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INTRODUCTION

Sports are an important part of people lives everywhere in the world. One does not necessarily need to participate in a sporting activity or event to be in some ways influenced by it. The most popular one is football, with billions of fans worldwide. It can be a source of joy, pride, anger and suffering to some, while for others a simple interest or leisure activity, but none of its followers can deny its simple beauty and magic. This beautiful and alluring ideal has unfortunately lost much of its appeal if confronted with contemporary events. Scandals, commercialisation and political agendas has transformed what once was the passion of the working-class into greedy corporate business. The unfortunate mixing of politics and football has brought up to the public attention certain mechanisms that tend to use sports to divert people from grave problems.

The term sportswashing, although quite recent, describes an ancient practice, which seems to be on the rise. The latest trend of this phenomenon, as identified by Jules Boykoff, is the entry in professional football leagues of authoritarian actors with questionable human rights record and the imperative need to clean up their international image. While academic literature on the subject is still quite scarce and very recent, there are many works of great importance which provide a certain understanding of this topic. Among them, the writings of Stuart Murray on sports diplomacy, and the ones of Jules Boykoff and Simon Chadwick on sportswashing, surely stand out. Delving in this topic is fundamental to identify what causes it, which mechanisms it uses, and which effects it carries. Only with this knowledge policy-makers will be able to recognise it and take action against it.

The specific question of football clubs' acquisition by autocratic regimes, being the newest, is perhaps also the most subtle form of sportswashing, and that is why it particularly important to bring academic attention toward it. This dissertation poses itself the objective of identifying the underlying reasons of this phenomenon, and to argue how the purchase of football teams by authoritarian regimes, in this case Qatar and Saudi Arabia, constitute a case of sportswashing in relation to the social value of football clubs, and the continuation of the regimes' foreign policy in the international arena.

In order to do that, this paper will begin with a theoretical overview aimed at clarifying the notions of sports diplomacy, sportswashing and soft power; they are all pivotal for this subject and are often misused, due to certain definitional issues that they present, which will be highlighted in the chapter. Later, an analysis of the overall sports strategy of the State of Qatar and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will be implemented, in order to contextualise their sports operations in within the relations between them, which will be commented with a brief report of the Gulf Cooperation Council crisis of 2017. Finally, the paper will focus on the core issue at end, concentrating on the actual purchase of football clubs by the two regimes and using the theoretical notions and political contextualisation of the previous chapters

to unmask why these financial operations aim at football clubs in particular and what they plan to achieve; the last section will instead focus on how they constitute the continuation of foreign policy of the regimes which apply them.

CHAPTER I

1. SPORTS DIPLOMACY AND SPORTSWASHING

1.1. Theoretical Overview of Sports Diplomacy

In 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and within the context of the end of the Cold War and the American triumph, Joseph S. Nye questions himself on the new role the United States are bound to take in a world without the Soviet threat where they now hold a hegemonic position. In his article published on 'Foreign Policy', Nye (1990) suggests that in the new world order, the traditional means to achieve a country's objectives are not as efficient anymore. The emergence of transnational non-state actors such as multinational companies, economic interdependence, technological innovation and strengthened smaller states are all signs that the world is changing, and with it, political aims. Although he recognizes the importance of traditional power dynamics and means, namely the military, he foresees the necessity of developing other forms of gaining or maintaining influence in the international arena that do not rely on coercive actions. He therefore introduces the concept of soft power, which "occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants" (Nye, 1990). This ability is linked to intangible power resources, such as "culture, ideology, and institutions". The ultimate aim for the state is to showcase its power as legitimate, in order to pursue its objectives with less international resistance; instead of using coercion, the State should attain its goals through co-optation and persuasion.

The revolutionary introduction of soft power and the fast pace at which the world was changing and developing, posed a significant threat to the notion of traditional diplomacy, defined by H. Bull in 1932 as "the conduct of relations between sovereign states with standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means"; where foreign policy is understood as one state's ends, which are to be achieved through diplomacy. By the end of the Cold War new diplomatic actors start appearing, like corporations, IGOs, NGOs and also celebrities. These new diplomatic

agents have now proliferated in the modern society, forcing governments to enact deep reforms to their traditional diplomatic institution, massively increasing the importance of public diplomacy (Murray, 2012). While the latter is not a new notion or practice, it has only been in the post-Cold War decades that the previously mentioned conditions prompted its emergence as a pillar of international relations. This phenomenon was described by the former Australian foreign minister (1988-1996) as “an exercise in persuasion and influence that extends beyond traditional diplomacy by leveraging a much larger cast of players both inside and outside government”. The extremely wide scope and means of public diplomacy made it possible for governments to utilise a diverse cast of actors, making it possible to give birth to various forms of hybrid diplomacy (Murray, 2012). Among them, one has been of particular relevance in the academic works of the last decade, although its importance and use goes as far as the first Olympic competitions in ancient Greece; it is sports diplomacy.

Murray (2018) defines sports diplomacy as “the conscious, strategic and ongoing use of sports, sportspeople and sporting events by state and non-state actors to advance policy, trade, development, education, image, reputation, brand and people-to-people links”. The main advantage of this approach is the universal character of sports, which are not subject to language or cultural barriers; it is one of the main reasons for its ever-increasing popularity. Focusing on its relationship with traditional diplomacy, Murray (2012) argues that “increasingly, traditional diplomats are engaging with sporting organisations, professional sports people, and the global sporting public, the spectators and fans”. This approach involves both representative and diplomatic activities, in this case undertaken by people in the sporting world, such as athletes, managers, coaches, bureaucrats, club owners etc... Said activities are promoted on behalf and in conjunction with governments. The latter, through these non-state actors and the sporting events in which they take part, aspire to create a favourable image internationally, striving to influence foreign publics’ perception in order to ease the government’s foreign policy goals. The author further identifies seven reasons explaining why sports diplomacy constitute an attractive choice for those who pursue it.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, since the post-Cold War era governments have been forced to reform the way the conduct diplomacy; using sports is “a proactive,

original, and pioneering form of engagement” to show both the domestic and international public that diplomacy is no more confined to the elites. Secondly, sports and sporting institution have a global scope and appeal, and per se meet no opposition; nearly everyone in the world, in one way or another, is involved in sports either actively or passively.

Thirdly, it engages the public in a way that high politics diplomacy does not anymore. It is a potent soft power overture, as a mean to bring nations, cultures and people closer together or to showcase already existing friendly-relationships.

Fourthly, sports are a major part of modern life and sporting mega-events, like the Olympics or Football World Cup, receive a worldwide media exposure, providing precious opportunities for the countries hosting them.

Fifthly, they both share and represent, allegedly, similar values; diplomacy represents peace and order amongst international anarchy, practicing negotiation, compromise, and conciliation on the basis of clear and open communication, it embodies noble values. In a similar way, sports embody virtuous qualities and values which are appealing to diplomats.

The sixth reason is affected by globalisation; in a world where affiliations are looser the public expect more social awareness by the two professions. Both of them strive to win for their people and their country.

Finally, sports have been historically used to start a process of diplomatic normalisation between estranged countries. The most famous examples include the 1970s ping pong diplomacy between the US and China, which paved the way to the epochal visit of the US president Richard Nixon in the Asian country, officially establishing diplomatic relations, or the 2002 FIFA World Cup co-hosted by two old rivals, Japan and South-Korea, the latter having suffered numerous military invasions and occupation by the former since 1592 until the end of WWII in 1945, or recently North and South Korea marching under one flag in the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang.

Moving on to the mechanisms of sports diplomacy, H. M. Nygård and S. Gates (2013) were able to identify four of them, from the international level to the local one: image-building, platform for dialogue, trust-building, reconciliation and integration.

The first one regards the hosting of sporting mega-events, which are able to bestow

on the host country global attention for a certain amount of time. These events enable the circulation of a massive amount of capital and human resources in a short time span. The international prestige stemming from such events and from performing well in them is immense; it is truly the quintessential example of soft power.

Secondly, sporting events are able to strengthen ties between countries, providing a platform for a peaceful cultural exchange and the normalisation of relations among estranged parties. Creating a platform for dialogue differs from image building because while the former aims at self-promotion, this one promotes relationship-building.

The third aspect regards the building of trust between two parties to eventually maintain peace. An example is given by the use of baseball in the post-WWII era to pacify US-Japan relations. In reality, as it will be highlighted later, more often than not sports escalate tensions rather than appease them.

The fourth and final mechanism uncovered is used to diminish frictions within a country through anti-racism, integration and reconciliation. This was the case for the 1995 Rugby World Cup in South Africa.

Although recognising the potential of sports diplomacy in building relations among states, Murray highlights a series of issues that arise from mixing sports and diplomacy. Firstly, the author reports the uneasiness and the opposition of many sports fans around the globe regarding the influence of politicians over sports and vice versa; they feel as if the pure and immaculate nature of sports is tainted by the intervention of political factors, and claim that these two realms should be separate. Although one could agree with this sentiment, the reality is that sports and politics have always mixed, now more than ever, and it is unlikely that this complex relation will cease any time soon.

Furthermore, Murray argues that the instrumentalization of sporting events can easily be directed towards fostering nationalism and division. After all, many advocates of sports diplomacy conveniently fail to notice that the nature of sports is highly competitive; the goal of an athlete is not mere participation, but to achieve victory. When these feelings expand toward supporters, perverted and terrible consequences might occur. Notions of agony, tribalism, battle suffering and war are often associated with sports and their competitive and divisive character; one of the

most infamous cases being the phenomenon of hooliganism among English football supporters, which still nowadays taints stadia all over the world, sometimes with tragic outcomes. Derby matches between different teams of the same city, whose supporters are usually historically divided by either socioeconomic, political or religious motives, frequently ignite outbreaks of violence. An infamous example being Glasgow's Old Firm, the world-renown clash between the Celtics, the historically catholic, separatist team of the city, and the Rangers, the protestant and unionist one. In 1971 a stampede occurred after clashes between the rival supporters, causing the death of 66 people in what is remembered as the Ibrox disaster. Similar tragic events occurred in Europe in the following decades¹. International fixtures are not exempt from violence either; in 1969, during the qualifying matches between El Salvador and Honduras for the entry in the 1970 FIFA World Cup, a series of violent riots were a catalyst for a brief military confrontation between the two countries. Although the causes of the conflict were deeper and involved agrarian reforms and immigration issues, the escalating tensions arising from the matches sparked the war (Nygård & Gates, 2013).

Finally, the enormous expenses needed to host mega-events like World Cups or the Olympics have to be considered. While these venues are extremely beneficial to build international prestige and usually spur economic growth, they need an immense quantity of resources, which are likely to be moved from other important social and economic programs. The 1976 Montreal Olympics are famously recalled as "the Billion Dollar Games"; thirty years were needed to repay the cost. Huge protests were also held in Brazil regarding the hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics. It is fundamental to be reminded that sports diplomacy does not always have to be of a conciliatory nature. During the Cold War it was not rare assisting to boycotts and counter-boycotts between rivals, the best known being the US Boycott to the Moscow Olympics in 1980, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the USSR Counter-Boycott to the following Los Angeles Olympics of 1984. South African national teams were frequently denied participation in international events due to then country's apartheid policies. These are important examples of the appliance of soft power through sports, aiming at attacking the international image of a country.

¹ Heysel Stadium disaster (1985) and Hillsborough disaster (1989)

Nonetheless, the main appeal of this approach stems from the ability of sports to cross barriers, bringing people together under a common banner. The US and USSR boycotts and counter-boycotts were followed by the Goodwill Games, aimed at reopening sports relations between the two superpowers. In 1995, one year after the election of Nelson Mandela as the President of South Africa and a few years since the ending of the Apartheid regime, the Springboks² victory in the Rugby World Cup was perceived as a sign of national unity, opening the most popular sport in the country to everyone, in the true fashion of nation-building.

1.2. Theoretical Overview of Sportswashing

In recent years, academic interest toward sports diplomacy has paved the way to further research on the subject of relations between international politics and sports. An approach that has just recently caught attention, is the one of sportswashing. While the academic literature on this topic is still limited, the media has been facing it quite extensively, and no without a number of issues. While the appearance of this term is quite recent, examples of its usage might go as far as to classical antiquity; the Athenian general Alcibiades famously used the victory of his sponsored Athenian chariots team during the Olympics of 416 BC to wield enough status and influence to convince the other citizens to embark in the disastrous military expedition in Sicily (Gribble, 2012). And how to forget Romans and their political strategy of *panem et circenses*³, where men of politics used to host games and distribute food among the plebs to obtain their compliance.

Anyway, the word 'sportswashing' was first used in 2015, in light of the European Games hosted in Baku, Azerbaijan, when the human rights activist Gulnara Akhundova wrote an article for the British newspaper The Independent, criticizing the choice of the country as a host in relation to its problematic human rights record (Akhundova, 2015, as cited in in Boykoff, 2022). Since then, the term has gained massive popularity among media headlines, especially in relation to three sporting mega-events: 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup in Russia, 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup in Qatar. Despite the extensive use of this term, it

² South Africa national rugby union team

³ Bread and circuses

keeps on being relatively undefined. The two most prominent scholars on this fairly new subject, the former footballer and English scholar Simon Chadwick and the former footballer and American scholar Jules Boykoff, gave it the following definitions.

Chadwick defined it as “a means by which a country can deflect audiences’ attention away from less favourable perceptions of a country via a programme of investment in sports” (2022); Boykoff, “as a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front” (2022). The term ‘washing’, associated to its antecedent ‘greenwashing’ and ‘whitewashing’, implies the act to conceal or divert.

Following these definitions, it is easy to see this notion as fitting to describe the recent sporting events in Qatar, Russia and China. All of them exhibit a critical human rights record according to NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. The latest Press Freedom Index indicate these regimes as with a difficult or very serious situation regarding press freedom, with the People Republic of China ranked among the bottom 10 countries of the list.

It should be highlighted, regarding the use of this term in the media, that while the definition does not necessarily tie it to a specific culture or political system, Boykoff (2022) in fact claims that it has been used by democratic and undemocratic regimes alike, as of today it has been used to describe the use of sporting venues to enhance one’s soft power only when the perpetrators are non-western authoritarian regimes. This obvious bias generates an academic conundrum among researchers, which inspired the article of Michael Skye in the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2022). The author examines whether sportswashing can be qualified as an analytic concept or is nothing more than a media headline, and it would be better understood as a sensitizing concept, namely “a direction along which to look”, which “lack precise reference and have no bench marks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance and of its content” (Blumer, 1954, as cited in Skey, 2022).

In order to have a better understanding of sportswashing, its relationship with soft power should be further explored. As stated earlier, soft power is the ability to influence another actor opinions and views in order to align them with the actor who

intends to influence. This is not done with the use of force, but rather through co-optation and persuasion, J. S. Nye in 2004 adds a pivotal element: credibility. In order for this operation to be successful, the influenced should perceive the influencer's image as credible and desirable; anything that is perceived as propaganda will be easily dismissed. In this case, one may even incur in totally opposite results, increasing the risks of losing attractiveness and credibility, leading to the emergence of soft disempowerment (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018).

Given this new addition to soft power, one may dispute the efficiency of sportswashing; since a myriad of articles and criticism surrounded the development of the sporting events mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, one could argue that the goal entailed in the definitions of sportswashing, namely to divert public attention from domestic issues regarding human rights, has utterly failed.

But that is just half of the story. Boykoff (2022) presents sportswashing as a social and spatial relation that encompasses multiple audiences: an international one and a domestic one. If we take as an example the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, the enormous international backlash deriving from the recent occupation of Crimea might induce to think that any opportunity for Russia to wield soft power was squandered; on the contrary, Grix and Kramareva (2015) claim that main target of the Sochi Olympics was actually the Russian public. The criticism from the Western World were framed by Putin's administration as attacks on the old Russian enemy; through this operation it was able to galvanize public support and to unite its citizens in a wave of national pride.

Similarly, the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup in Qatar was the target of harsh criticism from international media outlets and civil society groups, regarding especially the normative discrimination of LGBTQ+ individuals in the country and the hardships and abuses that the migrant workers in the country, subjected to the Kafala system, had to endure during the constructions of the stadia and other infrastructures in the years leading to the competition. It is assessed that 6,750 migrant workers coming mainly from the Indian Subcontinent perished because of hazardous working conditions⁴. Along with this type of criticism, many articles and news section went viral after attacking certain aspects of the country's culture and religion; the Qatari

⁴ Source: Supreme Council of Health (Qatar), Embassy of India (Qatar), Embassy of Nepal (Qatar), Foreign Employment board (Nepal), Wage Earners' Welfare Board (Bangladesh), Embassy of Sri Lanka (Qatar)

monarchy, mainly through its renowned media outlet, the Doha-based Al Jazeera, was able to dismiss this and the other critics as cases of western islamophobia, racism and hypocrisy, winning huge consensus all over the Arab and Muslim world (Dubinsky, 2022). For Arabs and Muslim in general, this competition was of historical importance, being the first time that the FIFA World Cup was hosted in the Middle-East, by an Arab and Muslim majority country.

In a democratic context, the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics were a perfect opportunity, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, to project a sense of American national security worldwide and reinforce the notion of 'American Exceptionalism'. Hosting the games was a way to prove that the US were now safe from external attacks, but at the same time the games were used to promote and fortify the idea of the 'War on Terror', creating a path of public support to the following year invasion of Iraq (Boykoff, 2002). Once it is clarified that this phenomenon is not the sole domain of autocrats and that it can target both internal and external audiences, it is central to establish a series of guidelines that allow to identify a sporting event as sportswashing.

As noted earlier, the perpetrator must aim at diverting attention from a, usually domestic, issue; might it be the case of a poor human rights record, discrimination or a particularly unpopular policy. It is not a concealment operation, since it does not have the means to hide what its perpetrators intend to, but it is surely able to distract and manipulate its target. Therefore, to be able to safely claim that a sportswashing operation is going on, we must be able to observe the manipulation of information, which can occur in a number of instances (Ganji, 2023).

The first one, is displacing negative content by elevating alternative stories. The media outlets in reporting news involve both a selection and presentation bias; this implies that by selecting especially sport news, which are more followed by the public, they will turn away from other stories with sensitive political matters.

Secondly, another way to discredit negative coverage is to amplify alternate perspectives. A century ago, the US journalist W. Lippman warned against the tendency of the public to heavily rely on intermediaries to interpret an ever more complex and bigger world. This led to Bernays' invention of public relations as a profession (Ganji, 2023). Celebrity athletes, administrators and policymakers act as intermediaries conveying public attention away from sensitive information.

Finally, sporting events are able to debase negative content by arousing alternate emotions. Collective experiences are daily parts of people's life, and some of them are charged with a particular emotional energy shared by the participants. This is what E. Durkheim's identifies as 'collective effervescence'. While the pioneering French sociologist attached this notion especially to religion, sports have been associated to the latter in the way they are able to generate these emotions. The emotional charged provided by the competitive atmosphere of sports is the main ingredient to this form of manipulation.

In the last 15 years, a new form of sportswashing has emerged. In 2008, UAE's City Group purchased the English Premier League football club Manchester City F.C.; since then, the club, thanks to the huge investments of the Emirates fund, has obtained many successes in the English league, finding also victory in the Champions League, the most important European Competition for football clubs, last year. The act of investing significant amount of money in football clubs and player transfers or big sponsorship contract, e.g., Qatar Airways 4 years shirt-sponsorship with Barcelona FC, has been ever since adopted by other Gulf powers, all of them with shady relations with human rights. Boykoff (2022) identify this phenomenon as the most recent and possibly subtle form of sportswashing, which is going to be the main object of this paper.

1.3. A comparison of Sports Diplomacy and Sportswashing: are they any different?

After having analysed these two theoretical notions, it is almost spontaneous to ask what differentiates them. It is not a simple answer: it is clear that they share many similarities and that there are some obvious theoretical shortcomings in sportswashing (Skye, 2022) and its coverage stems mainly from mediatic sources, although this might change with time as academic research progresses. M. Skye warns against the improper use of the word, deriving from its lack of a narrow, definitive and clear definition, and quotes Chadwick's words: "If you sit in Qatar, you sit in Saudi Arabia, [they call what they are doing] nation building ... [or] ... soft power... Sportswashing is in the eye of the beholder" (Walt, 2021, as cited in Skye, 2022). He devolves the notion to a sensitizing concept, claiming that it lacks the

components of a definitive concept. It is nonetheless true that some important divergences between sportswashing and sports diplomacy exist, e.g., domestic target audience, relationship with soft power etc..., but perhaps it would be more correct to analyse the former as an element of the latter. On one hand, regarding the relation between sports and politics, sportswashing encompasses way more notions than the ones belonging to the field of international studies, offering a multidimensional view entailing sociological and psychological factors; on the other hand, its main actor remains the state, which is the only force which can enable its mechanisms, and the one which holds interest in its application. But even though it cannot qualify as a definite field of public diplomacy, it still envisions a very specific phenomenon, promoted by specific actors, having specific goals. Given the growing importance of sportswashing and its increasing global use, it is pivotal to delve deeper in to this topic, as only more knowledge on the subject will help prevent its manipulation. Academic research on the subject has only just begun, but it is destined to grow overtime, as it is a phenomenon that yes, has always existed, but as it becomes more common and wider in scope, the need of facing it becomes fundamental. In order to do that effectively, it is pivotal to work on a precise, universal definition, clear of the biases that the media seems to carry every time the term appears in a headline or an article.

CHAPTER II

2. SPORTS AND POLITICS IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

2.1. Qatar Sports Strategy

Qatar is a small state located in the eastern shore of the Arabian Peninsula. It shares its only land border with one of the most powerful actors in the area, Saudi Arabia. On the other side of the Persian Gulf, it faces the Saudis main regional challenger, Iran. The country is a semi-constitutional monarchy, where the Emir holds most of the executive and legislative power; the Al Thani royal family has been ruling the area since the mid-1800s, but the country has obtained its independence from the United Kingdom only in 1971. Despite its recent history, the country witnessed an impressive economic development, owed mainly to the discovery and the exploitation of its large oil basin in the 1960s.

Even though the country has witnessed two coups since its independence, in 1972⁵ and 1995, both were bloodless and the State enjoys a certain degree of political stability. The 1995 coup is particularly important to understand Qatar's current agenda. The then Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani seized control of the government, supported by the royal family, while his father, the Emir Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, perpetrator of 1972 coup d'état, was on a diplomatic visit in Switzerland. The new Emir shifted the supremacy of power in his hands, which traditionally belonged to the heir apparent; he then started the promotion of a series of social reforms which aimed to modernise the country (Rathmell & Schulze, 2000) In 1996, he prompted the birth of Al Jazeera, the media outlet which later established itself as the main voice of the Arab World; this event marked a great shift from the harsh mediatic censorship of the previous regimes. In 1999, in occasion of the Municipal Election, for the first time in the history of Qatar, women were allowed to vote and to hold public office. In 2004, following the late 2003 referendum, the first permanent constitution was written. 5 years later, the Emirate launched Qatar

⁵ The heir apparent and Prime Minister Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani seized power from his cousin, Emir Ahmad bin Ali Al Thani.

National Vision 2030, whose goal is to transform the country into “an advanced society capable of sustaining its development and providing a high standard of living for its people”⁶. In 2013, after the abdication of Hamad bin Khalifa, his fourth son became the new and current Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who seems to be following in his father’s footsteps, leading the nation to the realization of the long-term goals inscribed in QNV 2030.

The historical context is pivotal in the understanding of Qatar sports strategy. Like the other Gulf states, Qatar’s economy is heavily based on its natural resources. These countries medium term objective is to survive once their oil and natural gas basins expire; to do that, they need to diversify their portfolio by investing in multiple sectors. In the short term they will still need to exploit their basins, all while avoiding their neighbouring rivals’ attack. To do that they establish international alliances through huge military contract and through the purchase of stakes in western companies by their respective sovereign funds. These operations are needed to bind western countries’ economies to the maintenance of these funds’ investments; western countries will then constitute important diplomatic auxiliaries.

Sports investments come into play in building a favourable international image to ease relations with the West, building the Gulf states soft power. In the medium term, as mentioned earlier, they will need to diversify their economies by investing in sectors like tourism, education, renewable sources of energy, sustainable development and sports industry. The latter in Qatar is under the management of the QSI⁷, a subsidiary to the country’s sovereign investment fund, QIA⁸. Sports investments are a fundamental component in building ties within the international community; presenting a polished image of a State might ease the establishment of friendly relations. Additionally, relationships established through these operations can promote further contacts in other fields, namely technological advancements, whose use is pivotal to maintain security.

While almost all of the Gulf countries have a similar approach in this regard, Qatar has truly made sports its central tenet of public diplomacy.

⁶ Government Communications Office, National Vision 2030

⁷ Qatar Sports Investments

⁸ Qatar Investments Authority

H. S. Søyland and M. Moriconi (2022) have identified the four main pillars on which Qatar sports strategy is based.

The first one regards the hosting sporting events and state-of-the-art sporting facilities; the 2022 FIFA World Cup is just the cherry on top of a long-standing plan to become a globally recognised hub for international sporting events. While the event might come as a surprise to many, this goal was part of Qatar National Vision 2030, the national plan to become an advanced country by 2030; it is the manifestation of this hard pursue. The first major Asian sporting event hosted by the country is Asian Football Cup dates back to 1995; in the same year the country was chosen as a venue for the U-20 FIFA World Cup. In the mid-2000s Qatar hosted several Asian championships encompassing various sporting competitions. The 2006 Asian Games were a watershed in the country sports strategy; it was the first time that Qatar was facing an enormous target audience, making it the perfect occasion to showcase its culture and recent advancement, wielding enough soft power to advance its international standing. In the last few years, the Gulf State was the theatre of a series of global competitions, varying from the 2015 Handball World Championships, where its national team reached the final, to the 2019 World Athletic Championships. In 2019 and 2021 the Monarchy served as the stage for a major FIFA event, the Club World Cup, which sees competing the best clubs from the organization's continental federations. The number of international tournaments hosted by Qatar in the last 15 years is greater than 500⁹. But none of these appointments reach the prestige and the relevance of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Its hosting was truly the pinnacle of the Al Thani sports strategy, and the 220bln dollars spent for this occasion¹⁰, more than any other sporting event in history, proves it.

The second way Qatar pursues its sports strategy is by investing in global sports and acquiring global sporting broadcasting rights. The sponsorships of high-level competitions and elite clubs, plus the direct investments in the latter, is far from being only attached to economic profit. This image-building operation aims at branding the country as modern, vibrant, friendly and legitimate State, associating itself with global sports. The main actor in this regard, the earlier mentioned QSI, has made its first important financial operation in a European sports club in 2010,

⁹ Qatar's Government Communications Office website, "Sport in Qatar"

¹⁰ A. Lyjak (2023), in *The Finances Behind the 2022 World Cup*, in *The Michigan Journal of Economics*

with the acquisition of the Spanish team Málaga Club de Fútbol. Its arguably most notable one came the following year, when the QSI bought 70% of shares of the French Ligue 1 club, Paris Saint-Germain FC, completing the takeover in 2012. Under the management of Nasser Al-Khelaifi, PSG president and QSI chairman, the club met an enormous domestic success, winning 9 out of 12 French league titles, and a number of other domestic competitions, making it the most titled French club in the history of football. Later in the paper, the reasons behind this investment and why they might be a case of sportswashing are going to be analysed more deeply. It is anyway important to note, for now, that the relevance that Qataris hold within French Football has visible effects in their diplomatic relations, shown by the intervention of French authorities as mediators during the GCC¹¹ diplomatic crisis. Moving one to sports sponsorships, the first major move of the QSI dates back to 2011, when the Qatar Foundation¹² became Barcelona FC first-ever paid-for sponsor with a €150mln five years deal. From 2013 to 2017 Qatar Airways¹³ became the club's first-ever commercial kit sponsor. The national airline is a fundamental actor in the country's sport strategy. In the last decade it has been the sponsor of a series of top global football clubs, like the Italian AS Roma, the Argentinian Boca Juniors, the German Bayern Munich FC, and since this year, the QIA owned PSG. It should be noted that the latter is the only club left with a standing sponsorship with Qatar Airways, and both Barcelona and Bayern Munich have left due to the country's tarnished reputation following the criticism in regards to the 2022 Football World Cup. Despite these recent controversies, since 2017 the company has been a major FIFA partner and its official airline, sponsoring the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship, the 2019 and 2021 FIFA Club World Cup and, of course, the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup.

Regarding broadcasting rights, Qatar has started raising its global standing when in 2012, when Al Jazeera Sports was separated from its main outlet and rebranded as beIN Media Group. Since then, it has acquired the broadcasting rights of the top European Leagues in countries all over the world. In the MENA region alone, it is the main provider of the broadcasting of the FIFA World Cup, UEFA Champions League, Italian Serie A, Spanish La Liga, French Ligue 1, German Bundesliga and English

¹¹ Gulf Cooperation Council

¹² Non-profit organisation

¹³ Qatar state-owned national airline

Premier League. Football is the main focus of the Group, as it holds a significant slice of its rights in France, the USA and Canada. Nasser Al-Khelaifi, apart from being PSG and QSI chairman, is also the CEO of beIN sports and a member of UEFA executive committee.

The third pillar of the National sports strategy focuses on sporting success and the naturalisation of athletes. If the State's approach to sports diplomacy is to be considered successful, it is imperative to enhance the performance of national athletes in regional and international competitions. Qatar's entry in international sporting organisations started in 1972, when the country obtained the membership of FIFA. In 1979, with the founding of the Qatar Olympic Committee, it paved the way to its first participation to the Games, which arrived a few years later, in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Very recently, in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Gulf state achieved its best performance so far, winning two gold medals and a bronze one, reaching a total of 5 bronzes, 1 silver and 2 golds. In the Asian Games instead, the country has been consistently more successful, with a total of 120 medals¹⁴, making the Monarchy the most successful among its GCC partners. Qatar has also obtained a recent and prestigious success in Football, crowning itself winner of the 2019 AFC Asian Cup, beating Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the competition's host, in the process. There are two main reasons behind these successes.

The first one is the construction of state-of-the-art sporting facilities and the injection of huge resources in sports talent development programs. The forefront of this operation is the Aspire Academy; founded in 2004, it possesses world class facilities, leading expertise in sports science and highly qualified international scouts and coaches (Søyland & Moriconi, 2022). The Academy is located in the Aspire Zone, a multi-sport facility whose cost is esteemed to be around 1.2bln EUR. While these programs have reached some positive outcomes, Qatar's small population constitutes an important constraint on its talent pool. To overcome this issue, the normative order of the country conceived the possibility of naturalisation of foreign athletes, and while the results obtained through this policy have been far more effective¹⁵, they have not come without controversies or criticism.

According to Article 6 of Law No. 38 of 2005 on the acquisition of Qatari nationality:

¹⁴ 43 golds, 31 silvers and 46 bronzes

¹⁵ The first and the second Qatari Olympic medallists were both naturalised

Notwithstanding the provisions of Articles 2 and 18 of this Law, by an Emiri decision Qatari nationality may be granted to those who have rendered great service to the country, or who have particular skills the country need, 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.

Criticism surrounding this article stems mainly from the fact that in Qatar citizenship is understood by blood, and this particular process of naturalisation openly contradicts citizen criteria; it requires being born to a Qatari father. Foreigners are the vast majority of the inhabitants of the peninsula (almost 90% as of 2019)¹⁶ and their chances to obtain full citizenship are extremely limited (Reiche & Tinaz, 2018), as shown by the overly strict requirements listed by Article 2 of Law No. 38 of 2005 on the acquisition of Qatari nationality:

Any non-Qatari may acquire Qatari nationality, by decree of the Emir, provided that:

1. On the application date for Qatari nationality, he has been a regular resident in Qatar for not less than twenty-five consecutive years. This provision shall not be prejudiced by the applicant being absent from Qatar for not more than two months in a single calendar year, provided the applicant has the intention of returning. These periods of absence shall be deducted from the actual cumulative residence period. Should the applicant leave Qatar following the submission of the nationality application, and remain absent from Qatar for longer than six months, the Interior Minister reserves the right to disregard his previous residence, and discount his application.
2. He has a lawful means of income.
3. He is of good repute and has not been convicted of any offence impugning his honour or integrity.
4. Has good knowledge of the Arabic language.

¹⁶ Snoje (2019), *Population of Qatar by nationality - 2019 report*, in *Priya DSouza Communications*

Furthermore, Article 17 of the same law adds yet another limitation:

In accordance with the provisions of Articles 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, Qatari nationality shall not be granted to more than fifty (50) applicants in one calendar year.

Some indicates this treatment as unfair towards migrant workers in the country, who will likely never see their application overcome these normative obstacles. Another peculiar aspect of this process of naturalisation regards the mission passports formula. These temporary passports seem as an ad hoc provision to allow their holders to take part to the competition at hand, and the athletes holding them remain dual citizens. Only those achieving exceptional success receive full citizenship; furthermore, competitors never possess both passports at the same time and never have the Qatari one themselves, similarly to the Kafala system (Reiche & Tinaz, 2018). This controversial system plus the international allegations of Qatar exchanging passports for a pecuniary compensation led both FIFA and the IOC to take special measures. The former officially forbid the selection of players that have not been residing in the football association territory for two consecutive years, while the latter introduced a waiting period of three years before a player can represent another country in the Olympics (Poli, 2007, as cited in Søyland & Moriconi, 2022).

The final tenet of Qatar sports strategy discussed by Søyland and Moriconi (2022), is the engagement of famous sports stars to publicly talk in a favourable way of the Nation's society and political regime. In the early 2000s, a huge cash flow was injected in Qatar's football league, catching the attention of several football stars close to retirement. Among the huge names that went on to spend the ending of their career in the peninsula attracted by luxurious salaries, there are Gabriel Batistuta, Josep Guardiola, Claudio Caniggia and Frank De Boer. This trend was witnessed again in recent years, where footballing icons the likes of treble winner with Inter Milan FC and Cameroonian national Samuel Eto'o, Barcelona FC legend and World Champion with Spain Xavi Hernandez and Dutch national and again treble winner with Inter Milan Wesley Sneijder. Most of the mentioned players were subsequently engaged as 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup ambassadors or as spokespersons to promote Qatari culture and to paint a beautiful, polished image of the country. Their statements were mainly used to counter criticism against Qatar's hosting of the

World Cup, hoping that the words of these influential figures, supporting the Monarchy capabilities and legitimacy to host the competition, could gather the favour of football fans. As mentioned at the start of this sections, Qatar approach to sports diplomacy and sportswashing is a multi-level, multi-actor strategy; it encompasses the use of a variety of institutions, both domestic and foreign, and actors, like the sporting celebrities listed.

2.2. Saudi Arabia Sports Strategy

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies a large slice of the Arabian Peninsula, and it is the 2nd largest State of the Arab World. The first independent Saudi State was formed in 1727 by Muhammad bin Saud, progenitor of the House of Saud, today's ruling family of the Kingdom. The XVIII century is an important period to understand contemporary Saudi Arabia; Muhammad bin Saud in fact joined forces with the religious leader Muhammad ibn Abd-Al Wahhab and founder of Wahhabism, which preaches an extremely puritanical form of Sunni Islam; Wahhabism is still hugely influential, as it provided the religious and normative framework of today's Saudi Arabia, which is a conservative theocracy. KSA became formally a Kingdom in 1932, when a royal decree unified the dual kingdom of the Hejaz and Najd, under the ruler Ibn Saud. In the first decades of the XX century, following the end of WWI, westerners, mainly Americans, started investing in the peninsula's oil resources, creating the company which, following the Yom Kippur War in 1973, would become the Saudi owned Aramco. As the other Gulf States, Saudi economy was, and still mostly is, petroleum-based. The country has to import the majority of its food and other commodities, which are paid for with the stellar profits of oil exploitation.

Another pivotal event in the modern history of the Nation, is 1979, the year of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution in Iran. Following the war with Iraq, it was immediately clear to the world that the Islamic Republic of Iran was set on his quest to expand his Shiite Islam radicalism in the Middle East. For Saudi Arabia, whose purpose is to assume a leading role in the Sunni Muslim World and to be a regional superpower, it was unacceptable. This led to the creation of a ferocious rivalry between the two, leading to a series of proxy wars, like the ongoing conflict in Yemen.

Jumping forward a few decades, we arrive at 2017. This year is a watershed in the recent history of Saudi Arabia, due to one man; in 2017, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, son of King Abdullah, becomes Crown Prince and heir apparent of the Kingdom. The prince was aware of the need to modernise the country and to diversify its economy. He was also well aware, that any push toward reform would have angered and met the opposition of the Saudi elite. His rise to absolute power started with the establishment of an anti-corruption commission, which was seen by many as a pretext to incarcerate and silence any opposers to his political program. In the following weeks a number of Saudi emirs and businessman were put under house arrest in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. While it is probable that many of the investigated individual were to a certain degree guilty of the charges, this event has all the elements of a classic power move.

Once any possible opposition was removed, Muhammad bin Salman promoted a series of social reforms conceding certain rights to women, such as lifting women's drive ban in 2018, granting them greater control after 21 years of age, and allowing them to be legal guardian of their children. Furthermore, in a country whose median age skews younger (29.8), the Crown Prince and since 2022 Prime Minister, recognised the need to offer a range of entertainment options, investing in sports, concerts and other leisure events, hoping that they would placate and distract from the wish of gaining greater freedom in other social and political aspects (Ettinger, 2023).

These changes in the Kingdom legal code are envisioned in Saudi Vision 2030, announced in 2016, which similarly to QNV 2030 sets the long-term goals to become a modern country within the next seven years. These objectives also include a series of financial restructurings aimed at diversifying the country oil-dependent portfolio by investing in other sectors, mainly outside national borders, and by the wishes of MbS¹⁷ to enforce a large privatisation of Saudi economy, which entails mass state employment. These domestic reforms pursue three main objectives: "to solidify Saudi Arabia's status at the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds; to position Saudi Arabia as a global investment powerhouse while diversifying its economy and revenues beyond oil; and to leverage Saudi Arabia's geolocation at the crossroads of three continents to become a global hub of Asian, European, and African commerce

¹⁷ Mohammed bin Salman

(Ettinger, 2023). It is central to keep in mind that these actions are only possible due to the extraordinary oil profits; Aramco in May, 2023 became the world's second largest company in terms of revenue, amounting to a shocking \$2.1 trillion (Okonkwo, 2023). These flows are pivotal in Saudi modernisation strategy.

Among the various sectors which are the object of KSA financial investments, sports have been of growing importance in recent years, accompanied by international media headlines. Although, in comparison to its Gulf neighbours, the Kingdom has started quite late to pursue this road, but it is quickly gaining ground as its investments in sports in the last few years have reached a staggering total of more than €47.6bn. The means through which Saudi Arabia invests in sporting clubs and venues, among other activities, is the Public Investment Fund, the country's sovereign wealth fund founded in 1971 under Royal Decree No. (M/24). The chairman of the fund is Prince Mohammed bin Salman himself, while the current board members are mainly government ministers. The fund has been ever more important in the last few years in the country's economic plans, as it is shown by the increasing number of annual investments reported in the 2022 PIF Annual Report (383bn EUR in 2020; 491bn EUR in 2021; 554bn EUR in 2022¹⁸). Saudi Arabia sports strategic investments, similarly to Qatar's, have three main functions.

The first one is diversifying Saudi economy beyond the oil sector, and reforming society to allow a more permissive range of entertainment options, satisfying the population material needs without accompanying them with any political liberalisation.

Secondly, they are a substantial part of a longer-term effort to bind Western to Saudi interests both financially and politically, building bridges with international actors in order to create a global perception which normalise doing business with their regime. (Acharya 2007, as cited in Ettinger, 2023). As the other Gulf States, they need to grow a global net of relations to ensure their security and longevity in an increasingly multipolar world.

Finally, the Nation is in desperate need of creating a positive image of itself, considering it has been tainted by numerous records of human rights violations and infringements of international law, regarding especially its war on Yemen and the infamous 2018 state-sponsored murder and disposal of the Washington Post

¹⁸ The mentioned figures have been changed from Saudi riyals to their respective value in euros

journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul (Ettinger, 2023) (Bianco & Sons, 2023). That is the reason why the country has been actively pursuing sportswashing activities, most famously through investments in football and golf (Boykoff, 2022).

While the last aspect surely plays a non-indifferent role in the country's sports strategy, it is safe to say that as of right now, KSA primary interests remain in the domain of hard power and state security. Nonetheless, this does not exclude that these operations are laying the foundation for the accumulation of soft power in a near future.

This being said, it is time to have a closer look at Saudi Arabia sports strategy. The most comprehensive and recent report available on Saudi sportswashing and sports diplomacy operations is provided by Grant Liberty, a London based non-profit organisation whose goal is to spread awareness on the country's usage of sports and other means to divert public attention from the serious human rights violations, e.g., mass imprisonments, state-sponsored assassinations, infringements of LGBTQ+ and women rights etc...

This report will be used to list the sports in which the PIF has invested until now and exactly how much money the country has directed into each.

Boxing has first been in the interests of the Saudi sporting strategy in 2019, when the country hosted the fight for the WBC¹⁹ featherweight title between Amir Khan and Billy Dib. It was followed later that year by the heavyweight title rematch between Andy Ruiz and Anthony Joshua. Three years later they hosted the rematch between AJ and Oleksander Usyk in Jeddah. The total expenses for these events amount to €245mln²⁰.

Regarding fighting sports, the report mentions a failed attempt to invest €375mln in the world's most renowned Mixed Martial Arts organisation UFC, including a €94mln offer to the Russian Muslim champion Khabib Nurmagomedov to fight Connor McGregor in the country, refused by the former²¹.

Saudi Arabia in 2020 gave birth to the most lucrative horse racing competition in the world, the Saudi Cup, with a total prize deposit of €32.8million and €18.8million for the winner. Total expenses until 2023 amount to €121mln.

¹⁹ World Boxing Council

²⁰ All figures in this section have been changed from dollars to their respective value in euros

²¹ (2020), *Russia's Khabib refuses Saudi's \$100m to fight Ireland's Conor McGregor*, in Middle East Monitor

In 2017, KSA also hosted the King Salman Chess Championship with a €1.87mln prize fund, more than any other previous chess event in history. The Nation eventually lost the right to host international chess competitions the following year, after de facto preventing the participation of Israeli players.

Additionally, Saudis signed a 10 years deal with WWE²² for almost €1bln, providing for two yearly events of the organisation to be hosted in KSA. A further €33mln were spent on snooker events, and €6mln in the 2019 and 2022 Tennis Diriyah Cup.

Interestingly, the Kingdom spent the majority of its total PIF sports investments in Esports, amounting to a staggering total of €35,4bln. Mohammed bin Salman is therefore extending his reach outside traditional sports, laying his eyes in an extremely lucrative and rapidly growing sector. The PIF established in fact the Savvy Games Group, holding numerous stakes in various gaming companies as well.

Despite the variety of Saudis investments, the ones that have conquered the stage are directed towards golf and football. The PIF devoted more almost €5bln to each of them. In 2021 KSA became a major player in the golfing world, investing nearly €2bln to create LIV Golf, whose inaugural tour was set to take place in the spring of 2022. Controversies broke out as early as the idea was conceived, in 2019. The Tour was in competition with the long-standing Professional Golf Association; PIF plan was to sign high-profile international golf players, offering them pharaonic prizes that PGA could not compete with. LIV Golf famously offered Tiger Woods, considered the greatest player of all time, €750mln to compete in their tournaments, but he disagreed honouring his loyalty to PGA; many others did not. This led to a series of antagonistic actions between the two organisations, with PGA banning from its events any player that would have signed for the concurring association. LIV, supported by a series of professional golfers, filed an antitrust lawsuit against the American organisation, leading the US Department of Justice to investigate PGA for anticompetitive behaviour (Davis, Plumley & Wilson, 2022; Schlabach 2022b, as cited in Ettinger, 2023). Eventually LIV Golf Tour managed to arrange a merger with its rival, announced in the summer of 2023. LIV Golf Tour, PGA Tour and PGA European Tour are set to pool their commercial rights into a new venture, funded by the PIF (Draper, 2023).

²² World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc.

Saudi's first relevant investment in football came actually in 2013, acquiring the ownership of the English football club Sheffield United F.C. While this operation has not attracted a great deal of public attention and has not yielded any meaningful result²³, the recent acquisition 80% of the shares for €375mln in English Premier League's Newcastle United F.C. in 2021, followed by the recent privatisation and purchase of 4 Saudi League football clubs by the PIF, has been widely covered by international media. International criticism depicted these financial operations as sportswashing attempts, highlighting the political motives behind them, as these teams can all be considered state-owned. A huge slice of news coverage revolves around the stellar transfers of football stars in the recently acquired Saudi teams; the first and most significant one being the arrival, in December 2022, of football demi-god Cristiano Ronaldo in the Saudi club Al Nassr, in a deal that made him the highest ever paid footballer in history (€470mln in 2 years). These operations and their relevance will be extensively discussed in the last chapter of this paper. In addition, KSA paid €22.5mln to host the Italian Super Cup in the country three times in five years and is set to host the FIFA Club World Cup in 2023. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia planned to promote a bid to host the 2030 FIFA World Cup, but it seems that it has been abandoned in favour of promoting a sole bid for the 2034 edition of the tournament, with the intention of mirroring Qatar's achievement.

Saudi Arabia sports strategy, as shown by these investments, is extremely ambitious and covers a great range of sporting activities. While having in common many of Qatar's characteristics, it differentiates itself for two main reasons: the extremely aggressive use of its sovereign fund, uncaring of creating controversies and putting itself in antagonistic relations with many of the long-established sports institutions; and its majorly international focus. A great portion of its investments are directed abroad, and for now are not aimed at increasing the level of its own athletes and national teams, limited to host international venues. Nonetheless, seeing the recent major shift towards their own Football League, the latter point might change soon.

²³ The team has since then been promoted and relegated several times, without winning any major trophy

	Money spent until 2020 (\$m)	Money spent until 2023 (\$m)
Boxing	107	262.2
Golf	20	5060
Football	169	5077.6
Esports	0	37800
Tennis	6	6
UFC	0	0
Horse Racing	60	125
Chess	2	2
Motorsports	664	1420
Wrestling	1000	1000
Snooker	33	33
Total	2,061	50,786

Money Spent by KSA on sportswashing starting in 2016

Source: Liberty Grant Report (2023), *Sportswashing Saudi Arabia 2023*.

2.3. Qatari-Saudi relations: The GCC diplomatic crisis

As stated in the beginning of this paper, sports have a highly competitive character; this fundamental element of theirs, applies perfectly within the realist interpretation of the realm of international relations, an anarchic system where everyone seeks to be the top player. It should not surprise then, when sports and diplomacy intertwine themselves in a confrontational fashion. Episodes in the sporting world where an international victory assumes even more significance if obtained against a rivalrous nations are not rare, as is the use of sports as direct competition short of war between nations. International tournaments can easily provide a platform for these types of encounters, which can be channelled to pursue one's own political agenda. Considering the complex nature of the relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and in particular their recent fallout during the 2017-2021 Gulf diplomatic crisis, it is possible to witness some instances in which sports were used in the manner just described.

In the last few decades, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the State of Qatar held conflicting views on their respective plans in the region. The former has been clearly trying to establish itself as a leading country in the Arab and Islamic World, strong of their kings' title of custodians of the two holy mosques; its territory is the location of the two most sacred mosques in Islam, the Prophet's Masjid in Medina and the Al-Haram Masjid in Mecca, the site of the Kaaba, the final destination of millions of pilgrims' Hajj.

In order to do that, the House of Saud has been steadily increasing its control and influence in the MENA region, strong of their military power, immense wealth and the US support. Their main obstacle is given by the presence of Iran. In order to maintain its powerful position, the Saudis need the acquiescence of their neighbours.

Qatar, anyway, has proven to be a thorn in the side of the KSA. The country is following its own political agenda, which does not entail compliance with the Saud's plans. The Al-Thani have been persistently trying to impose themselves as an important actor in the region, compensating for their lack of military prowess with their strong international ties, assisted by their foreign investments, and huge soft power in the Arab World, establishing itself as the main voice of the Middle East through Al Jazeera. To prevent its neighbours to conceive any armed invasion, Qatar has built strong relationships with other intimidating military powers, hosting the biggest US military base in the Middle East, the Al Udeid Air base, and a Turkish military base counting around 3,000 troops. Qatar's ambiguous relations with Iran and Muslim fundamentalist groups have more than once enraged its neighbours.

Nonetheless, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are part of the Gulf Cooperation Council, an international organisation founded in 1981 in the wake of the successful Islamic Revolution in Iran. The organisation members are Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman; its headquarters are sited in Riyadh. The charter of the organisation vaguely refers to cooperation and coordination among its member states; in reality, the substantial divergences among some of its members are the reason why Jean-Loup Samaan (2022) refers to it as '*organised hypocrisy*'. The author explains this notion through N. Brunsson's book 'The Organisation of Hypocrisy', in which he argues that the work of organisations will ultimately lead to contradictions, highlighting the divide between "talk, decision and action",

showcasing the usual gap between “the rhetorical production of an organization and the concrete implementation of its promises” (Samaan, 2022). Since the Islamic Revolution, stability in the Gulf region has been considered a primary interest of US foreign policy since Jimmy Carter’s administration, who extensively sponsored the creation of the GCC. Samaan claims that a call for the building of genuine pillars of security in the Gulf is essentially an American aspiration; it is likely that the Gulf monarchies decided to go ahead with the establishment of the GCC as a way to please their precious American ally, rather than a genuine desire for cooperation among them. In the Saudis’ view, the organisation is merely a means at their disposal to pursue their own political agenda, creating the illusion of consensus among its neighbours. Clearly, Qatar does not perceive it the same way, and has always pursued a quite independent foreign policy from the other Gulf states.

But a sharp turn further deepening the divide among the GCC partners came in 2011, during the Arab Spring popular uprisings. While all the other Gulf monarchies sided with the authorities endangered by protests of the Arab youth, providing financial, and in some cases, military support, Qatar chose to side with the protestors and insurgents; famously supporting the Islamist militia opposing Assad regime in Syria, and with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which had a huge part in the overthrowing of the former president Mubarak (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018). The movement was declared a terrorist organisation in 2013-2014 by the Gulf states and by Egypt, after a military coup in the country seized control of the government from the Brotherhood and its recently elected president of the country, Mohamed Morsi. Since then, relations with the current Al Sisi military regime and the Qatari monarchy have plummeted, with the latter hosting many of the Brotherhood’s dissidents. The other Gulf states accused Qatar also of fostering political uprisings in their countries, and to side with Iran, leading to a first, shortly-lived crisis within the GCC in 2014.

In 2017, the accumulating tensions between the two escalated in a new, more serious diplomatic crisis that saw Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt cut all ties with Qatar, following the spread of a series of reports from the Qatar News Association on certain controversial statements by the Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani regarding Iran, Israel and Hamas, plus a declaration by the country’s foreign affairs minister on the withdrawal of the country’s ambassadors from Bahrain,

Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Although Qatari officials quickly branded the previous statements as fake news, citing a hacker attack as the official cause, nonetheless the situation kept on escalating, bringing the quartet to sever any diplomatic ties with Qatar, recalling all their citizens residing in the country (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018). Later they presented a list of 13 draconian demands to their rival, including halting funding of terrorist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, ceding residing political opposition dissidents to their country of origin, shutting down Al Jazeera and other state-funded media outlets, severing all political ties with Iran, terminating any military cooperation with Turkey, paying a monetary compensation for the loss caused by Qatari policies, permitting audits to investigate on the implementation of said measures, and finally completely allying themselves with the rest of the Peninsula regarding political, economic and social issues (Kakar, 2019; Bianco & Stansfield, 2018). Qatari authorities swiftly rejected the list, and sent their foreign minister to seek diplomatic support in the West, finding sympathetic reactions in the countries where Qatar's investments are most prominent, but also more resistance, and a rhetorical support to Kuwait's mediation, in the countries who have closer economic relations with the quartet members; the crisis truly globalised.

The embargo on Qatar was a particularly aggressive move, since the country's livelihood depends on its commercial traffic: it imports 80% of the food it consumes, and oil exports are its main source of income. Saudi Arabia and the others wished to remind Qatar of being a small state that cannot pursue its great ambitions, by trying to choke its economic development. The Al Thani responded in a functional way, establishing more air links through Iran to maintain its exports and imports, and in a symbolical way. In 2017, PSG signed the most expensive transfer in the history of football, securing the Brazilian star Neymar from Barcelona FC for €222mln. Similarly, next year €180mln were spent on another football transfer, the one of the then wonderkid Kylian Mbappé from AS Monaco. The cost was obviously covered by the Qatar Investment Authority, the country's sovereign wealth fund, sending a powerful message to its blockaders (Bianco & Sons, 2023). In 2019, during the Asian Football Cup hosted by the UAE, Qatar secured the trophy serving a humiliating defeat to both the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the process, galvanising its population

during those difficult times and serving a huge blow to the pride of the defeated nations.

The crisis finally met its end in January 2021 with the Al Ula Declaration, signed in the homonymous Saudi city. The rapprochement was initiated by Mohammed bin Salman, the KSA Crown prince, perhaps because of the recent advent of the Biden administration. The previous Trump administration was overtly very close to the prince, ensuring him almost unconditional backing in all of his operations. He probably knew that this level of public support was not ensured with the new president, and used the diplomatic solution to the crisis as a way to ingratiate the US, maintaining friendly relations. While the embargo may be lifted, and the relations reinstated, thinking that the Gulf issues are now solved would be extremely naïve. The deep cleavage between Saudi Arabia and Qatar remains intact, even with the rhetorical address to peace and regional integration of their respective leaders. In the final section of this paper, the use of football clubs as foreign policy tool between the two powers will be discussed further.

CHAPTER III

3. STATE-OWNED FOOTBALL CLUBS: PIF AND QSI ACQUISITIONS

3.1. The Case Study: QSI and PIF Purchase of European and Local Football Clubs

Qatar started investing in European Football as early as in 2010; in July of that year, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Nassar Al-Thani, member of the royal family, bought La Liga team Malaga FC for €36mln. Despite an early historical success for its supporters, meaning the 2013-14 participation to the UEFA Champions League, the first and only one in Malaga history, the club has known a series of unsuccessful results over the years, reaching the bottom with last season's relegation from the Segunda División to the Primera Federación. While this particular venture of the Al Thani is quite unremarkable, the same cannot be said about QSI's purchase of PSG. The investment fund initially acquired 70% of the club stakes in 2011, completing the acquisition with a further 30% the following year. Today the club is the 5th in the world by revenue, accounting for an annual turnover of €654mln, according to Deloitte (Eltayeb, 2023). QSI's chairman Nasser Al Khelaifi was nominated president of the club, and under his reign the Paris based team met an extraordinary success, collecting 30 domestic titles in the last 12 seasons, reaching the top of the table 9 times, and the UEFA Champions league final in 2020. This enormous success was possible thanks to pharaonic spendings in player transfers and contracts. The German website Transfermarkt lists all players' acquisitions in each season; since the Qatari takeover in 2011, the club spent around €2bln in market transfers, bringing to the team global football stars the like of Zlatan Ibrahimovic, David Beckham, Angel Di Maria, Sergio Ramos, Lionel Messi, Neymar Jr, Kylian Mbappé and many more. The last two names also account for the two most expensive transfers in football history, respectively accounting for €222mln and €180mln. PSG has also experienced one of the highest fanbase growth in football, reaching 150mln supports worldwide in 2021, surpassing the historical rival Olympique de Marseille as the most supported French club in the country and abroad.

Anyway, these series of success did not come without controversies. While the entry of huge billionaire investors in European football is not really a news, especially since the heavy commercialisation the sport has been going through since the mid-1980s (Manchester Utd was one of the first football teams to become a public limited company in 1991; Silvio Berlusconi's takeover of AC Milan in 1986). Nonetheless, many football fans have been increasingly feeling estranged by the direction football is taking; what was once a working-class activity, with a strong social identity attached, is now the domain of businessmen and corporations. Furthermore, the inflated prices and salaries of football players made championships around Europe way less competitive, with league titles consistently being awarded to the wealthiest teams; many people feel like this new way of business is shredding the magic of football and its very nature, where genuine passion does not have room anymore. Additionally, in the case of PSG, there is another factor to which European supporters are not used to: the team is quite obviously owned by a state, an absolute monarchy even. Its ownership belongs to the QSI, a subsidiary of QIA, a governmental public investment fund, under the direct control of Qatar's Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. The danger of sports and politics mixing, in this case is very real and not all supporters are fine with that (Danielsen, 2022).

This controversy belongs to other authoritarian regimes directly investing in European football; the UAE, whose City Group directly owns Manchester City FC, plus a series of other teams all over the world, and of course Saudi Arabia, whose recent takeover of Newcastle Utd plus other four teams of its own league did not go unnoticed.

Saudis first engagement with European football came later than its Gulf neighbours, but what they lacked in time, they do not in terms of money. In 2021, the English Premier League club was purchased by the 6th wealthiest sovereign wealth fund²⁴, the Saudi Public Investment Fund, accounting for a total of €7.27bln. It finally obtained the ownership of the club after a year-long legal dispute over broadcasting rights with Qatar's beIN media group; once that was settled, the Premier League was given assurance that there were no political ties between the fund and the Saudi government in order to complete the acquisition. Controversially, the Premier

²⁴ Source: Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute, Rankings by Total Assets (last accessed: 16/09/2023)

League board ignored the fact that the chairman of the PIF is Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince and now Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Newcastle Utd FC is a historical team in English football, with more than 100 years of history (founded in 1892) and important accolades to its name and it boasts a strongly attached fanbase of millions of supporters. Unfortunately, the once great club has been consistently falling short in the last two decades, going through a series of upsetting results and facing relegation twice, in 2009 and 2016. It is therefore easy to understand the enthusiasm of the team's supporters, or *Magpies*, when the new extremely wealthy Saudi owners took over the club promising glory and success in the years ahead (Roslender, 2023). The joyous rash among the fans following the announcement saw thousands of them celebrating around St. James Park, Newcastle Utd's stadium, wearing their team's jerseys and keffiyeh, a typical Saudi headgear, until the club politely asked them to stop (Newman, 2022). Since the takeover, the PIF spent almost €470mln in transfer fees²⁵, greatly increasing the team's performances and obtaining an early achievement, namely last year's Newcastle qualification to this season's UEFA Champions League, missing since 2003.

While this strategy essentially mirrors the examples of Qatar and the UAE, the KSA has decided to do something different. In the summer of 2023, the PIF announced that it would take control of the four top football teams and the founding members of the Saudi Pro League: Al Ahli, Al Ittihad, Al Hilal and Al Nassr (Walid, 2023). The latter became prominent after the transfer of Cristiano Ronaldo in December 2022; the football demi-god was only the first of a numerous list of global stars of the European leagues to join Saudi teams. According to Transfermarkt, the quartet spent approximately €835mln just in last summer transfer session, engaging names like Riyad Mahrez, Kalidou Koulibaly, Sergei Milinkovic-Savic, 'Ngolo Kanté, Sadio Mané, Aymeric Laporte and Neymar Jr. All of them were offered way above average salaries to lure them in the league; Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo record-breaking contact will ensure him €200mln per season, while the Brazilian Neymar Jr is set to gain €40mln per season.

The transfer of football players in their last years of career to less popular and competitive destination for higher salaries is not uncommon in the football world,

²⁵ Source: Transfermarkt, Newcastle, Storico Trasferimenti

especially in the last two decades; many players moved to somewhat bizarre locations for these reasons, the most selected being the US, Japan and China, which are commonly referred to as 'retirement leagues'. Nonetheless this is a different case. Fans are assisting to a series of beloved, still highly performative and relatively young players defect from a perhaps rewarding future in European competitions, the most viewed and relevant in the world, to a relatively unknown league, in a country where there is very little football tradition. But there's more to it than meet. It is clear that Mohammed bin Salman plan is to make the Saudi Pro League the most competitive and followed in the MENA region. Football is already the most popular sport in the area, and after the 2022 FIFA World Cup hosted in Qatar, and the incredible run of the Moroccan national team, the number of Arab fans has surely increased. As Saudi Arabia population grows younger, with the median age being of 29.8 years, the prince needs to meet the need for sports and entertainment of his subjects, hopefully diverted by the sporting enthusiasm from the lack of political freedom, which does not seat well with the younger generations.

2022 witnessed a brutal crackdown on citizens sharing negative opinions on the regime online; at least 15 people were sentenced to serve prison terms ranging from 10 to 45 years for this reason, and the infiltration of a social media company by the Saudi authority to act as a monitor to these activities has been reported (Amnesty International, 2023). These ruthless repressions are likely to increase in the future, as MbS follow on his path to shape the country as he wants it to be, with no tolerance for dissent.

3.2. Sportswashing through Investments in Football Clubs

Seeing the keen interest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in directly investing and owning football clubs, it is imperative to seek the reasons why these regimes are interested in such operations and what do they hope to obtain through them. In order to get a better understanding of this phenomenon, it is important to delve into the meaning of a football club within the community which supports it. For many football fans, following their favourite team either every weekend in the stadium or from the tv of a pub, or from their own home, it is so much more than mere leisure. The feelings

attached to a certain team are usually very strong, and the experience of fandom transcends being a regular hobby, or a personal interest. Football fandom is a significant and permanent component of identity, many support a certain team because it was their parents' favourite, and their grandparents and so on; just like tradition, it is handed down from one generation to the next one. It is a combination of cognitive, emotional and symbolic experiences which makes fandom an essential component of a supporter's identity (Porat, 2010). Furthermore, many teams have strong geographical, cultural and religious ties with the community where they have been established, some famous examples are Athletic Bilbao in the Basque region in Spain, Celtic FC in Glasgow and its catholic supporters, Barcelona FC in Catalunya and Bnei Sakhnin in Israel with its Palestinian supporters. They are object of pride and identity for their community (Porat, 2010).

Nowadays the relationship between supporters and their clubs has undergone through major changes, especially since the 1990s. According to Cleland (2010), by the end of the 1980s many fans started feeling as the previous relationship with the club and its management shifted, neglecting their needs and inputs. One of the reasons mentioned is the series of disastrous events and tragic accidents in English stadia, many of them caused by the violence of hooligans. In the 1990s, with the removal of these subjects from the stadia and the creation of the English Premier League, families started attending the games and many teams became IPO, entering in the stock market. The advent of internet and social media gave room to more interactions between the clubs and its fans. The latter are fundamental for the economic health of the teams, since they are the ones paying the tickets for the games, purchasing the merchandise of the team, following them on social media pages and so on... these new dynamics allowed for the fans to gain more importance within the management of the clubs, therefore giving their opinions on certain matter more weight.

The best way to maintain a good relationship with the supporters, and therefore ensure the future of the club, is to win trophies. That is where the autocrats and their infinite resources come in. The purchase of a professional football club in a putative democracy by a controversial regime has been identified by Boykoff (2022) as a new form of sportswashing. The playbook was set in 2008 by the UAE with the purchase of Manchester City FC. The plan is for the new owners to identify a team with a solid

fanbase who has recently been going through a rough patch, inject huge quantity of money in it to expand and increase the quality of its rosters, which in return will allow the club to win titles, establishing a blissful relation with the supporters. The latter might use their clubs' success to differentiate themselves in a good light from other clubs, ultimately legitimising the positive image the owner (Erstad, 2023). In the research conducted by Emma Erstad, the author found out that in the case of MCFC²⁶ and PSG, following the clubs' victories fans were more likely to show a positive attitude toward the values of the external state-affiliated ownership. Nonetheless, the study has also found that those supporters do not wish to live in the authoritarian states themselves.

Anyway, the clubs' victories have been proved effective in diverting the attention of fans from the owner's abysmal human rights record, and instead refocusing it on the success of the teams. It is also note-worthy that international press has not been particularly gentle with the new way of doing business within football, and supporters all over the world are holding the same feelings. The entry of wealthy corporate ownership in football has also prompted an increasing commercialisation of the sport. Transfer fees, players' salaries and ticket prices are all being immensely inflated in recent times. While this trend is not solely attributable to autocratic owners, since it is not them who have introduced this corporate model, they are surely applying it and benefitting from it. The estrangement that football fans have been experiencing gave the way to the rise of movements resisting this new trend; 'Against Modern Football' movements have been developing all over Europe, and they often protest through demonstrations, banners, slogans, boycotts and petitions (Choluj, Gerard & May, 2020).

One might then think that at the end of the day, sportswashing is not really succeeding, and these investments from the PIF, the QSI and the City Group are not obtaining the results that they have been looking for; and one could not be more wrong. This summer, the PIF made global headlines with their acquisition of 4 teams in the Saudi Pro League, and the subsequent incredible summer transfer session, in which they have spent hundreds of millions of euros in the pursue of international football stars. It is not a novelty that these individuals are highly influential in today's society, especially among youngsters. Cristiano Ronaldo's Instagram page is the most

²⁶ Manchester City Football Club

followed in the world, with 604mln followers; Lionel Messi is right behind him with 486mln. The former's arrival in Saudi Arabia was a historical event for Arab and Muslim fans worldwide; if asked about that possibility only one year ago, many would have deemed it as impossible. The amount of soft power that a similar operation is about to wield is abnormous. Football is the number one sport in the MENA region, and Saudi Arabia is on the way to become its main hub; Saudi Arabia has an increasingly young population, whose wishes for more political freedom and participation are to be smothered also through persuasion, not only coercion. The deal is simple: as long as the regime is not to be questioned, it will provide any form of entertainment desired for any amount of money. In doubting the efficiency of sportswashing, it is important not to incur in the Eurocentric error of observing its effects on the Western World alone, deliberately cutting off other possible target audiences.

Another relevant question on its efficiency, is to be sought in the media coverage regarding this summer's transfers to Saudi Arabia. As mentioned earlier, news outlets have not been gentle towards Saudis regarding their investments; one of the main accusations toward the regime is to be "disrupting the football landscape" (The Indian Express, 2023). The majority of worldwide criticism has been in fact revolving around the aggressive and exponential use of their fund by the Saudis, which are accused of making the competition unfair for the European clubs. And while a lot of articles have been written on this theme alone, much fewer treated, for example, the killing of at least a hundred of Ethiopian asylum seekers trying to cross the Yemen-Saudi border between March 2022 and June 2023 (Human Rights Watch, 2023). It is possible then to argue, that even if receiving bad publicity, as long as the public attention is diverted from far more serious issues, the sportswasher goals may still be attained.

3.3. Sport Diplomacy through Investments in Football Clubs

There is one remaining aspect of the PIF and QSI investments in football clubs left to be analysed. These operations, together with pursuing the diversification of the country's economy and sportswashing their image to the public, serve as a

continuation of their own foreign policy, often in a confrontational manner between each other. To back this claim, a few examples will be provided, mostly based in the time-frame of the 2017-2021 Gulf Cooperation Council diplomatic crisis, that will show how the ownership of these clubs aligns with the owners' foreign policy.

Firstly, following the beginning of the crisis, Qatar's foreign minister embarked on a series of diplomatic visits to Europe seeking for allies in the country's cause. Sympathetic responses were mainly found in countries where the QIA directed a substantial part of its investments; among them, there is France. The establishment of informal diplomatic ties with the country started with QSI's takeover of the Parisien football club Paris-Saint Germain, in 2011. Since then, Qataris heavily invested in the country through a series of initiatives, mostly stemming from sports. The Qatari sports broadcasting outlet, beIN, is one of the most important in France, and offers the broadcast of all of 5 top European football leagues plus the main international club competitions in the continent. It is then not really a surprise that France immediately posed itself as a mediator in the crisis, advocating for the normalisation of relations among the parties involved and the lift of the quartet's ban on the State of Qatar. Therefore, it is possible to witness how Qatar's purchase of PSG aligns with the state's goals to establish friendly and strong diplomatic ties with the West.

Secondly, still regarding the case of PSG, in 2017 the QSI reached an agreement with Neymar Jr. to introduce him in the roster of the French team, for a record-breaking transfer fee of €222mln. The Brazilian was followed the next year by the French star Kylian Mbappé, whose cost for his engagement amounted to €180mln. These two are not solely transfer market operations, they actually hold a great symbolic value. They happened in the midst of the diplomatic crisis which saw Qatar being completely cut off by its neighbouring rivals, who aimed at disrupting the country's economy to make it fall in line with their decisions. Pursuing such a costly operation for apparently frivolous reasons constitute a serious slap in the face of its opposers, and strengthen the Emirate position against their demands.

Thirdly, in 2020, the PIF deal to acquire Newcastle United was temporary suspended because of the legal dispute between the Qatari sports broadcaster beIN and the Saudi-operated pirate pay television beoutQ ('Be out Qatar') regarding the unlawful suspension and piracy of sports broadcasting rights of beIN in Saudi Arabia that took

place at the beginning of the crisis in 2017. Saudi authorities did not lose time and quickly instrumentalised the situation to represent the blockade of the takeover to its soon-to-be Newcastle supporters as the interference of the Emirate in the Saudis' strife to bring back the club to its ancient glory. To do so, they established a series of fake accounts on social media which represented Geordie supporters posting public attacks on the government of Qatar, managing to foster the fans' rage against the latter (Jones, 2022). In such fashion the KSA was able to frame a particular situation in a way to both build a positive image of themselves to their target audience, and to mobilise the latter antagonising it to its regional rival.

Lastly, the pharaonic market transfers going on during the summer of 2023 which saw the arrival in Saudi Arabia of a series of global football stars, aim directly at increasing the competition and the viewership of the Saudi Pro League. Saudis are set to bid for the hosting of the 2034 FIFA Men's World Cup, the modernisation and building of sporting infrastructure together with the increase in relevance of their domestic football league are set to add substance to Saudi's claim over staging the venue in its territory. The establishment of Saudi Arabia as the new MENA region football hub could be also designed with the intention of stripping Qatar of the position in the Middle-East sporting world for which it has worked and invested so much, denying the small country of one of its most important assets, while enriching Saudi capacity for soft power.

These examples serve as a way to show how football, in particular, and a country's own agenda can perfectly intertwine, with the former serving as an instrument to the latter. Whether or not one agrees with the mixing of sports and politics, such thing has been a reality for a very long time, and now it is more than ever.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate aim of this dissertation was to explore the relationship between the acquisition of football clubs by the authoritarian regimes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the realisation of their political agenda; in particular, the focus of this work was set on how such acts constitute a case of sportswashing and why these regimes select these particular venues for polishing their international image, and also how these financial operations constitute the continuation of Saudi and Qatari foreign policy in the context of the GCC diplomatic crisis. The initial theoretical framework and the analysis of Saudi Arabia and Qatar sports strategy and their diplomatic relations has provided the context needed to analyse the cases of the acquisition of PSG by the QSI and of Newcastle Utd, Al Nassr, Al Ittihad, Al Hilal and Al Ahli by the PIF. It was shown how the strong social identity attached to the support of a football club pushes the supporter to engage in collective experiences, which in the case of victory are likely to build a positive image of the club's ownership, setting a fundamental motive for the Gulf regimes to engage in these financial operations. Furthermore, it was highlighted how there are multiple target audiences to these ventures, and while some might have the impression that sportswashing is not particularly effective in this case, while it may be true for an audience, it is not necessarily true for all of them. After that, it argues how even a negative media coverage might not be a defeat, as long as this coverage divert public attention from far more serious and pressing issues that the sportswasher do not wish to be of public domain. Finally, it provided a series of examples where the acquisition of football teams constituted the continuation of their owners' foreign policies, as the intended effects of these ventures aligned with the states' diplomatic pursue at the time. While these findings may not be enough to build a general theory on this particular form of sportswashing, they are to be considered as an invite to more thorough academic research on the phenomenon, as its use and effectiveness is likely to increase with time.

Nowadays, as sports and politics are ever more mixed, it is fundamental to have the theoretical background to recognise when certain events imply a certain political

agenda, and how they might serve the interests of certain actors. It is also central to keep in mind that this phenomenon is not to be attached to only certain political entities, meaning non-democratic, western regimes, but it can, and it is, used by a multitude of different states in the world, some of them being western democracies. To be safe from sportswashing, it is essential to be able to recognise it, and to do that it is necessary to be able to define it, without political or ideological sympathies, but focusing solely on the facts at hand. Jules Boykoff has been working towards the building of a strong enough theoretical framework to finally enable scholars to perceive and use sportswashing as an analytical concept; this is the route that the academic world shall take, and I sincerely hope that this work will be a small step toward this direction.

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