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To cite this article: Paul Michael Brannagan & Richard Giulianotti (2015) Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals, *Leisure Studies*, 34:6, 703-719, DOI: [10.1080/02614367.2014.964291](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.964291)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.964291>

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(ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT)

**This is the Author's Original Manuscript in its final and definitive form. The Version of Record can be found via the following reference:**

Brannagan, P.M. and Giulianotti, R. (2014) Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment: Qatar, Global Sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals, *Leisure Studies* [online]. DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2014.964291. Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02614367.2014.964291#.VImSzjGsV8E>

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## Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment: Qatar, Global Sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals

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The paper examines the critical role of global sport within Qatar's international strategy, most notably through the successful bid to stage the 2022 football World Cup finals. Our research draws particularly on interviews with key stakeholders in the Qatari sport system, as well as fieldwork in Qatar, and analysis of relevant documents and secondary materials. Our discussion is separated into three main parts. First, we set out our theoretical framework, which draws on the concepts of globalization and soft power; to assist analysis of Qatar's engagement with global sport we introduce the two further concepts of 'glocal consciousness' and 'soft disempowerment'. Second, with reference to these theoretical tools, we discuss three key themes that emerged mainly from our interviews on Qatar and global sport: exhibiting Qatar's supremacies as a microstate; the pursuit of peace, security and integrity; and confronting national health crises. Third, we explore issues of soft disempowerment and reputational risk with regard to these three themes and in particular critical international comment surrounding Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup. We conclude by arguing that Qatar's soft disempowerment, although damaging in the short-term, leaves the door open for the state to respond in a positive manner, regenerating its soft power capabilities in the process.

**Keywords:** Qatar; football; globalization; sports mega-events; soft power; soft disempowerment; glocal consciousness.

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## 1. Introduction

The State of Qatar is a sovereign Arab state, situated on the Persian peninsula of the Arabian Gulf. Whilst gaining full independence from the UK in 1971, Qatar has continued to be ruled as an absolute monarchy since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Qatar is both one of the world's smallest states, and one of its richest. The total population stands at just over 250,000 Qatari citizens, plus some 1.5 million foreign occupants who are employed principally in the state's thriving oil and construction industries. Qatar is also the world's third largest oil producer and the principal supplier of liquefied natural gas (Dargin, 2007). Consequently, Qatar has extraordinary levels of annual income: in 2014, national GDP per capita (citizens) in Qatar is projected to be almost double that for the United States (US\$106,110, compared to roughly US\$54,609) (International Monetary Fund, 2014). Moreover, vast oil wealth has fuelled the very rapid development of Qatar's capital, Doha, into a global city in little over a decade, in ways that combine 'instant urbanism' and 'Dubaiification' (Bagaee's 2007: 174; Adham 2008: 247).

Alongside the neighbouring city-states of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, exceptional wealth has enabled Qatar to realize far greater levels of global integration than most Middle Eastern countries; a process that began in 1995 when the previous Emir, Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, seized power in a peaceful *coup d'état* against his father (Kamrava, 2009). In turn, Qatar's long-term strategic plan – the '2030 National Vision' – came to set out the 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). The resulting global integration of Qatar has been led socially, by investment in education and healthcare; politically, via becoming a centre for international dialogue and peace-building; in global communications, through the global spread of the Doha-based media network, Al Jazeera; and in particular financially, through the state-run 'Qatar Investment Authority', which has acquired major stakes in prestigious global corporations such as Barclays Bank, Credit Suisse and Harrods.

Sport has provided arguably the most prominent field of activity for Qatar's global engagement. The state-owned 'Qatari Diar', along with the UK private company, Delancey, has acquired major shares in the 2012 Olympic Athletes' Village, and the state-funded 'Qatar Sports Investment' group (QSI) has, of course, made a significant purchase in European football club, Paris Saint-Germain; and, help secure the original €150 million sponsorship deal with FC Barcelona for the Qatar Foundation (now Qatar Airways) – the first ever commercial sponsor of the FC Barcelona shirt. Qatar also has hosted a plethora of major international sporting tournaments, notably: the Qatar Open Tennis Tournament, the Qatar Open Golf Masters, the 2006 Asian Games, and the 2011 Asian Cup football tournament. Qatar will host the 2015 Handball World Cup, and of course the 2022 football World Cup finals; rare failures in global sport have included two failed bids by Doha to host the 2016 and 2020 Olympic Games. In addition, Qatar stages several major international sports conferences, such as the annual Doha

Gathering Of All Leaders in Sport (Doha GOALS), and the ‘Securing Sport’ symposium that is convened by the Qatar-based International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS).

In this paper, we seek to fill a significant gap in regard to social scientific discussions of Qatar’s engagement with global sport. Prior work in this area has been mainly advanced through Amara’s (2005) insightful study of political discourses surrounding Qatar’s hosting of the 2006 Asian Games, drawing particularly on documentary analysis; Campbell (2010) on Qatar and the importing and naturalization of foreign athletes, drawing mainly on secondary sources; and, Dorsey’s regular analyses of national, regional and global politics and policy with regard to Qatar, published particularly in blog articles (Dorsey, 2013a; 2013b). This paper, as part of a wider project on Qatar’s sporting intentions, offers a significant advance on these prior works, providing the first detailed academic discussion of Qatari sport with significant reference to the securing of the 2022 World Cup finals, and the first to draw directly on primary research with leading decision-makers and stakeholders within the Qatari sport system.

In-depth interviews were conducted with seven leading sport officials in Qatar, working respectively for the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee, which led the successful World Cup bid; the Aspire Academy of Sports Excellence, the ‘Sports City’ of Qatar; and, the International Centre for Sports Security, based in Doha. Fieldwork was also undertaken through three visits to Qatar in May 2012, March 2013, and December 2013, during which we attended conferences, sport and cultural events, and conducted informal interviews with local citizens, migrant workers, and visitors. Additional research included the analysis of key documents, most notably Qatar’s 2030 National Vision, the state’s National Development Strategy, and the National Health Strategy, as well as related FIFA reports; and, the collection and analysis of international media articles surrounding Qatar’s engagement with global sport. Our research data – in particular interview transcripts, along with field-notes, key documents, and media reports – was subjected to thematic analysis. The emerging themes from this analysis form the basis of our discussion in section three.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four main parts. First, we set out our theoretical framework, drawing on the concepts of globalization and soft power, and introducing the new keywords ‘glocal consciousness’ and ‘soft disempowerment’. Second, we uncover and discuss our interview data with reference to three main emerging themes: *exhibiting Qatar’s supremacies as a microstate; Qatar’s contribution to peace, security and integrity; and, the national health crises*. Third, we explore the possibilities of ‘soft disempowerment’, with reference to the potential risks surrounding the three themes outlined earlier, and more significantly in regard to critical international discussion of Qatar and the hosting of the 2022 World Cup finals. We conclude by arguing that Qatar now has the opportunity to respond in a positive manner to some of its international fallacies, and, in doing so, has the potential to reconstruct its soft power strategy.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Globalization/Glocal Consciousness and Soft Power/Soft Disempowerment**

Our analysis of Qatar's engagement with global sport is premised on two interrelated theoretical fields, relating to *globalization* and *soft power*.

### *Globalization and Glocalization*

First, by way of definition, we understand globalization as featuring two main processes: increasing levels of interconnectedness across nations and regions, as illustrated by contemporary social media, the world financial system, the growth of international governmental organizations, and global cultural events such as sport tournaments; and also, increasing levels of social consciousness of the world as a single place, as illustrated by international political diplomacy, or by the transnational environmental movement (cf. Robertson 1992: 8). In addition, global processes have been marked by more intense and complex interrelations between the local and the global; Robertson's (1992) concept of *glocalization* serves to capture this interpenetration. A pivotal point here is that 'the local' and 'the national' should not simply be seen as set for obliteration by 'global forces'. Instead, local and national societies or nation-states, through their transnational connections, have substantial scope to adapt, innovate and manoeuvre, and to differentiate themselves from each other, within this 'glocalized' world (Robertson 1992; Ritzer, 2011). Thus, for example, most nation-states engage in nation-branding before worldwide audiences, such as by harnessing global communications and technology to define and to market themselves in specific ways, usually with the aim of attracting various forms of trade and investment (cf. Anholt, 2007).

We introduce the concept of *glocal consciousness* to refer to how nation-states imagine themselves within the global context, and position themselves vis-à-vis processes of globalization. Glocal consciousness underpins, for example, how national governments engage with global sport, most obviously when bidding to host sport mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup or Olympic Games. Such events provide host cities and nations with exceptional opportunities to construct new, authorized, brand identities before both their own citizens and global audiences (Roche, 2000; Chalip and Costa, 2005). In different circumstances, host nations may use these events to change their international image (Preuss and Alfs 2011: 66); to signal their 'graduation' or 'arrival' on the global stage (Black and Van der Westhuizen 2004; Horne and Manzenreiter 2006); or, to achieve certain domestic or foreign policy objectives (Black and Van der Westhuizen, 2004). For example, in hosting the 2006 World Cup finals, Germany sought to project itself 'as a nice and friendly country to visit', challenging wider international stereotypes that touch on the Second World War and Nazism, or notions of a 'dominant', 'arrogant' and 'dull' people (Grix & Lacroix, 2006: 383). For the 2010 South Africa World Cup finals, the hosts portrayed the tournament as an 'African showpiece' – a force for continental unity, solidarity and peace (Cornelissen 2004; Pillay and Bass, 2008). And in Dubai, major developments in the field of sport look to be used for foreign policy goals, most decisively for inward investment, and, in the words of the state's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rahid al-Maktoum, as part of an international, multi-billion dollar 'charm offensive' (in Jackson and Haigh, 2008: 351).

For Qatar, the hosting of the 2006 Asian Games provided a further demonstration of glocal consciousness. Amara (2005) argues that, in staging this event, Qatari authorities sought to celebrate their national culture, environment, and Asian identity, and to demonstrate their national creativity and modernity. Moreover, Amara's analysis draws on Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism, which explains how powerful Western discourses have represented 'the Orient' (Eastern societies and cultures) in systematically negative ways. Thus, Qatar's hosting of the Asian Games was intended in part to challenge Orientalist stereo-types of Arab peoples as irresponsible, backward, irrational, and lazy. In broader terms, we may say that part of Qatar's glocal consciousness involves a commitment to rebut Orientalist images of the nation, the Persian Gulf and Arab peoples more generally.

### *Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment*

The second strand of our theoretical framework centres on the concept of *soft power*, and the binary opposite term that we introduce, *soft disempowerment*. According to the American political scientist, Joseph Nye (2004a: 256), soft power is defined by 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments'; thus, soft power stands in marked contrast to 'hard power', such as military action or economic incentives. The underlying goal, here, Nye suggests, is the ability to set the political agenda in such a way that the power preferences of others become shaped by their desire to duplicate your 'soft power resources': an attractive culture, desirable ideologies, and credible, innovative and forward-thinking institutions and policies (Nye, 2002; 2008). Soft power is understood here as increasingly important within the global context; and, culture represents a key field for the pursuit and exercise of soft power, notably through sport, the arts, education, and media.

The hosting of sports mega-events appears to provide national governments with significant opportunities to increase their soft power, notably through cultural showcasing on global television, 'attracting' tourists, and augmenting national pride (Manzenreiter, 2010; Grix & Houlihan 2013). For example, the 2008 Beijing Olympics were viewed as increasing China's soft power, through successfully hosting the event, advancing messages on ancient Chinese culture and civilization, and gaining prestige from topping the medals table (Zhongying, 2008).

However, we should recognize that, wherever there is the attempt to accumulate soft power there is always the possibility of *soft disempowerment*. We introduce the concept of soft disempowerment to refer to those occasions in which you may upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a loss of attractiveness or influence. The concept of soft disempowerment ensures that we should move beyond thinking only of how soft power is positively accumulated; instead, this term enables us to examine how social actions may have positive *and* negative outcomes that are empowering and disempowering respectively.

The staging of sport mega-events carries inevitable reputational risks, and thus may be accompanied by forms of soft disempowerment. Host nations may be unprepared for the

subsequent high levels of attention and critical scrutiny from international media, human rights, governmental, sport and other organizations (Chalip, 2005). For example, the Beijing 2008 Olympics also placed China in the critical spotlight in regard to the occupation of Tibet, the treatment of minorities such as the Uyghur peoples, high pollution levels, human rights, and democracy (cf. Nye 2004b). As Higham (1999: 84) observes, this potential for negative publicity and loss of attraction can lead host nations 'to lose more than they can gain in terms of destination image'.

In sum, in understanding globalization as the heightened interrelationship of the local and the global, we see how national governments come to imagine themselves within the global context, and, subsequently, exhibit glocal consciousness through engaging in global sport in order to achieve desired outcomes. Most specifically here, we see how global sporting forms act as vehicles for nation-state to construct or reshape specific brand identities and achieve certain foreign policy objectives. Through this, national authorities draw on sporting mega-events to achieve precise state-led soft power goals, mainly via signalling particular messages to external audiences, successfully hosting such events, and through demonstrating one's sporting ability on the world stage. However, as we have introduced here, with any soft power strategy there is always the risk of soft disempowerment, most specifically when host nations are either unprepared for the level of attention that accompanies such events or exhibit undesirable values in the eyes of others.

### **3. Qatar and Global Sport: Three Key Themes**

Thematic analysis of our data indicated that Qatar's engagement with global sport centres on three key themes: *exhibiting Qatar's supremacies as a microstate*; *projecting notions of peace, security and integrity*, and, *confronting national health crises*. Each of these themes is underpinned by a glocal consciousness and by the pursuit of soft power.

#### *3.1 Exhibiting Qatar's Supremacies as a Microstate*

The first major theme to emerge here centres on Qatar's influence and effectiveness as a global microstate. To begin with, a key component of this strategy concerns the endeavour to debunk negative, 'Orientalist' images of Qatar and the wider 'East' (cf. Said, 1978). This focus reflects Qatar's glocal consciousness, in recognizing how the nation-state, and the wider region tends to be portrayed or viewed in a global context; and also Qatar's pursuit of soft power, in terms of seeking to strengthen its reputation and attractiveness across international society (cf. General Secretariat for Development and Planning, 2008). For Qatari authorities, successful engagement with, and leadership of, global sport is one of the most effective mechanisms for promoting better understandings of Arab and Eastern cultures, and for demonstrating what 'Oriental' societies have to offer in socio-political terms. These motives were highlighted by interviewees in regard to Qatar's bid to host the 2022 World Cup finals (2022WC), as Interviewee 3 explains:

‘So one of our main goals when we were bidding...was to try and create better understandings between the East and the West...just like the prejudice and misconception from the West about the Middle East, there is also some misconceptions and prejudice I think to a lesser extent from the Middle East to the West. But there is a lot more influence from the West to East...we watch American movies from Hollywood...you know people travel a lot to England, to France, the U.S....there is also substantial amounts of people from the West who come and live and travel here. But I think to a lesser extent if you take the sheer number of people in the West and Europe who haven’t really experienced the Middle East or the Region [Persian Gulf)...those are the ones we’re trying to target here.’

The hosting of such an event is perceived by Qatari authorities as, in effect, increasing the nation’s soft power, in terms of highlighting Qatar’s professionalism and responsibility, as both an Eastern nation, and also as a micro-state that is able to deliver on its goals. As Interviewee 3 further stated:

‘It is important for people to realize that football is a global game...and for a country this size, [that we] are able...which we’re confident of doing...to host a World Cup that opens the horizons for countries who are of a similar nature in terms of size...or maybe even a little bigger...but to say, ‘Hey, if Qatar are able to do it then we can do it as well. Our size is not an impediment!’ ‘You know...we want to show people that we are...and that the region [Persian Gulf] in general...is capable of handling such a massive responsibility.’

The 2022WC is also intended to spotlight Qatar’s innovative modern culture and state-of-the-art technology and development. While these qualities may be seen as enhancing the nation’s soft power, they also reflect Qatar’s glocal consciousness, in terms of capturing how Qatari culture engages creatively and critically with global processes. In this respect, several interviewees referred to the design and technology behind the architecture of Qatar’s World Cup stadiums. For example, the ‘Al-Wakrah Stadium’, one of Qatar’s leading venues for the 2022WC, has been designed by Aecom in part to symbolize the nation’s past and progressive future vision. Additionally, the Aspire Dome, designed by Roger Taillibert, is the ‘world’s largest indoor sports facility’ (ALCOA: Aspire Dome), and exhibits what can be described as ‘state-of-the-art architectural grandiose and wonder’ (Field-notes, 2013), encapsulating, in the process, Qatar’s ‘project for modernity’ (Amara, 2005: 503). Sporting architecture such as this represents a ‘dramatic symbol of change’ for Qatar, capturing notions of modernism and national ambition in similar ways to Asian cities that have undergone rapid development, such as Kuala Lumpur, Dubai and Singapore (cf. Mangan, 2011: 2232).

The suitability of Qatar’s climate for elite sport competition has been a recurring focus of international controversy following the award of the 2022WC, as summer temperatures can reach up to fifty degrees Centigrade (Pattison, 2013). However, the Qatari response has been to



highlight the nation's technological expertise and international leadership, in dealing effectively with adversity. Hence, Qatari authorities have highlighted the technological measures within stadiums that would seek to reduce or eliminate the impact of a hot climate on these fixtures. The aim here is to pioneer the use of high-tech, carbon-neutral, environmentally-friendly cooling systems to drastically reduce stadium and training venues (FIFA, 2010), which then may be used at other tournaments – again reflecting both a glocal consciousness and the pursuit of soft power through staging the event. As interviewee 3 explained:

‘We do see this technology as innovative...I mean it has always been part of our desire to achieve this; but, you know, it was always going to be a challenge, but it's one we believe we've looked to overcome...The technology itself is state-of-the-art and we hope it paves the way for others with a similar climate to host future events.’

A further aspect of Qatar's glocal consciousness and pursuit of soft power centres on the proposed use of stadiums post-World Cup. Most sport mega-events generate ‘white elephant’ facilities that are under-used afterwards (Rose and Spiegel, 2011); Qatar, with a total of nine new stadiums to be constructed for less than two million people who fail to exhibit a strong sense of football culture, would be particularly exposed to this danger – highlighted most explicitly during fieldwork in December 2013 when we witnessed a mere 150 supporters attend a Qatar Stars League match in a stadium capable of accommodating over 18,000 people. To tackle this inevitable problem, and to enhance the nation's soft power, the Qatari authorities are committed to the modular construction of stadiums so that they might be disassembled and ‘given away’ to developing African nations (FIFA, 2010). As interviewee 3 explained:

‘Look, we don't need such big stadiums for our requirements here. So one way for us to avoid having ‘white elephants’...is thinking about modular technology for building the stadiums which we can then contribute to developing countries in order to develop their sports infrastructure, whether its football or not - you can use them for football fields in places like Africa, South America...countries even in the Arab world who want to develop their sports infrastructure, so why not? We're benefiting from the World Cup, why not have the world also benefit from our World Cup?’

This pursuit of soft power among developing nations is reflected in Aspire's elite football development programme, wherein annually over 600,000 boys from across the world, particularly developing nations, undergo preliminary trials, with the best candidates being invited back to Doha for expert training; the Academy sends monies back to candidates' families, and in some cases installs new sport and community facilities in their hometowns (Interviewee 1). Although we may view this as one way for the Academy to hand-pick the best foreign talent for its national teams, Interviewee 1 insisted that ‘none of them [the boys from the programme] have played for any of Qatar's national teams...’ and ‘we've supported them to go and play for their own youth national teams’ – which the majority, we were told, have already done so.

Overall, Qatar's endeavour to highlight its significance as a microstate via the leveraging of global sport is underpinned by a glocal consciousness and pursuit of soft power in a variety of ways. Core concepts and images emerge here, of competence, professionalism, technological sophistication, and international benevolence, as the basis for Qatar's soft power strategy through sport, and also reflecting how the Qatari authorities position themselves vis-à-vis globalization processes, and in opposition to highly simplified, Orientalist images of Eastern societies. However, as we note in section 4, these aspects of Qatar's engagement with global sport inevitably carry the potential for 'soft disempowerment'.

### *3.2 Projecting Peace, Security and Integrity*

The second theme emerging from Qatar's involvement in global sport centres on peace, integrity and security. The context for this theme centres on Qatari foreign policy. In terms of 'hard power', although Qatar benefits greatly from its economic muscle, its military influence is very limited, and would have little prospect of repelling a significant invading force. Diplomatically, Qatar's security strategy has involved cultivating the United States as a close ally, particularly through provision of natural resources and a site for US Middle Eastern military headquarters (Sakmar, 2007). Yet, more broadly, Qatar's security policy is by necessity centred on the exercise of soft power through peaceful international cooperation, and association with the values of peace, security and integrity (Sajedi, 2009). Part of this strategy has involved Qatar embedding itself within international society, as a key centre for dialogue on global issues and peace-building. For example, Qatar has hosted major UN and other conferences on climate change and the environment; and, acted as mediator and 'reliable peace broker' in Middle East conflicts (Kamrava, 2011: 540). Such initiatives are considered to position Qatar as a constructive and valued contributor to international affairs, and to reduce the prospect of 'hard power' engagement with larger rivals. These activities are also underpinned by Qatar's glocal consciousness, in terms of identifying an appropriate and engaged national role within the context of political and economic globalization.

Given its position within the Middle East, part of that soft power internationalism involves Qatar leveraging global sport to educate international society on the socio-political differences between this microstate and more conflict-affected parts of the region. Again, this reflects Qatar's glocal consciousness, in terms of recognizing how it may be viewed in the global context; and also its endeavour to turn these disempowering aspects into something more positive. A particular focus here is on reaching Western nations as, according to interviewee 3, many Westerners:

'...only experience what they see on the news, and it's always the really unfortunate incidents that make the news, and it's usually magnified or sensationalized. They see what's happening on the roads of Gaza or Baghdad and they think this is the Middle East. They don't know how to differentiate. The situation in Qatar is very different from that of Afghanistan. A lot of

people think that's it's all the same thing...so it's unfortunate because you have a lot of movies that portray the Middle East like that and all the news that comes out of the region: wars, civil strife, civil wars...'

Consequently, for Qatari authorities, the hosting of a sport mega-event provides a communication platform for reaching a global audience, as interviewee 3 went onto explain:

'We felt that this [hosting the 2022WC] was an opportunity for a lot of people who are going to be visiting here, where the spotlight is going to be shown on us, that we say that the Middle East is nothing like some places you would see on the news. Yes, we do have our problems, some countries more than others, but at the end of the day it's not what people make us out to be. So that was one of our main goals when bidding for this kind of global event.'

Qatar's endeavour to reshape international understanding of the nation and the region as a peaceful environment relates strongly to the state's further aim: to leverage the tournament in order to develop a powerful tourism industry. In 2011, Qatar welcomed 2,905,300 tourists (Qatar Statistics Authority, 2012: 38); however, the great majority of this number travelled to Qatar for short-term conferences and business seminars (Hazime, 2011). Consequently, one of the main objectives for Qatari authorities is to reshape its role as longer-term holiday destination (Qatar General Secretariat, 2011). In order for this aim to be realized, Qatar needs to present itself, in soft power terms, as attractive and appealing to international audiences at everyday level; and also, to establish a substantial presence within the global tourism marketplace. Hosting the 2022WC was considered by our interviewees as critical in promoting that aim (cf. *ibid.*: 53; 202); as interviewee 3 puts it, the successful event bid has 'catapulted us maybe 100 years in terms of profile, in terms of [the wider world] knowing who Qatar is, in terms of knowing where Qatar is'.

A further means through which Qatar leverages global sport, in order to advance its national association with themes of peace, security and integrity before international audiences, centres on the Doha-based International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS). Again, the organization reflects Qatari authorities' glocal consciousness, and their endeavour to be identified with empowering internationalist values. Founded in 2010, the government-funded ICSS's stated mission is to 'help organisers stage safer world-class sporting events' (ICSS: FAQ). According to interviewee 2, the ICSS is driven by an internationalist sport agenda:

'The Qatari government want the ICSS as an organization to help to promote safety, security and integrity in sport for the benefit of all humankind...it's not just for the benefit of Qatar...you know...it is the benefit for humankind! So the objective of the organization is really to become a global and international centre for sport security.'

Consequently, through employing and working with leading stakeholders in sport and security from across the world, conducting research, recommending 'best-practice' initiatives, and hosting

annual conferences, the ICSS is presented as a vehicle for demonstrating Qatar's commitment to the universal values of peace, integrity and security. Moreover, the desire to benefit 'all humankind' was echoed in all interviews with Qatar officials on different aspects of the state's engagement with global sport.

Overall, Qatar's leveraging of global sport, in order to demonstrate a national commitment to peace, security and integrity, is underpinned by a glocal consciousness and soft power strategy. The overarching aim here is to present Qatar before international society, as friendly, cooperative, and credible, an attractive nation to visit and to do business with, and one that is committed to acting to the benefit of humankind. Again, these aspirations carry inevitable risks of soft disempowerment, as we discuss more fully in section 4.

### *3.3 Confronting National Health Crises*

According to some international measures, Qatar has some of the world's worst levels of health and well-being. Currently 71% of Qatari nationals are 'overweight', with 32% considered to be either 'obese' or 'morbidly obese' (Qatar National Health Strategy, 2013a); with 20% of nationals also suffering with diabetes (Qatar National Health Strategy, 2013b). This critical public health issue can be associated with a failure to confront some of the negative socio-cultural consequences of rapid modern development and wealth creation, with Qataris combining high levels of fast-food consumption and low levels of physical activity (Brannagan and Giulianotti, in Grix, 2014).

All of our interviewees emphasized that the Qatari state was committed to confronting the perceived national health crises in obesity and diabetes. One aspect of the state's health strategy engages with sport and physical activity, which are viewed as 'the perfect investment into creating a healthier country' (Interviewee 1); the long-term aim is to engrain such activity within everyday Qatari society (National Health Strategy, 2013a).

Hence, in broad terms, our interviewees indicated that Qatar was aware of its very poor health position in a global context, thus reflecting a glocal consciousness. Moreover, these interviewees indicated that a successful response to these health problems would in part increase the nation's soft power, in terms of becoming a role model for other nations, and in terms of showing how sport should be leveraged to confront these challenges. A related benefit, in regard to advancing soft power, centred on the attempt to develop world-leading sport science and training facilities that would have positive health impacts.

A key institutional focus for these aspirations is the state-funded Aspire Zone. Aspire's facilities include a 50,000 seat stadium, Olympic swimming pool, and many football pitches, tennis and squash courts, sport science laboratories, and the only FIFA medical centre of excellence in the Middle East. At everyday level, Aspire runs various health and fitness programmes for citizens, particularly children. Moreover, while seeking to inspire Qatar's youth into sport and physical activity, Aspire acts as a vehicle for identifying and recruiting talented young athletes into its academy system, to 'produce future sporting champions that will become role models for the

rest of the country for generations to come' (Interviewee 1). The example cited here is the high-jumper Mutaz Barshim, an Aspire graduate, who won gold medals at the 2011 Asian Athletic Championships and 2011 Military World Games, and bronze at the London 2012 Olympics.

The state views such strong performances at elite sporting level as a means both of promoting sport and physical activity within its citizenry, and of challenging the nation's embarrassing global association with major health issues. As interviewee 1 explained:

'When you get evaluated as the unhealthiest place in the world... they [the Qatari government] have to do things to inspire people into change and build a sporting culture that overlays the embarrassment of issues such as people being unhealthy and being a country that is known for being unhealthy! But there's a lot of pride in international sport...I mean their hosting of the World Cup in 2022...they want to put in a good performance on the field. So these are the things which are of importance leading up to 2022...producing champions that can inspire society and do the state proud at the same time.'

Thus, implementing a sporting culture at everyday level is intended to challenge Qatar's obesity and diabetes issues, and also to raise its international profile and status in this field; that is, as interviewee 1 put it, to develop 'a leading centre that becomes known for its innovative and inspiring drive for sports excellence over other things such as health, for example.'

Finally, Aspire is also committed to gaining international recognition. Indicatively, in recent years, Aspire training facilities have attracted leading athletes such as Rafael Nadal and clubs such as Manchester United and Bayern Munich. As interviewee 1 stated:

'I've been to the AIS in Australia many times....those are the kind of places which people talk about in those regions of the world to say 'that's the elite training place, that's where you want to be'. And so we really want Aspire to eventually become that place...to become a recognizable centre like that...'

Thus, Aspire reflects in part Qatar's wider pursuit of soft power through sport and science and health: at elite level, with the aim of being *the* world-leading centre for sport science and talent development; at everyday level, as a key driver for the transformation of Qatari health. In ideal terms, the overall aim is to establish a set of successful sport policies, institutions and cultures that enhance the state's international reputation. In regard to health, if levels of obesity and diabetes are reduced then Qatar would become one of the few Gulf States to overcome this challenge. Such an outcome would represent a significant policy coup for Qatar in the international context although, as we note in the subsequent section, this aim does carry significant reputational risks, or potential for 'soft disempowerment'.

#### **4. Soft Disempowerment**

As mentioned, the concept of soft disempowerment locates the other side of soft power, referring to those occasions in which a given state may upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a *loss* of attractiveness or influence. In the case of Qatar, we may point here to five sport-related issues which, we would argue, have been most damaging to the state's soft power.

First are the undercover reports that surfaced in May 2011 claiming the Qatari's had paid in excess of \$1 million to African FIFA Committee members in exchange for World Cup votes (*The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2011); this situation worsened a few months later when Mohamed bin Hamman, a FIFA executive committee member from Qatar, was given a life ban from football after allegedly personally handing more than \$1 million over in bribes (*The Sunday Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011). Most recently, new corruption allegations have surfaced concerning payments made to former FIFA vice-president, Jack Warner, leading to an official investigation of the 2022WC bid by FIFA's ethics committee (*The Telegraph*, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2014). Second are the numerous sexual-minority activist groups which have called for FIFA and the IOC to halt any sports-related tournaments to countries who embrace any form of discrimination (*The Independent*, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2013). Consequently, FIFA's Anti-Discrimination Taskforce is to urge football's governing body to put pressure on Qatar to relax its anti-gay legislation (*The Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2013). Third is the general consensus which has emerged amongst UEFA's 54 member countries who suggest that the 2022WC should not be played in Qatar as the weather in the summer months is simply too hot. Most worrying for European members is the likely switch to holding the tournament in early winter, claiming that such a move would amount to a crucial issue in the scheduling of domestic leagues (*The Independent*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013).

Fourth relates to the public perception of the 2011 Qatar Sports Investment Authority's acquisition of European football club, Paris Saint-Germain (PSG). Most significantly here is the recently-announced sponsorship deal between PSG and the Qatar Tourism Authority – a deal which will ensure PSG earn up to €200 million a year for a total of four years (*The Telegraph*, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2013). Alongside the current Qatar National Bank sponsorship, the Qatar Tourism Authority's involvement in PSG has raised serious questions from the European community as to whether such a relationship looks to find a loophole in UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations (*ibid.*); this situation was arguably worsened when, three weeks after the Qatari-PSG acquisition, Al Jazeera secured the domestic broadcasting rights to the French football league (*The Guardian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2011).

Fifth, and perhaps most significantly, we can point here to how the hosting of the 2022 finals has increased global awareness towards the state's issues with human rights. Projected to the world in September 2013 through a report conducted by *the Guardian*, it was revealed that thousands of Nepalese workers had died in Qatar as a result of 'forced labour' in connection with 2022WC projects. The report enlightened the world to the appalling conditions South Asian expatriates face on a daily basis, documenting examples of exploitation, abuse, lack of pay, lack of access to food and free drinking water, and the confiscation of passports, equating, consequently, to forms

of ‘modern-day slavery’ (Pattison, 2013). The report stated that such a situation clear example of ‘one of the richest nations exploiting one of the poorest to get ready for the world’s most popular sporting tournament’ (ibid.).

Taking the above into consideration, we suggest that, whilst Qatari authorities look to cultivate soft power through global sporting practices, at the same time, said strategy has, in-fact, led to forms of soft disempowerment. In opposition to Qatari soft power objectives, forms of soft disempowerment through global sport have enlightened the international community towards those instances when Qatar has exhibited a lack of integrity, foul play, discrimination, unfriendliness, and a dearth of accountability. This has resulted in serious questions being asked not only in regard to Qatar’s ability and right to host the 2022WC, but, perhaps most significantly, led to concerns and doubts over the state’s readiness to fully-join the international community.

Looking to the future, we would argue that Qatar will have to deal with the ‘snowballing’ effect of soft disempowerment, whereby more and more of the spotlight will be shone on the state’s fallacies leading up to the 2022WC. Qatar’s soft power success will arguably depend on how it looks to overcome such issues; what this demonstrates, however, is that with any soft disempowerment situation comes the opportunity for ‘soft power regeneration’ via responding to one’s mistakes in a positive manner. Qatar’s desire to confront its national health crises is a case in point here; however, although the desire may be there, we must be sceptical of the fact that there is little evidence to suggest any correlation between hosting sport mega-events and significant long-term rises in physical activity participation (cf. Murphy & Bauman 2007).

## **5. Conclusion**

We have endeavoured here to fill a significant gap in discussions of Qatar’s engagement with global sport. In doing so, and in locating the ‘glocal’ nature of globalization, we have detailed how, through the pursuit of global sporting forms, Qatar has exhibited its glocal consciousness – referring to how nation-states both imagine themselves within the global context, and position themselves vis-à-vis processes of globalization.

In locating Qatar’s evidential glocal consciousness, we have focused here on how the state looks to draw most prominently on global sport for the purposes of a soft power strategy. Through interviews with key stakeholders within Qatar’s sport system, fieldwork, and the analysis of key documents and secondary materials, we have uncovered that the use of global sport to Qatari authorities revolves predominantly around three key themes: exhibiting Qatar’s supremacies as a microstate; the pursuit of peace, security and integrity; and confronting national health crises.

In leveraging global sport to this effect, we have argued here that Qatari authorities seek to strengthen their reputation and attractiveness within international society by advocating notions of professionalism and responsibility, innovation and sophistication, modernism, competence,

international benevolence, cooperation, security, peace and integrity, and successful leadership (both sporting and otherwise). The underlying foundation for looking to exhibit such qualities revolves around Qatar's glocal consciousness of the lack of understandings between Western and Eastern cultures - specifically what 'Oriental', microstate societies have to offer of the socio-political front - the state's limited hard power capabilities, the need to engage with greater levels of foreign investment and tourism, and its issues with national health in comparison to the majority of global society.

Nonetheless, we have also advocated the need here to focus on the other side of soft power: that of soft disempowerment. In doing so, we can locate that although Qatar has an underlying soft power strategy through global sport, since its acquisition of the 2022WC numerous commentators have highlighted the state's fallacies, leading to a loss of international attraction. Most significantly here has been discussions within the international community of bribes surrounding the acquisition of the tournament itself, the state's controversial laws surrounding gay rights, concern by the European community of the potential of a winter World Cup, the role of Qatari institutions in the French domestic first division, and finally, and most significantly, Qatar's severe lack of human rights for its migrant workers.

Consequently, the current position that Qatari authorities find themselves in, on the one hand, with a soft power strategy that looks to paint the picture of an attractive and well-managed, modern nation-state; and on the other, the international reputation of a citizenry that lacks integrity, honesty, friendliness and compassion towards citizens of other nations - even those working within Qatari borders. Although there have been signs that Qatari authorities are aware of some of their fallacies - particularly their abysmal human rights record - how far they are willing to go to rectify the current soft disempowerment situation they find themselves in remains to be seen. Nonetheless, we would argue that said forms of soft disempowerment need to be addressed swiftly if Qatar is to maintain its international credibility; of course, in achieving this, Qatar's soft power could also benefit via the state proving to the community of nation-states that it is capable of, firstly, owning-up to its faults and, secondly, reflecting its desires to overcome such wrongdoings.

As a final word, it should be detailed here that one area of soft power that we have been unable to explore in this context relates to *domestic soft power*. That is, how the most powerful forces within a nation-state are able to make themselves (and their specific national ideologies) more attractive and influential among their citizenries at home. Domestic soft power is a potentially significant factor to consider when exploring how sport mega-events are leveraged for particular political ends by dominant groups within nation-states. For example, Russia's hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi was certainly intended, in part, to enhance Russian soft power internationally; but, the event was also orientated partly towards strengthening the influence and attractiveness of Putin and his allies among the Russian people. In this sense, we realize that our future research on Qatar would benefit from exploring how involvement in international sport connects to domestic soft power or disempowerment, for example in regard to different forms



of public support or opposition, for the ruling elites and for specific constructions of Qatari national identity.

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