Airways, became the first commercial sponsor of Barcelona, Spain's most popular club. Following that, this airline became an official FIFA partner and organized horse racing, tennis, and squash tournaments in Qatar. Following the operations of Al Jazeera Sports, which broadcast sports events in the region from 2003 to 2013, Qatar established BeIN Sports as the first sports TV channel with exclusive broadcast rights in the Arab world. This channel not only secured rights to the FIFA World Cup but also holds exclusive broadcasting rights for the Olympics and five European championships in the Middle East and North Africa (Shariati & Zare, 2022). In response to Qatar's sports achievements, Saudi Arabia attempted to undermine BeIN Sports by hacking the channel

through a group known as BOutQ. Qatar organized the Gulf Cup of Nations (1976, 1992, and 2004), the Asian Soccer Championships in 1988, before moving onto the global stage with the FIFA U-20 World Cup (1995), the Handball World Junior Championships in 1999, the World Weightlifting Championships in 2005, and the Asian Games-the world's second-largest multi-sport event after the Olympic Games-in 2006. Beside the acquisition of Paris Saint-Germain by Qatar Sports Investment (QSI), the Qatar Foundation became a shirt sponsor of FC Barcelona (Chadwick, Widdop & Goldman, 2023)

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are spending lavishly on sports, fuelled by the oil and gas deposits that sit beneath their countries. Despite criticism of the intersection between sport and politics, the first quarter of the 21st century has seen these realms become increasingly intertwined rather than separate. Different ideologies now drive the organization and governance of sport, as nations compete to develop effective strategies and policies. Following this event, the Qataris dubbed Saudi Arabia the "home of hackers," which strained relations between the two Arab states of the Persian Gulf. In fact, Al-Arabiya's failure to compete with Al-Jazeera has resulted in Qatar's BeIN Sports leading the television broadcast of sports events among Arab-speaking states. Qatar Airways is one of the most internationally visible Qatari entities, and it was FIFA's official partner airline for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups.

1-3. UAE's Strategic Soccer Investments: From Oil Boom to Global Sports Branding

After the discovery of oil in the 1970s, the United Arab Emirates experienced explosive growth and was able to establish a strong economy in 30 years. Since then, the country has attracted foreign direct investment, and it has maintained its growth strategy by relying on foreign skilled laborers from around the world. In 1977, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) recruited the former Leeds United and England manager, Don Revie, to manage the national soccer team. Revie's recruitment heralded the Persian Gulf States' entry into soccer's international sphere, which has reshaped the game's political economy. Confronted by the need to diversify oil monies housed in sovereign wealth funds, the Persian Gulf States, most notably the UAE and Qatar, have invested broadly in soccer. This investment has reshaped soccer boundaries globally, though not without controversy (Thani & Heenan, 2016). The UAE national team's first-ever official soccer match dates back to 1972, when

they played against Qatar. The UAE has won fewer titles in soccer compared to Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, contrary to these two countries, it receives 79% of its GDP from non-petroleum revenues due to its negligible dependence on the export of petroleum products (the figure is raised to 98% for Dubai).

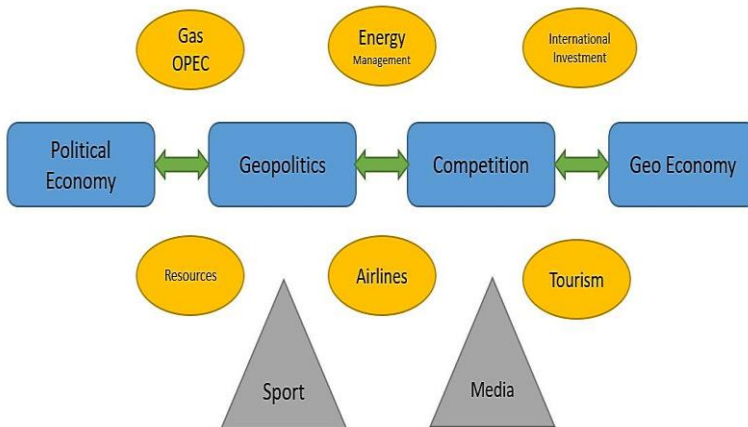
Emirates is involved in over 50 sporting sponsorships globally, including many major soccer clubs like Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain, Arsenal, and AC Milan. These investments assist in branding the UAE, and particularly Dubai, as a global destination and transport hub connecting Asia, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, Abu Dhabi's Etihad Airline is a partner with Manchester City, while the Qatar Foundation features on the Barcelona FC jersey. Dubai-owned airline Emirates' vast sponsorship portfolio across European soccer, rugby, and tennis; Russian state oil corporation Gazprom's extensive investments in German and European soccer, including partnerships with UEFA and FC Schalke 04; and Azerbaijan's former sponsorship of Atlético Madrid (Thani & Heenan, 2016).

2. Persian -Arab Conflict; Play in Neutral Field

Although, prior to the Iranian revolution, Nixon called Iran and Saudi Arabia the US "twin pillars" in the Middle East (Shariati, Ranjbar & Monazzami, 2023), the Iranian revolution with the slogan "Neither East nor West" led to the increasing divergence in Iran-Saudi Arabia relations and to the estrangement between the United States and Iran over American policies in the Middle East. In the Iran-Iraq War, Saudi Arabia's support for the Arab country exacerbated the divergence in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This diplomatic estrangement between them deepened on January 2, 2016, when Saudi Arabia executed Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shia cleric, along with 47 others. In response to that, some Iranian protesters stormed the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, prompting countries such as Sudan, Bahrain, Somalia, Djibouti, and the Comoros to align with Saudi Arabia and sever their diplomatic relations with Iran. Subsequently, the Saudis requested that the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) move their matches scheduled in Iran to a neutral venue, citing concerns over security at Iranian stadiums. The AFC agreed to this request.

Exploiting the 2016 attack on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran, Saudi Arabia pursued legal action in international sports institutions, including the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), to assert that the safety of athletes and soccer players on Iranian soil

could not be guaranteed and that Iran was incapable of ensuring the security of Saudi players. As a result, the AFC ruled in favor of Saudi Arabia, barring Iranian teams from hosting their opponents in Iran during the AFC Champions League. This conflict with Saudi Arabia, a dominant force in the Arab world, has led to numerous challenges for Iranian sports, particularly soccer, due to the political situation. Iranian soccer clubs are now required to host their matches in neutral countries, and Iranian fans are unable to support their clubs or national teams in stadiums. Additionally, Iran has faced a decrease in revenue from television broadcast rights and stadium advertisements due to these restrictions. More importantly, Saudi Arabia is attempting to present Iran to international sports agencies as an insecure country in the region.



Source: (Research Findings)

Figure (1): Geoeconomic Competition Among Arab States: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE)

3. Methods and Materials

Content analysis is a widely used research method that is particularly effective when existing information needs to be systematically analyzed and interpreted. This method has been employed in the present study, which is both applied and qualitative in nature. Content analysis facilitates the quantification and examination of data through identifiable symbols and is commonly used for analyzing both printed and digital texts and resources. It allows for the systematic analysis and classification of articles and texts. For this research, the data were drawn from English-language

articles published between 2000 and 2024, focusing on sports and the Middle East. Sources included Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Journals, and Routledge books.

4. Findings

While the sport has a critical role in empowering international prestige, soccer is the main player in this field. Under Joao Havelange's presidency, FIFA increased the number of available World Cup places for African and Asian nations. The following are some examples of extensive investment in hosting the soccer events by Arab states:

Table (1): Hosting International Soccer Events in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in the New Millennium

Saudi Arabia		Qatar		UAE	
Year	Event	Year	Event	Year	Event
2006	AFC Beach soccer	2004	Arabian Gulf Cup	2002	Arabian Gulf Cup
2007	Arabian Gulf Cup	2006	Asian Games	2014	Arabian Gulf Cup
2007	AFC Beach soccer	2011	AFC Asian Cup	2023	FIFA Club World Cup
2008	AFC Beach soccer	2013	AFC Beach soccer	2027	AFC Asian Cup
2009	AFC Beach soccer	2019	Arabian Gulf Cup	2034	Asian Games
2009	FIFA Club world Cup	2019	FIFA World Club Cup		
2009	FIFA Beach soccer World Cup	2020	FIFA World Club Cup		
2010	FIFA Club world Cup	2022	FIFA Club World Cup		
2012	AFC Futsal Asian Cup	2023	AFC Asian Cup		
2017	FIFA Club world Cup	2030	Asian Games		
2018	FIFA Club World Cup				
2019	AFC Asian Cup				
2023	Beach soccer World Cup				

Source: (Research Findings)

On 26 May 1989, the former English soccer manager, Don Revie, died. His funeral a few days later attracted members of his championship-winning Leeds United team. Revie had managed Leeds from 1961 until 1974, lifting the club from the depths of the English Second Division to the heights of three First Division titles and an FA Cup. Not only were many of his training initiatives ahead of their time, but he was among the first managers to realize the considerable money on offer in the Persian Gulf. In July 1977, he outraged English soccer when he signed a £340,000, four-year deal to coach the United Arab Emirates (UAE) national team. This was the first step for Arab owners of European clubs. The second table indicated that the Arab states have huge investments in soccer clubs in the EU region; this is the main part of their vision to attract European citizens and put these states on the global map.

Table 2. The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar owners of European Soccer Clubs

Table (2): Ownership of European Soccer Clubs by UAE, Saudi Arabian, and Qatari Entities

Club	Chairman	Investor Country	Value
Manchester City	Sheikh Mansour	UAE	\$ 746 Million
Paris Saint German	Naser Al Khelaifi	Qatar	\$ 3.2 Billion
Malaga	Abdullah Bin Nasser	Qatar	\$ 3.6 Million
New Castle	Khaldoon Almobarak	Saudi	\$ 415 Million
Aston Villa	Nassef Sawiris	Egypt	\$ 221 Million
Sheffield United	Abdullah Bin Mossad	Saudi	\$ 108 Million

Source: (Research Findings)

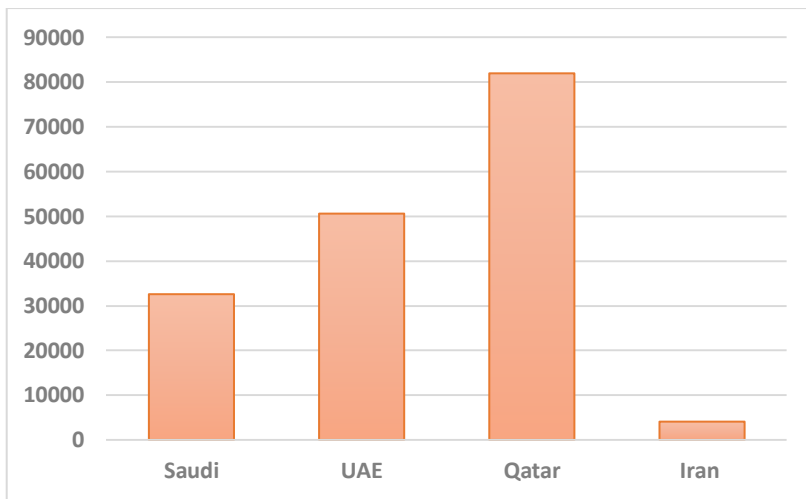
Empowering the soccer clubs is a key part of soccer diplomacy in Arab states. While Saudi Arabia is organizing the Super Cup of Italy and Spain in its territory, its clubs are growing fast to compete with the international brand in the UEFA championship.

Table 3. Achievements of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in Soccer

Country/Soccer Achievement	Asia Club Championship (Since 2000)	FIFA World Cup	Result	FIFA Ranking
Saudi	Al Hilal 2000	1994 US	Round of 16 th	53
	Al Ittihad 2004	1998 France	Group Stage	
	Al Ittihad 2005	2002 Japan/Korea	Group Stage	
	Al Ahli 2012	2006 Germany	Group Stage	
	Alhilal 2019	2018 Russia	Group Stage	
	Alhilal 2021	2022 Qatar	Group Stage	
Qatar	Al Sadd 2011	2022 Qatar	Group Stage	58
UAE	Al Ain 2002	1990 Italy	Group Stage	72

Source: (Research Findings)

Figure 2 indicated that the sample study has the highest rate of GDP per capita; GDP per capita is a measurement of the total economic output of a country divided by the number of people and adjusted for inflation. It's used to compare the standard of living between countries and over time. Although Saudi Arabia has the highest number of GDP, Qatar has the highest GDP per capita because of its limited population.



Source: (Research Findings)

Figure (2): Per Capita GDP of Study Sample

Before the arrival of British games, inhabitants of the Persian Gulf States were engaged in traditional sports such as camel racing, falconry, and horseback riding. With the arrival of British games, most notably soccer, these local sports were marginalized. The popularity of soccer in the region today reveals the states' connections with their British past. With recent developments in global soccer, it is useful to understand how West Asia in particular has responded to the challenges and/or concerns of their legitimacy. This discussion is scant in the literature, and this study draws attention to this trend considering the millions of dollars that have been spent by governments to improve their world ranking. Whether these investments confer on the Middle East the title of "future soccer destination" is a matter open to debate. In the Middle East, major sporting events are hosted for economic gain and international prestige. Sporting initiatives are typically more focused on the welfare of national society. The versatility of the sports industry allows for it to be used in many ways by each government, but it is too early to tell if these strategies will have successful long-term outcomes.

Conclusions

The rapid rise of Persian Gulf investment in foreign sports markets has prompted extensive media and scholarly discussions about the implications, motivations, and broader significance of these sponsorship efforts. What are the political implications of these new

financial flows? How do they affect teams, players, fans, cities, and local and national governments? Is there a risk of 'corrupting' traditional sporting ethics when funds come from autocratic states or state-owned enterprises? Do these investments support the Persian Gulf countries' 'soft power' campaigns, where royal families and autocratic leaders seek to enhance their international image or buy political influence through sports? While the Middle East has successfully hosted numerous major men's soccer tournaments, no Gulf state has yet hosted the FIFA Women's World Cup, with Jordan being the only Arab country to have done so, hosting it in Amman in 2018. However, Saudi Arabia has made strides in women's sports by organizing the 2023 SAFF (Saudi Arabian Soccer Federation) Women's Friendly Tournament. Soccer has become a symbol of change in Saudi Arabia, evidenced by the removal of gender discrimination in sports, including the presence of women in sports venues. Recently, Reema bint Bandar Al Saud, a Saudi woman, was elected to the International Olympic Committee.

In contrast, while Saudi Arabia uses soft power, particularly through soccer, to assert its regional dominance, Qatar has positioned itself as a peacemaker and friendly nation in the Middle East. After a decade of rivalry between Saudi Arabia's Arryadia and Qatar's BeIN Sports, the latter has emerged as the leading sports channel in the region, broadcasting major global soccer events such as the UEFA Champions League, Ligue 1, La Liga, and Copa Libertadores to Middle Eastern audiences. Qatar's success in sports investment, including hiring professionals and consultants for its universities and sports centers, and its long-term strategy for a post-oil economy, was demonstrated by its victory in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. Unlike Qatar, Saudi Arabia, with its military capabilities and large population, does not rely on sports to supplement its defense and military power. According to Dorsey, a renowned sports journalist, Qatar aims to influence the region through sports, while Saudi Arabia seeks to use sports for regional dominance.

Ideological and sectarian tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, two major Muslim nations, contribute to their efforts to form rival groups and strengthen their positions outside their borders, exacerbating the region's political challenges. The ongoing conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims, combined with Iran's regional policies and proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, has made soccer a casualty of their prolonged confrontations. The recent reopening of embassies between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023 may potentially alleviate some of these soccer-related issues in the coming years.

References

- Al Horr, A., Al Thani, G., Tok, M. E., Besada, H., O'Bright, B., & McSparren, J. (2016). Qatar's global-local nexus: From soft to nested power?. *Policy-making in a transformative state: The case of Qatar*, 347-365.
- AlKhalifa, H. K., & Farello, A. (2021). The soft power of Arab women's football: changing perceptions and building legitimacy through social media. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 13(2), 241-257.
- Amara, M. (2011). *Sport, politics and society in the Arab world*. Springer.
- Blake, H., & Calvert, J. (2015). *The ugly game: The corruption of FIFA and the Qatari plot to buy the World Cup*. Simon and Schuster.
- Brannagan, P. M., & Reiche, D. (2022). *Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup: Politics, controversy, change*. Springer Nature.
- Chadwick, S., Widdop, P., & Goldman, M. (2021, January). The geopolitical economy of sport. In *Policy Forum* (Vol. 13).
- Conn, D. (2017). *The fall of the house of FIFA: The multimillion-dollar corruption at the heart of global soccer*. Hachette UK.
- Do, H. X., Nguyen, Q. M., Nepal, R., & Smyth, R. (2021). When Pep comes calling, the oil market answers: The effect of football player transfer movements on abnormal fluctuations in oil price futures. *Energy Economics*, 100, 105325.
- Kamrava, M. (2015). Contemporary port cities in the Persian Gulf: Local gateways and global networks. *Gateways to the World: Port Cities in the Persian Gulf*, 69.
- Karimi Firozjaei, A. (2018). A study of sport newspapers titles from the critical discourse analysis view: a case study of Perspolis of Iran and Alhelal of Saudi Arabia matches. *Applied Research in Sport Management*, 6(3), 21-32.
- Koch, N. (2020). The geopolitics of Gulf sport sponsorship. *Sport, ethics and philosophy*, 14(3), 355-376.
- Monazzami, A., Shariati Feizabadi, M., & Ranjbar, S. (2023). Anti-Diplomacy of Football in the Middle East: The Geopolitical Challenge of Iran and Saudi Arabia. *Communication Management in Sport Media*, 10(4), 15-28.
- Nye, J. S. (2011). *The Future of Power* (Public Affairs, New York).
- O. Madichie, N. (2013). Ode to a "million dollar" question: does the future of football lie in the Middle East?. *Management Decision*, 51(9), 1839-1860.
- Reiche, D. (2015). Investing in sporting success as a domestic and

- foreign policy tool: the case of Qatar. *International journal of sport policy and politics*, 7(4), 489-504.
- Reiche, D., & Brannagan, P. M. (Eds.). (2022). *Routledge handbook of sport in the Middle East*. Routledge.
- Remy-Miller, K. (2017). *Sports in the Desert: How Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai are employing sports to make economic, political, and international gains* (Doctoral dissertation, Brandeis University).
- Satish, K., Portet, X. G., & Vela, J. D. S. E. (2024). Football and nation branding: A case study of Saudi Arabia's strategy for global football recognition. *adComunica*, 27-52.
- Shariati Feizabadi, M., & Zare, R. (2022). Sport and sustainable environmental security. *Research on Educational Sport*, 10(27), 81-104.
- Thani, S., & Heenan, T. (2016). The UAE, Qatar and the re-shaping of global football's boundaries. In *Sport, identity and community* (pp. 89-101). Brill.
- Thani, S., & Heenan, T. (2017). The ball may be round but football is becoming increasingly Arabic: Oil money and the rise of the new football order. *Soccer & Society*, 18(7), 1012-1026.