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Sports Mega-Events, Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment: international supporters' perspectives on Qatar's acquisition of the 2022 FIFA World Cup finals

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Through conducting document analysis, field work, and semi-structured interviews at five major tournaments in Asia, North America, Europe and South America, the paper examines the perspectives of international football supporters on the Fédération Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA) decision to award the 2022 World Cup finals to the State of Qatar. The paper is separated into five sections. First we ground Qatar's sporting strategy within the concept of 'soft power', as well as pinpoint the negative consequences that have manifest since the state's acquisition of the 2022 finals. Second, we disclose and defend our chosen data collection strategy. Third, we uncover and discuss our results with reference to three key themes: *the state's suitability as a football destination; the dubious awarding of the 2022 World Cup; and, Qatar's cultural backdrop and domestic policies*. Fourth, we align our findings to Qatar's foreign policy intentions and 'soft disempowerment' consequences, locating in the process the opportunities and challenges that accompany the state's hosting of the 2022 finals. We conclude by reflecting upon the contribution we have made here, as well as acknowledging the importance of Qatar for current and future sports mega-event research.

Keywords: Qatar; soft power; global sport; football; sports fandom; sports corruption

Notes on Contributors

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Introduction

Over the previous decade, the State of Qatar has undeniably ascended to global prominence, despite inhabiting a national citizenry of little over 250,000. This has been evident through the state becoming the world's third largest oil producer and principal supplier of liquefied natural gas; positioning itself as a fundamental mediator between fractured groups across the Middle East; the multinational reach of the media network, Al Jazeera; and via the Qatar Investment Authority, which holds stakes in numerous leading corporations, notably Barclays Bank, Sainsbury's and the Harrods Group. Combined, these practices optimize Qatar's long-term national commitment: 'to enhance competitiveness and attract investment [that] will be needed in a dynamic and increasingly borderless international economy' (General Secretariat for Development and Planning, 2008: 25).

It is, nonetheless, the role of global sport that has occupied the foremost interest of the Qatari leadership in recent years. Alongside hosting the 2005 West Asian Games, the 2006 Asian Games, the 2011 Asian Cup, and the 2015 Men's Handball World Championships, the state annually stages the Qatar Open Golf Masters, the ATP and WTA Tennis Championships, and the Doha stage of the MotoGP World Championships; future events include the 2019 IAAF World Championships in Athletics and football's 2022 FIFA World Cup (22FWC). The acquisition of elite sporting occasions is complemented by the organizing of numerous year on year sports conferences, notably the Doha GOALS Forum and Securing Sport symposium; and Qatar Sports Investment's purchase of European football club, Paris Saint-Germain, as well as its role in securing the original €150 million agreement between FC Barcelona and the Qatar Foundation (now Qatar Airways) – the first commercial sponsor of the FC Barcelona shirt.

As argued in detail elsewhere (see: Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014a; 2014b), we maintain here Qatar's increasing engagement with global sport rests on the desire to acquire 'soft power'. The concept of soft power was coined in 1990 by American political scientist, Joseph Nye. According to Nye, in the contemporary epoch, political outcomes can be attained through a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' strategies (Nye, 1990; Keohane and Nye, 1998). On the one hand, leaders may enforce forms of 'hard power', through, for example, offering economic incentive or drawing on military means; on the other, leaders may indirectly adapt the political agenda in such a way which shapes the preferences of others through, for instance, emulating one's 'soft power resources': approving values and ideologies, credible and prominent institutions and policies, and an attractive culture (Nye, 2002; 2004; 2008). It is this latter approach which Nye calls 'soft power': 'the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion' (Keohane and Nye, 1998: 98). Such attraction converts into power outcomes when those on the receiving end of the soft power strategy look to the state producing it for verification and leadership, or seek to imitate their domestic and/or international accomplishments (Keohane and Nye, 1998).

The desire to acquire soft power forms arguably accounts, at least in part, for why national leaders fiercely compete with one another to obtain hosting rights for sport mega-events (cf. Andreff and Szymanski, 2006). With their unprecedented global appeal, 'first order' events, such as the FIFA World Cup and Summer Olympic Games provide valuable opportunities for states to meaningfully contribute towards globally showcasing their language, culture, heritage, and capabilities, and to attract others through inbound tourism, increased trade, and a growing sense of national pride (cf. Grix and Houlihan, 2013; Grix, 2014; Grix *et al*, 2015). In the case of Qatar, for example, we have seen how in raising global awareness of the state's socio-political supremacy, the hosting of sports tournaments intend to be leveraged to showcase ideals of modernity, proficiency and innovation; furthermore, in seeking to align itself to universal ideas of peace and security, and exhibit the state's differentiation from its Middle East neighbours who have experienced recent instances of socio-political unrest, the staging of sports events are intended to frame the state as a cooperative,

responsive and friendly member of international society; and finally, we have witnessed how Qatari authorities not only plan to engage with global sport for the sake of health and well-being *per se*, but also understand the foreign policy returns on the creation of ‘positive’ sport policies and ‘world-leading’ institutions that validate the aptitude to successfully mitigate contemporary challenges (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2014a; 2014b).

Nonetheless, simply having the ambition to be seen as attractive through the use of global sport does not automatically lead to one becoming so in the minds of others. In fact, for states that endeavour to improve their image through global sport and its subsequent mass-media exposure, there is always the need to consider the potential for ‘soft disempowerment’, referring to ‘those occasions in which you may upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a loss of attractiveness or influence’ (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014a; 2014b: 12; cf. Giulianotti, 2015). Since being awarded the rights to the 22FWC in 2010, Qatar’s soft disempowerment has been played out most predominantly on four levels: first are continuous allegations of bribery and corruption surrounding the acquirement of the 22FWC itself (cf. *The Sunday Times*, 1st June 2014); second is the heightened international awareness of Qatar’s issues with human rights (*The Guardian*, 25th September 2013); third, trepidations have been expressed over the health and safety of players and fans, particularly with regard to Qatar’s extreme climate and lack of freedom for women and homosexuals (*The Telegraph*, 2nd December 2010; *The Guardian*, 8th September 2013); and finally, it is perceived the sale of alcohol will be profoundly restricted in comparison to previous World Cup destinations, suggesting supporters will be forced to heavily limit their consumption patterns, both inside and outside of stadiums (*The Telegraph*, 17th March 2014).

In light of the state’s increasing sporting endeavours and resulting consequences, we attempt here to fill a substantial gap vis-à-vis socio-political scholarship on Qatar and sport. Notable research in this area includes: Amara’s (2005) exploration into the political discourses surrounding the 2006 Asian Games; Campbell’s (2011) study on the harvesting of athletic personnel to solidify nationalism; Foley *et al.*’s (2012) investigation into the use of sport to project images of safety and familiarity; Ginesta and San Eugenio’s (2013) evaluation of the significance of sport for place branding; Rolim Silva’s (2014) analysis on the role of sport within historical pursuits of nation building; and finally, Brannagan and Giulianotti’s (2014a; 2014b) examination of the soft power intentions and consequences of Qatar’s global sports strategy. In providing a more fan-centred approach, we offer the first academic account to focus on, and give voice to, the intersubjective world of devoted international match-attending football supporters who perceive themselves to be affected by the decision to award Qatar the 22FWC. Openly documenting and considering these perspectives, we believe, is of utmost importance, as such supporters act as a key stakeholders and consumers of football, without whom these mega-events would probably not take place (Rookwood and Millward, 2011; Rookwood and Chan, 2011; Sutton and Rookwood, 2015).

The remainder of the paper is separated into four sections. First, we disclose the thinking behind our chosen data collection strategy. Second, we reveal and discuss the results from our data analysis with reference to three core themes. Third, we examine and ground supporters’ perspectives in the context of soft power and soft disempowerment, highlighting the most significant opportunities and challenges the state will face leading up to and during its hosting of the 2022 finals. We conclude by reflecting upon our contribution here, as well as identifying the significance of Qatar for sport mega-event research.

Methods

In formulating our data collection strategy, we decided to adhere to that of ‘within-methods triangulation’, referring to the use of multiple approaches within a given scientific paradigm (Johnson et al., 2007; cf. Denzin, 1978). Drawing on this form of triangulation ensured we gathered knowledge from comparative viewpoints, and were thus able to acquire greater confidence in our findings (cf. Flick, in Flick *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, the data presented here was collected in three stages.

The first included the continual analysis of key documents since Qatar’s awarding of the 22FWC in December 2010, most notably international media articles and related FIFA reports. This armed us with key background information to ensure the central points were covered during each of our discussions with supporters (cf. Bowen, 2009). The second stage included semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation at five major football tournaments in Asia, North America, Europe and South America over the course of four years. In total, four focus groups (each comprised of four to six people) and fifteen interviews were conducted at sixteen games spread across the 2011 Asian Cup in Qatar, the 2011 Gold Cup in USA, the 2012 European Championships in Poland, the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, and the 2015 Copa America in Chile. Our inclusion criteria ensured all interviewees and focus group respondents were English speaking and had previously attended at least one FIFA World Cup and one continental confederation event prior to the respective competition where data was collected. Engaging with supporters directly allowed us to examine the effect the media has on shaping various attitudes, as well as permitting additional comment to surface. The final stage included field work undertaken through four visits to Qatar in January 2011, May 2012, March 2013, and December 2013, during which we attended various sport and cultural events, and visited key tourist sites that will play an essential role during the hosting of the 22FWC. Experiencing Qatar first-hand allowed us to both question and relate to data which emerged from our media analysis, as well as interviews, focus groups and participant observation at various football events. All data was subjected to a thorough thematic analysis.

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar: supporters’ perspectives

Our thematic analysis indicated the central perspectives of football fans vis-à-vis Qatar’s awarding of the 22FWC revolved around three key themes: *the state’s suitability as a football destination; the dubious awarding of the 2022 World Cup; and, Qatar’s cultural backdrop and domestic policies.*

The State’s Suitability as a Football Destination

A prominent theme to emerge from our analysis centred on Qatar’s suitability as a football destination. Most specifically, it became clear to us early on that many supporters held the opinion that the state severely lacked the kind of football infrastructure needed to host the 22FWC. Although Qatar is no stranger to staging ‘second-order’ sports events, supporters reminded us that the World Cup will require far more infrastructure and expenditure. Acknowledging this, Qatar’s World Cup bid proposed the inclusion of twelve stadiums in seven cities, eight of which are to be constructed from scratch, with the other four requiring expansion. The building of eight new stadiums solely for the 22FWC was questioned by many supporters who advocated that the tournament should have gone somewhere with stadia already present: ‘Should it have gone to England, where everything’s in place, or should it go to another country that needs to create virtually everything from scratch?’ (interview 4, FIFA World Cup, Rio: 21st June 2014). While FIFA’s embryonic policy to award football’s greatest spectacle to new destinations suggests England were unlikely to emerge successful in any bid for this round of World Cups, numerous international media sources have questioned the decision to award the 22FWC to a country with such a lack of football heritage, strongly aligning with supporter opinion in this context: an article in *The Independent*, for example, speaks of ‘a concern about a lack of infrastructure’, leading with

the title ‘Shock as Qatar win vote for 2022 World Cup’ (2nd December 2010); likewise, Dave Jamieson of the *Huffington Post* declares FIFA’s pronouncement to award the 22FWC to Qatar as ‘shocking’ given ‘the lack of infrastructure in place’ (2nd October 2014).

Similarly, supporters made constant reference to Qatar’s absence of a strong football pedigree, and subsequent lack of need for so many stadiums post-2022, as one fan proclaimed: ‘As if they need all those soccer stadiums. What a waste...It’s such a small country, and not exactly a sporting giant. Attendances even at the biggest club can’t be much. What are those guys thinking?’ (interview 6, Gold Cup, Miami, 10th June 2011). Although we could dispute the notion that Qatar is not a ‘sporting giant’ – alongside hosting copious sports events, the state is also a highly sought-after training destination for professional athletes and clubs, attracted in particular to the ASPIRE Academy of Sporting Excellence (field notes, May 2012) – supporters referred more directly to the relatively insignificant structural and cultural resonance of the state’s domestic football league: ‘Surely you can’t build a stadium just for a couple of World Cup games? There needs to be club teams taking over grounds, and Qatar obviously doesn’t have that kind of demand. Waste of money’ (respondent 3, focus group, European Championships, Warsaw: 16th June 2012). Although clubs from the Qatar Stars League, the state’s premier domestic competition, received \$10 million each in 2003 from the Qatari Football Association to acquire some of the world’s leading players (field notes, January 2011), including the likes of Pep Guardiola, Raúl González and Xavi Hernández, the competition’s fourteen teams find it difficult to appeal to a sustainable number of supporters, with some stadiums occupying capacities of up to 13,000 averaging only a hundred or so citizens per match (cf. Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014b).

In acknowledging their lack of a football pedigree, and in showcasing their subsequent desire to overcome the prospect of ‘white elephants’, Qatar’s World Cup bid included the design of modular tier stadiums to be deconstructed post-tournament. The ‘legacy’ intentions here are to effectively donate much of the infrastructure used for the World Cup, including 170,000 seats and related cooling technology, to form new arenas in developing nations who wish to advance their domestic football but lack the resources to do so (Qatar Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, no date). Nevertheless, when raised during our interviews, it became clear that none of the supporters we spoke to were conscious of such a strategy, and, upon being informed, responded in a somewhat adverse manner, as demonstrated by one fan we interviewed in Brazil:

I’ve not heard anything about that, and I keep my ear to the ground. But that’s ridiculous, surely. It costs a fortune to build a stadium, a fortune to take down, a fortune to transport, and a fortune to put it back up again. And where would they take them? Crazy idea. They’d alienate more people with that kind of waste (interview 1, FIFA World Cup, Rio: 21st June 2014).

Although Qatari authorities see the exporting of stadiums as a significant component in the development of world football (cf. Qatar Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, no date), to many of the supporters we engaged with, the need for such a policy was another reminder of why the 22FWC should be hosted elsewhere. Specifically, as articulated above, some supporters felt the overall cost of construction, deconstruction, transportation and reconstruction of stadiums post-World Cup was an unnecessary expense for a four week tournament, inferring that the finance required to achieve such an ambitious strategy could be better spent on wider areas of development if the tournament was hosted by an alternative country that could sustainably make use of so many stadia. In a similar fashion, Qatar’s solution to overcoming climate concerns, the development of environmentally-friendly, ‘innovative’ cooling technology to control temperatures inside stadiums, training venues and fans zones acted as a further reminder amongst supporters of why the state was an unsuitable destination (cf. Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014b: 7):

I'd never heard of the phrase 'cooling technology' until Qatar got the World Cup... Imagine building twelve grounds you don't really need long term, as well as training facilities and fan parks, and making them all air conditioned in a country that's effectively a glorified dessert. Then imagine what you could do with the money you would save if you had that World Cup in England. That is frightening (interview 2, FIFA World Cup, Rio: 21st June 2014).

A further point raised by supporters we engaged with revolved around hosting the 22FWC in the traditional summer period of June and July (which at the time of our data collection, was the most likely future scenario). Average temperatures in Qatar's capital, Doha, rarely drop below 40°C in the hottest months, a significant rise on the 21°C experienced during the 2014 final in Rio de Janeiro, the 13°C 2010 final in Johannesburg, and the 18°C 2006 final in Berlin (BBC, 25th February 2015). This has led to key football officials expressing their concern over the health and safety of players and fans alike. Arguably most outspoken on the matter has been Greg Dyke, Chairman of the English Football Association, who recently suggested that 'we cannot possibly play in the summer in Qatar, it would be ridiculous to play then... The best option would be to not hold it in Qatar, but we are now beyond that...' (*The Guardian*, 24th February 2015). However, although we encountered some comparable opinions, in going against the current discourse, many supporters we interviewed took a more balanced perspective: 'We had altitude in Mexico in '86, we've had humidity in Brazil. I guess we'll have the heat now in Qatar' (interview 1, FIFA World Cup, São Paulo: 26th June 2014). Interestingly, our engagement with fans suggested that those who regularly attend the World Cup and other international football tournaments in person would not be put off travelling to Qatar due to climate concerns, regardless of what has been communicated by senior officials of the game, with some even revealing their preference for a June-July World Cup: 'Personally I'd keep it in the summer. It's always been that way' (focus group, European Championships, Warsaw: 16th June 2012).

Nonetheless, many supporters did comment on how FIFA's drawn out 'indecision' over the timing of the tournament was, at the time, proving detrimental to the external perceptions of Qatar, as one fan explained: 'The indecision doesn't make Qatar look very good. We don't know if it's going to be in the summer or winter. It's a long way off I know, but sooner or later they're going to have to decide' (focus group, European Championships, Warsaw: 16th June 2012). Such negativity relates directly to the extensive and continuous criticism from the media and senior officials around the potential need for an unconventional winter World Cup in 2022. After more than four years of extreme controversy, it wasn't until 19th March 2015 that FIFA eventually confirmed the 22FWC would be held during the winter months, with the final to be played on the 18th December. Subsequently, one interviewee stated 'Finally we have a decision about the World Cup in Qatar being in Winter. But the organisers and FIFA will be remembered for their indecision, as well as the corruption – and indecisiveness and organisation do not go together, so it does not paint Qatar or FIFA in a good light. But then, what about this World Cup bid has?' (interview 3, Copa America, Santiago: 29th June 2015)

The scheduling fate of the 22FWC has not only been a long drawn out process, as identified by supporters, but has also caused significant concern amongst various football authorities, most notably the European Club Association, who called on FIFA to provide compensation for the financial losses of players clubs will suffer with this programming switch, a proposal initially rejected by the world governing body's secretary general, Jérôme Valcke. Three weeks later, however, it emerged that FIFA had agreed to treble its payments to clubs for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, with club personnel also being allowed to have a significant say on changes to the international calendar in accommodating a winter tournament (*The Guardian*, 27th February 2015; *The Telegraph*, 19th March, 2015; *The Guardian*, 20th March, 2015).

The final point raised in this regard centred on the safety of supporters themselves, with many expressing their sincere concern over whether Qatari authorities would be able to effectively deal with forms of hooliganism and crowd disorder. Among the teams who qualified for the 2011 Asian cup were Lebanon, Syria, both North and South Korea – and Iran and Iraq, who faced each other early on in the tournament. Although we saw every team play in the competition, we witnessed limited examples of the participatory or disorderly behaviours often associated with football fandom (field notes, January 2011). The problematic nature of spectatorship which presents challenges to organisers of football mega-events is something supporters alleged Qatar had ‘no experience of’, as one fan articulated: ‘The Asian Cup is one thing; the World Cup is something else. Qatar has no experience of dealing with European fans or South American fans. I’m not sure how they’ll cope’ (participant observation, Asian Cup, Doha: 8th January 2011); a further supporter added: ‘...you need police with experience of dealing with football fans. You know, who understand when it’s going off or about to go off, and when fans are just being rowdy’ (respondent 1, focus group, European Championships, Warsaw: 16th June 2012). Considering this, many supporters felt the 22FWC may be better going to a country that had at least some experience of dealing with football violence or crowd disorder – a point of great significance when we consider the reduction of hooliganism at recent World Cups owes much to the introduction of effectively monitored fan parks, a clear reflection of the experience needed to respond to the challenge of hosting large numbers of football supporters (cf. Sutton and Rookwood, 2015).

Furthermore, in this context, some fans also expressed concern over the geographical scale of Qatar, suggesting that the 22FWC should, at the very least, have been shared with neighbouring states:

People moan about the size of Brazil, but you need the host nation to be a certain size, to keep fans apart. Imagine if Bosnia and Serbia both qualify, not to mention Israel and, well virtually anyone who hates them. And wouldn’t everyone go through the capital? ...They should have shared it with Dubai (respondent 1, focus group, European Championships, Warsaw: 16th June 2012).

Central here were supporters’ feelings that given Qatar’s relative size, authorities would find it impossible to maintain the necessary boundaries between rival supporter groups – predominantly those from nations with a long history of demonstrating forms of hatred and animosity between one another, either due to wider socio-political differences, or long-term football rivalries. Indeed, Qatar will need to ensure that it either acquires or develops experienced law enforcers during the tournament in 2022 if such issues of fan violence are to be prevented in the most effective way, particularly when we consider that the majority of stadiums are to be located within a 25-30km radius of one another (FIFA, no date). However, a further point of significance here relates to how supporters will be treated under Qatar’s Shari’a law during the 22FWC. The Qatar legal system differs greatly to the laws of many countries across Europe, America and elsewhere, with civil rights for offenders severely restricted. Opportunities for free speech, for example, are extremely narrow, with acts of proselytizing, swearing or insulting others in open spaces leading to imprisonment. Additionally, it is illegal to be publically intoxicated in Qatar, to show forms of intimacy in communal spaces, and the possession or use of illicit drugs can result in the death penalty (field notes, December 2013).

The Dubious Awarding of the 2022 World Cup

The second theme to emerge from our analysis centred on the dubious relationship between certain Qatari personnel and those at the helm of the world governing body of football. Dominant

to supporters we engaged with was the notion that Qatar's acquisition of the 22FWC rested on a great deal of dishonesty and untrustworthiness. This is not surprising given the plethora of media commentators that have continuously questioned the integrity of Qatar's right to host the 2022 finals, founded principally on accusations of bribery and corruption.

To several groups of supporters, the dubious nature of Qatar's acquisition of the 22FWC started with FIFA's decision to award the state the tournament twelve years in advance, signifying the beginning of a noticeably 'unusual' relationship between the world governing body of football and Qatari personnel:

The first thing to note is that the World Cup was given to Qatar for 2022 in 2010. With that new rotation of World Cups there was so much competition in Europe for 2018 it's as if FIFA saw their chance to sneak 2022 in under the radar. No one really spoke about how unusual or unnecessary it was to make the announcement for it twelve years in advance. Particularly for a country that changes so quickly. All the European focus was on 2018, and when England lost out to Russia that became the focus. Meanwhile, it was casually announced that this tiny oil-rich nation of Qatar would get the one after, no questions asked. That's how it came across (interview 2, 2014 FIFA World Cup, Rio: 21st June 2014).

In fact, many supporters felt the decision to award Qatar the 22FWC in December 2010 was convenient at the very least, with some going further by suggesting the verdict was 'a bit suspicious even' (interview 1, Asian Cup, Doha: 12th January 2011). The rationale amongst various fans here related to the fact that FIFA's decision to award a World Cup twelve years in advance is almost unprecedented, with the majority of previous hosts being selected only six years prior to staging the tournament - the exception being the twelve- and sixteen-year gap between FIFA's 1966 decision to award the 1978 World Cup to Argentina and the 1982 World Cup to Spain. The introduction of FIFA's World Cup rotation policy for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups, as well as the world governing body's noticeable desire to take the sport to 'new lands', led to the underlying assumption amongst many supporters that the decision to award Qatar the 22FWC was manufactured prior to the official bidding process (cf. *FIFA.com*, 29th October 2007; *The Guardian*, 1st December 2010; *The New York Times*, 2nd December 2010).

In this regard, supporters' continuously made reference to Mohammed bin Hammam, the Qatari-born, former Asian Football Confederation President and FIFA Executive Committee member. Although receiving two life bans from all football-related activities by the FIFA Ethics Committee in July 2011 and December 2012 for charges of bribery and 'conflicts of interest', it has been the *Sunday Times*' exposé of bin Hammam in June 2014 that has been most damaging to Qatar's right to host the 22FWC. According to the *Sunday Times*, emails were leaked to the British newspaper connecting bin Hammam with a number of corrupt actions vis-à-vis the 22FWC: first were allegations bin Hammam paid £3m to FIFA officials to help secure support for Qatar's 22FWC bid prior to the official voting process; second, it is suggested bin Hammam used his contacts in the Qatari government and royal family to organise a plethora of arrangements to secure the tournament for Qatar; third, it is claimed bin Hammam enforced mutual agreements with Russian president, Vladimir Putin, concerning the voting process for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups; fourth, bin Hammam is alleged to have organised meetings with Thailand's FIFA executive, Worawi Makudi, in which World Cup support was exchanged for gas exports from Qatar to Thailand; and finally, bin Hammam is purported to have brokered numerous talks with UEFA President, Michel Platini, and the Qatar bid team at UEFA headquarters in Nyon prior to the awarding of the 2018 and 2022 finals (*Sunday Times*, 1 June 2014).

Interestingly, none of the supporters we interviewed questioned the legitimacy of the exposés surrounding the 22FWC, with many fans expressing great faith in the research capabilities of the media: ‘We’ve all read the papers. British journalists always find the smoke and can usually connect it to the fire; (participant observation, FIFA World Cup, Brasilia: 23rd June 2014). Many supporters went further by explaining how the heightened media coverage of the 22FWC had actively shaped their understandings of the state, shedding light on how Qatar has been received by certain members of the football community:

What you’re finding with FIFA and Qatar through the negative media coverage though is unprecedented. Corruption is nothing new but this must run deep. It’s not just a few journalists digging for dirt. Everyone’s talking about it and it’s changing how the world sees Qatar. For countries that don’t know much about them it’s not the best first impression. They made promises about taking the game to new audiences and opening the Arab world, but the overriding thought is that they’ve bought it, and paid people off. Their World Cup is so intertwined with corruption in people’s minds and I don’t think the two will ever be split (interview 1, FIFA World Cup, São Paulo: 26th June 2014).

As noted above, one of Qatar’s central endeavours is to leverage the 22FWC to open up the Arab world to international audiences and create better understandings between East and West, targeting, in the process, many of the cross-cultural misinterpretations and prejudices that are alleged to exist with regard to treating the Middle East as a homogenous region and people (cf. Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014b); most specifically in this regard, Qatari authorities are actively attempting to confront this misunderstanding through the endeavour to present Qatar to the world as a progressive, forward-thinking state which vigorously adheres, in part, to forms of competence, and integrity (ibid.). Nonetheless, the ‘unprecedented’ international media coverage of the bin Hammam allegations appear to have introduced Qatar to various international supporters in a very different light, relating more to notions of deceitfulness and incompetence. Important to note here is that although it might seem necessary to differentiate between understandings of the 22FWC and Qatar’s wider socio-political standing, supporters continuously discussed them interchangeably, as one fan clearly articulated: ‘When you think of Qatar...you think of bribery. They’re all virtually synonymous now in the eyes of most people’ (participant observation, FIFA World Cup, Belo Horizonte: 24th June 2014).

Since the emergence of the *Sunday Times*’ exposé, the Qatar Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, the organization responsible for securing and successfully hosting the 22FWC, have outright denied any wrongdoing, claiming such allegations are ‘baseless and riddled with innuendo’ (*The Guardian*, 15th June 2014). More specifically, Qatari authorities have endeavoured to distance themselves from the shadow of bin Hammam, continuously suggesting the former Asian Football Confederation President played no ‘official or unofficial role’ whatsoever in the state’s bid for the 22FWC (*The Guardian*, 3rd June 2014). Nonetheless, this has not stopped a number of FIFA’s main sponsors registering their concerns over the negative publicity surrounding the 22FWC, with Adidas, Coca-Cola, Sony, Visa and Hyundai/Kia all putting forward formal responses; an Adidas statement, for example, read: ‘The negative tenor of the public debate around FIFA is neither good for football nor for FIFA and its partners’; Coca-Cola responded by claiming: ‘Anything that detracts from the mission and ideals of the FIFA World Cup is a concern to us’ (*BBC*, 9th June 2014). Most significant in this context, however, was the complete withdrawal in November 2014 of one of FIFA’s major sponsors, Fly Emirates, due to the growing international ‘poor image’ the former held in connection with bribery and corruption claims surrounding the awarding of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups (*Reuters*, 3rd November, 2014).

Qatar's Cultural Backdrop and Domestic Policies

The final core theme to emerge from our analysis revolved around Qatar's socio-cultural backdrop and domestic policies. Of significance here, given the continuous criticism the state has received through the international media, was that the majority of supporters we spoke to were planning to attend the 22FWC, with a great deal expressing their excitement in having the opportunity to experience Qatar's unique culture. This, it would appear, stemmed from fans' desire to travel to unexplored destinations, as one veteran World Cup supporter pronounced:

In England there was disappointment that 2018 went to Russia. But we're English and we're more than happy with Russia. The last place we'd have wanted it is England. Fans at home want it there, but those who travel want to go to new places. And 2022 is perfect. How many people have been to Qatar? (interview 1, Asian Cup, Doha: 8th January 2011).

This highlights the predominant view of hard-core supporters' that the World Cup is not simply about the football, but also presents opportunities to experience new settings. Specifically here, a distinction was made by the supporter we spoke to above, who suggested that, although fans who don't attend international football tournaments in person may wish to welcome the World Cup to their own lands, for veteran supporters who do, an essential factor when deciding to invest in tickets, hotels and travel expenses was the prospect to experience those places across the globe that are unique and exotic. Indeed, as a further veteran World Cup attendee explained to us: 'Qatar will be different, but that's the beauty of the World Cup, and another reason to go' (interview 2, Gold Cup, New Jersey: 18th June 2011). As Qatar is the first Middle Eastern state to host the World Cup, supporters emphasised their excitement towards having the opportunity to experience - alongside the football - what Arabic culture has to offer. Although many supporters also suggested that being the first Middle Eastern state to host a World Cup does put pressure on Qatar to succeed, some offered words of support for the State: 'I think they'll get everything right, as they'll be desperate to show off and show the world what they're capable of' (interview 2, Gold Cup, New Jersey: 18th June 2011).

Other supporters were, however, more sceptical of Qatar's hosting of the World Cup, pointing the state's prejudice towards certain groups, particularly women and homosexuals. The rights of women and homosexuals in Qatar have been raised by numerous international media sources, as well as many transnational non-governmental organizations. Human Rights Watch, for instance, have highlighted the severe lack of freedom women enjoy in Qatar under martial law (World Report 2014); this has led to numerous universal organizations calling for change: Philip Luther, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme, for example, has called on Qatar to address the lack of rights and widespread discrimination women face under the state's current family regulations (*Amnesty International*, 7th May 2014). Furthermore, since the decision to award Qatar the 22FWC, FIFA have been urged by the Gay Football Supporters' Network (GFSN) to pressure the state over its discrimination towards homosexuality: at present, Qatar is one of the few remaining countries where homosexuality remains illegal (*The Guardian*, 8th September 2013)

Considering this, some supporters said they'd 'give Qatar a miss, because it's not worth the risk' (participant observation, European Championships, Gdansk: 14th June 2012). With regard to women's' rights in particular, many female supporters we engaged with sensed they'd not be welcome in Qatar, and thus felt the best decision would be to stay at home during the 22FWC: 'We travel with a group, with a couple of girls. Their reaction [to Qatar being awarded the 22FWC] was, 'Well, I'm not going there. They don't want us in the stadiums.' They're worried about the

religion and how they dress' (interview 1, European Championships, Gdansk: 14th June 2012). Several female supporters we interviewed continuously referred to their uncertainty of Qatar's Islamic norms, and revealed how they did not want to unconsciously cause any offence through the wearing of 'inappropriate' attire. The use of inappropriate dress by various Westerners living in, and tourists travelling to, Qatar has been an issue raised by state authorities in recent years. In seeking to clarify to those considering travelling to the 22FWC what is considered 'appropriate', in June 2014 the Qatar Islamic Cultural Center launched its 'Reflect Your Respect' campaign. Through the use of flyers and social media, the campaign is designed to get the message across that one, regardless of gender, is required to cover up 'from shoulders to knees'. Leading with the title 'If you are in Qatar, you are one of us', the campaign advocates that short dresses, sleeveless clothing and crop tops are not considered appropriate attire for woman in public spaces, while men should refrain from the wearing of shorts and vest tops (*The Telegraph*, 27th May 2014; *The Telegraph*, 3rd June 2014). In reacting to the campaign, some have advocated that this is a further reason for the 22FWC to be held elsewhere, suggesting that, enforcing tourists to wear certain attire will have a significant impact on the visible expression of nationalism found at previous World Cups, thus limiting the overall carnivalesque atmosphere of the tournament (Huffington Post, 2nd June 2014).

A further point raised by many more experienced supporters with regard to Qatar's domestic policies was somewhat unanticipated given the media hype around wider issues, but reflected the appropriateness of not solely relying on media analysis. The issue revealed here revolved around the state's domestic organization of football events, and, most specifically, ticket availability, which we found significantly shaped supporters' perceptions of the host nation post-tournament. Indeed, as one supporter advocated:

Going to a World Cup is one thing, but you have to get to the matches. When you meet other fans, you talk about your journey, the weather, the people and the tickets. Oh, and the football! I always associate Switzerland with me not getting into any games at Euro 2008 (participant observation, Gold Cup, Miami, 10th June 2011).

The average attendance for Qatar's four matches during the 2011 Asian Cup was 28,935, whilst 37,174 were at the final. Nonetheless, for those remaining 27 matches in which Qatar did not feature, average audiences plummeted to a mere 9,324, with the lowest being 2,022. In a country with among the highest gross domestic product per capita, ticket prices across the competition ranged from the approximate equivalent of £2.40 to £24 (the latter a VIP ticket for the final), which were sold at various locations in makeshift carts (field notes, January 2011). In a queue for tickets for the opening ceremony, one observer noted: 'They're just printing these tickets here on little machines. If this was the World Cup someone would pinch that machine and print their own and sell them. They'll need to sort this ticketing situation out for the World Cup' (participant observation, Asian Cup, Doha: 7th January 2011). The policy for selling tickets at the 2011 Asian Cup was interpreted by supporters as Qatar's relative inexperience of staging first-order sports mega-events; as highlighted above, the World Cup will present Qatar with different challenges to that of the 2011 Asian Cup, particularly as the demand for tickets will be far greater, and the state will need to ensure that all measures are considered to prevent a logistical catastrophe and to safeguard supporters' positive experiences of the tournament in 2022.

Finally, it should be noted that the overwhelming majority of supporters we spoke to made little reference to Qatar's human rights violations, discussed continuously by media sources and non-governmental organizations. Projected to the world in September 2013 via British newspaper, *The Guardian*, it was revealed that thousands of Nepalese workers had died in Qatar due to 'forced

labour' in direct connection with 22FWC projects. The report exposed the conditions South Asian expatriates face daily, documenting multiple forms of exploitation, abuse, lack of pay, little access to food and free drinking water, and the seizing of passports, equating to forms of 'modern-day slavery', and a clear illustration of 'one of the richest nations exploiting one of the poorest to get ready for the world's most popular sporting tournament' (*The Guardian*, 25th September 2013; *The Guardian*, 27th September 2013). This has led to numerous commentators suggesting Qatar should be potentially stripped of the 22FWC: Aiden McQuade of Anti-Slavery International has previously called on FIFA to threaten Qatar with the removal of the 22FWC if migrant worker violations are not sustainably overhauled (*The Telegraph*, 4th October 2013); similarly, Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, has said that 'FIFA needs to send a very strong and clear message to Qatar that it will not allow the World Cup to be delivered on the back of a system of modern slavery' (*The Guardian*, 26th September 2013).

Upon questioning fans' attitudes towards Qatar's well-documented human rights issues, numerous supporters revealed to us that this was in fact of minimal concern when deciding to attend the 22FWC, as one fan proclaimed: 'You don't really think of the workers. I know it sounds bad, but you [the researcher] probably care more about that stuff. Once you're there it's party time' (respondent 1, focus group, European Championships, Warsaw: 16th June 2012). This is not to suggest that supporters we spoke to were unconcerned about said human rights violations, as one supporter suggested: 'Qatar has been accused of human rights violations in the construction of different buildings. Blatter and other FIFA men should prevent this kind of thing, but they haven't' (respondent 1, focus group, FIFA World Cup, Rio: 20th June 2014); rather, the opinion of supporters we spoke to was that, although issues of human rights violations should be addressed by relevant academics, policy-makers and football officials, the fans themselves did not see the need to directly concern themselves with such issues, and were more focused on the experience of the World Cup itself, both with regard to football activities and the anticipated carnivalesque atmosphere.

Looking Forward to Qatar in 2022

As previously mentioned, Qatari authorities intend to leverage the 22FWC for the pursuit of soft power and foreign policy gains, yet to date, the attainment of football's most global tournament has brought a significant amount of perceived soft disempowerment for the state to confront. Our analysis of international supporters' perspectives encapsulates this, demonstrating that, for their hosts, sport mega-events exert both 'positive *and* negative outcomes that are empowering and disempowering respectively' (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014b: 4).

On the one hand, supporters do not appear to align to the 'moral panic' exerted by the media over Qatar's extreme climate or domestic treatment of expatriate workers, with the majority we engaged with positively expressing their overall desire to visit the state in 2022. We argue that the apparent aspirations of supporters to attend the tournament in person presents Qatar potential soft power opportunities on two levels in particular. First, for a state that wishes to use the 22FWC to 'create better understandings between the East and the West' in order to overcome forms of prejudice and misconception (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014b: 6), thus further opening itself up to long-term foreign investment and tourism, the direct presence of those from diverse backgrounds will first of all need to be assured if any true exchange is to occur – solely relying on the media to showcase one's culture would, in this case, have certain limitations with regard to how much actual 'exchange' could materialize; furthermore, for a state that aspires to demonstrate to worldwide audiences its aptitude to effectively handle the 'massive responsibility' of hosting and successfully delivering one of the globe's largest events (ibid.: 7), it will first of all need the 22FWC to echo the kind of gigantism seen in previous tournaments, which, of course, can only be guaranteed if a

sufficient number of supporters are in attendance; an additional point to consider here is the soft disempowerment that would occur if a distinct lack of support manifest in 2022, showcasing most prominently the state's unsuitability and unpopularity as a World Cup destination; the need for a strong international presence during their tournaments is arguably essential for any host, but particularly for Qatar, which not only has an extremely narrow population pool as it is, but has also found the majority of its citizenry to be notably reluctant to attend sports events in person, leading most recently to the state being heavily criticised for having to pay some of its migrant workers £3.50 to appear at its hosting of the 2014 FIVB Beach Volleyball World Tour in order to make empty stadiums look full (cf. *The Guardian*, 17th December 2014).

Second, welcoming significant numbers of people to Qatar in 2022 presents state authorities with the potential to secure long-term tourism gains. As we have seen, holding the 22FWC in Qatar is considered by many supporters to provide exciting opportunities to experience the state's unique Arabic culture. This, it would appear, acts as one of the prime factors amongst supporters when deciding to invest in attending sport mega-events. For Qatar, we consequently suggest that if soft power rests - at least in part - on the ability to entice others through one's attractive culture, then the 22FWC does indeed appear to offer the state a prime opportunity in which to leverage what many international tourists (in this case sport-led tourists) are eager to experience, that is, its Arabic distinctiveness, thus equating, in the process, to forms of what Nye refers to as 'cultural-led supremacy'. For Qatari authorities, therefore, successfully showcasing and maintaining this desired uniqueness and exoticism to those attending the World Cup will be key if the state is to create any knock-on effect in its tourist numbers post-2022, thus creating a much-needed alternative revenue stream for when its fossil fuels diminish.

On the other hand, supporters were highly negative of what they considered to be Qatar's unfavourable and dubious ideologies and policies, equating, aligning with much of what has been expressed via the international media. First, issues of corruption and bribery have introduced Qatar to international supporters through what they perceive to be a detrimental light, with many speaking of an inseparable link between the state and forms of deceitfulness and incompetence. Second, supporters criticised the state's policies for dealing with its perceived unsuitability to host a World Cup: the construction of eight stadiums solely for a four-week tournament is seen as an unnecessary and excessive strategy; this is exacerbated by Qatar's relatively weak domestic football league; the state's solution towards overcoming its lack of need for so many stadiums post-tournament - the dismantling and exporting of stadia to developing countries - is also seen as an uninfluential policy, one that will alienate many via excessive financial expense that could be disbursed on more sustainable developments elsewhere; the state's strategy to overcome summer temperatures with the use of environmentally-friendly cooling technology is also seen in a similar light.

All of this does, of course, go against Qatar's strategy to use the 22FWC to exert notions of responsibility, capability, competence and veracity, as well as demonstrating the aptitude to meaningfully confront contemporary challenges, all key features in the state's soft power ambitions (cf. Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014b). Specifically, we can suggest that supporters' perspectives here relate to forms of soft disempowerment in two significant ways. First, rather than reflecting the state's suitability, capacity and skill to successfully and honestly acquire one of the world's largest sports events, the awarding of the 22FWC to Qatar was in contrast interpreted by supporters to be a result of FIFA's desire to take the World Cup to new lands, the organization's internal corruption, and, most specifically, Qatari personnel's ability to turn their fortunate wealth into various inducements. Second, and leading on from this, rather than seeing Qatar's solution to potential white elephants and souring climates as desirable and revolutionary policies, and for the benefit of world football, such measures were seen by supporters as, once again, the state simply

drawing on its abundant wealth to gloss over the cracks of its unsuitability as a World Cup host. In both cases, we see how supporters feel Qatar is drawing too much on its fortunate financial wealth (hard power) to create outcomes that are based on either illegitimate means or narrowly self-serving interests – thus severely prohibiting the manifestation of soft power forms (cf. Nye, 2008).

Finally, many supporters also questioned the effectiveness and suitability of the state's domestic proficiencies and values. For example, numerous supporters fear Qatar may not occupy the skill and capacity needed to effectively deal with potential instances of violence and hooliganism that have been present at prior World Cups. Due to the state's relative size and lack of experience with certain groups of supporters, central here was that the World Cup may pose certain health and safety issues for those who make the journey in 2022. Furthermore, supporters also criticised the state's domestic policies towards women and homosexuality. In particular, female supporters we engaged with were put off by the state's strict adherence to 'appropriate' attire. And lastly, supporters also criticised the state's lack of experience and subsequent inadequate policies for the sale of tickets at the 2011 Asian Cup, an issue yet to be discussed in this context until now. In all such cases, it would appear that, as a World Cup host, Qatar's abilities, policies and principles have been interpreted by supporters with much cynicism.

Looking ahead to the World Cup in 2022, we can surely suggest that significant soft disempowerment would occur if the state is unprepared to effectively deal with the many stresses that accompany the hosting of sports events. We have seen, for example, how Delhi authorities were severely criticised for their lack of ability to successfully plan and organize the 2010 Commonwealth games (Grix, 2013); furthermore, the Munich Massacre at the 1972 Olympic Games, although an incident of extreme magnitude, is another example of where a sports event exposed the inability of local authorities, in this case to plan and react in a meaningful way to a terrorist threat, leaving many 'calling into question...the whole mystique about German efficiency' (Large, 2012: 223). For a state such as Qatar that positions global sport at the centre of its soft power strategy, the need to demonstrate its organizational capabilities, foresight and proficiency through the 22FWC is of utmost importance if it is to maximize its long-term propensity to attract various overseas investors. One measure that might ensure the state minimizes the potential for hooliganism and forms of violence, and thus demonstrate its foresight in identifying potential hazards, would be to supplement their lack of experience by following French authorities and their policy of working alongside overseas police during the 1998 World Cup (cf. Stott *et al.*, 2001). Either way, perhaps of greater significance is how Qatari authorities will deal with various 'offenders' during the tournament, and how its legal policies in this regard will be received by international supporters and audiences. As mentioned, the state's Shari'a laws differs greatly compared to those found in some parts of the world, and if Qatari authorities are to maintain their regulations during the 22FWC on matters such as swearing, insulting others in public, or homosexuality - issues that are treated with relative ease in many Western countries - then the tournament may simply heighten awareness of the state's moral detachment from 'prevailing global norms', a substantial hurdle for those wishing to acquire soft power in the eyes of international audiences (Nye, 2002: 70). A final yet highly noteworthy policy issue here revolves around how lenient the state will be with regard to the freedom of women and forms of 'appropriate attire'. As we have seen, the female supporters we spoke to made reference to their unease with the state's regulations concerning attire, which has, in many cases, led to their desire not to attend the 22FWC. More broadly, for a state that wishes to use the tournament to increase its overall tourist base, Qatari authorities' adherence towards 'modest dress' and gender segregation leading up to 2022 may in the long-run be hugely significant, particularly when we consider the substantial and increasing role of women in the family holiday decision-making process (cf. Barlés-Arizón *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusion

We have endeavoured here to add to the relative infancy of academic research on Qatar and global sport by offering the first supporter-focused understanding of the state's acquisition of the 2022 finals. Although we would agree that future scholarship focused towards classifying the perceptions of international football supporters' vis-à-vis Qatar's forthcoming hosting of the 22FWC would be fruitful, our initial analysis here has raised a number of substantial arguments. First, unlike previous research on Qatar and sport which has solely attempted to add some form of theoretical analyses to the state's acquisition of the 22FWC, we feel we have gone one step further here by uncovering a number of significant points which would be meaningfully useful for policy-makers in Qatar who are involved in the planning, organization and hosting of the World Cup to consider leading up to the finals – supporters' sizeable concerns around crowd safety and the treatment of women and homosexuals, as well as the differences in domestic laws being cases in point. Second, our contribution here has, on the one hand, shed light on the way international football supporters do, in some cases, indeed align their opinions with popular media commentary; yet, on the other, we have uncovered the fact that, at least in the case of the 22FWC, that the 'pressing issues' expressed by various media groups, politicians and human rights activists have, in actual fact, been met by international football supporters with relative ease – the state's summer climate and issues around workers' welfare being examples here. As researchers, this reminds us of the need to go beyond purely top-down analyses and instead pay equal attention towards bottom-up interpretations and understandings – in the context of acquiring soft power through sport mega-events, this is vital, as it is those supporters who travel to tournaments in-person who are arguably in the upmost position to judge the credibility, attractiveness and/or effectiveness of a hosts' culture (beliefs, morals, customs), policies (intentions, organization, management) and institutions (cultural, medical, legal).

On the broader level, we would argue that, given the highly significant role of global sport to the state's soft power ambitions, as well as the increasing soft disempowerment that has manifest, Qatar provides a compelling case study in which to investigate the substantial socio-political impact of sports mega-events for nation-states, and would thus strongly encourage others to build on the relative infancy of scholarship in this context. For future sports mega-event hosts, our contribution here, for example, has shed-light on the superiority dedicated supporters place on travelling to new destinations, and thus exposes the dire need for first-time hosts in particular to take all measures necessary in ensuring the successful leverage and maintenance of those traits that make them unfamiliar, intriguing and distinctive in the first place. We have also seen here how, at times, hosts can be overambitious and sacrifice efficiency in the eyes of international supporters – Qatar's strategy for tackling its summer climates and lack of need for stadia post-2022 are examples in point here; in fact, our engagement with international supporters sheds light on the fact that hosts tend to be judged above all else on their capacity to successfully organize and oversee the purely sporting side of the event as opposed to the achievement of wider social/cultural/political outcomes - the availability of tickets being an example of the former here, yet one that has received little attention in the wider sports mega-event literature.

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