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Article

# Authoritarian States and Global Sport: The Contested Cases of Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia

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**Abstract:** Sport and authoritarianism have long been bedfellows, especially during the Cold War era. ‘Traditional’ authoritarian regimes—most notably the Soviet Union and its satellite states—learnt the art of instrumentalizing sport for political ends from each other. Motives for this included garnering international prestige via excellence in elite sport and showcasing communism as a viable alternative to capitalism. This paper shows how the ‘new’ authoritarian states are now beginning to impact global elite sport through similar sports investment strategies in an array of sports teams, sports sponsorship and sports leagues. Whereas ‘traditional’ authoritarian states sought sporting excellence on the playing field and the recognition this brought with it, the ‘new’ authoritarian states seek to buy into the cultural power and prestige of global elite sport for economic gain, to improve the health of their citizens and for global recognition. We draw on recent examples from Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia to understand why and how ‘new’ authoritarian states pursue sport policies and why this is contested.

**Keywords:** authoritarian states; professional sport; Gulf states; sport investment strategies; Qatar; the UAE; Saudi Arabia



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## 1. Introduction

Politics has long been a central part of sport despite the contestations to the contrary by politicians and sports organizations alike ([International Olympic Committee 1968](#); [Houlihan 2000](#)). In the 21st century, the notion that ‘sport and politics’ do not, or should not, mix, appears ludicrous, especially given the withdrawal of major sponsors at the recent Paris Olympic Games (2024) due to the perceived ‘politicization’ of the event ([InsidetheGames 2024](#)). Sport and authoritarianism have long been bedfellows, with examples going as far back as the Nazi and Italian dictatorships of the 1930s both using sport for non-sporting means, although this practice increased greatly during the Cold War era ([Riordan 2002](#)). The Cold War saw hostilities between ‘communist’ states on the one hand and ‘capitalist’ states on the other—spearheaded by the Soviet Union and the US, respectively—and these lasted from the late 1940s until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ([Garthoff 1992](#)). ‘Traditional’ authoritarian regimes—most notably the Soviet Union and its satellite states—learnt the art of instrumentalizing sport for political ends from each other. Motives for this included garnering international prestige via excellence in elite sport and showcasing communism as a viable alternative to capitalism ([Riordan 2002](#)). Since the end of the Cold War, there has been another type of authoritarian regime developing an interest in, and having an impact on, global sport. The ‘new’ authoritarian regimes (see below) differ in so far as they are less interested in developing their own elite sport systems for sporting success, but are far more interested in investing in sports strategies for economic gain, the health of their populations and global recognition. While there are clearly major differences between ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ authoritarian states, a number of factors do overlap. For example, chief among the generic characteristics of such regimes is the fact that they are ruled either by a centralized leading political party (communist during the Cold War)

or by a ruling family which is not constitutionally responsible to the people they seek to govern. There is no democratic election, no legal opposition, the media are generally regime-friendly or state run, citizens are either coerced or co-opted into accepting the ruling elite and there is usually a lack of human rights (e.g., a lack of freedom of speech, or choice of sexuality or religion) (see: [Bunce 2001](#); [Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965](#)).

This paper makes two novel contributions to the literature: first, we draw attention to three 'new' authoritarian states by outlining and analyzing their specific sport investment strategies, which are all strikingly similar. Second, we contend that, through these strategies, this group plays a 'disrupter' role in global sport, the consequences of which are likely to be far-reaching. The emergence of the Gulf states and their sports investment strategies has led to contestation in the sporting world. The main dispute is around the notion of 'sportswashing', whereby commentators understand the massive investments of these 'new' authoritarian states to be a deliberate tactic to distract from human rights abuses in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (see [Ettinger 2023](#); [Grix et al. 2023](#); [Grix and Brannagan 2024](#); [Skey 2022](#); [Fruh et al. 2022](#); [Crossley and Woolf 2024](#)). This contestation is discussed below after each of our case studies. Much more significant than 'sportswashing', we believe, is the 'disrupter' role this group of authoritarian states and their investment strategies play in global sport. That is, these states are already beginning to (re-)shape modern professional sport by accruing the power to decide where it is played, how it is consumed and by whom. The paper unfolds as follows: First, we discuss authoritarian states and the transfer of policy between them by offering an example of how the core characteristics of elite sport development first spread among former communist states during the Cold War and then spread to become the standard benchmark of modern-day elite sports systems. Second, we introduce our case studies and discuss the key 'drivers' of policy that have led to them pursuing similar sports investment strategies. Each state's sport investment strategy is analyzed with a particular focus on the hosting of sporting events for the following reasons: economic gain, health benefits for the nation and global recognition. Finally, we conclude the paper by assessing the impact of the findings on the future development of global, professional sport.

A key purpose of this paper is to highlight the trend of using sport for non-sporting aims by three important authoritarian states in the Gulf region and to understand how they perceive their sports strategies, what they set out to enact and why. This exercise affords us an opportunity to unpack the influence on global sport that wealthy authoritarian states have and will have.

## 2. 'Transferring' Sport Policy?

In this paper the term 'traditional' authoritarian states denotes former Soviet satellite states or other long-standing states, such as Egypt, Russia and Singapore, on which most studies of policy transfer focus; 'new' authoritarian states, on the other hand, relate here to Qatar (1971), the UAE (united in 1971) and Saudi Arabia (established in 1932), that is, relative newcomers to the authoritarian table. The vast majority of studies on policy transfer between states has been carried out on democratic nations ([Hall and Ambrosio 2017](#)). The concept of policy transfer has been defined by the academics who coined the phrase as 'the process by which knowledge about politics, administrative arrangements, institutions, and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, and ideas in another political system' [Dolowitz and Marsh \(2000, vol. 13, p. 5\)](#). While it is very difficult to prove that policy transfer has taken place between countries, the end result does often point to a clear set of factors that have led to similar policy outcomes. There is evidence that it is not just democracies that copy one another; authoritarian states too—both 'traditional' and 'new'—appear to borrow and emulate policies from one another.

We use an example of a 'traditional' authoritarian state to show how 'policy transfer' can occur. It seems clear that elite sport policy and development offers one of the few relatively straightforward examples of 'policy transfer', that is, a transfer of a policy or

idea, whether intentional or not, from one sports system and context to another. During the Cold War (1946–1991), many Soviet satellite states (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Poland and Romania) were very successful at elite sport. Putting systematic, state-led drug use to one side (effective only from the mid to late 1970s), the core structural elements of these sports systems all learnt from, and, in part, resembled, the extremely successful East German sports ‘miracle’ (Dennis and Grix 2012). That is, most communist countries transferred core parts of the East German system into their own, leading, for example, to four Soviet satellite states, East Germany and the Soviet Union being ranked in the top 10 in the 1976 Summer Olympics medal table (Olympic Museum (Germany) 1976) on the influence of communist states on modern-day elite sport. (See Green and Houlihan 2005; Houlihan and Green 2008; Grix et al. 2024). The key ‘ingredients’—and their integrated nature—that made up the East German sports system have gone on, through policy transfer, to provide a blue-print for the foundational development of elite sports systems globally today (the factors taken from East Germany include a government-driven sports policy; the professionalization of coaching; government funding and full-time, professional athletes; systems of talent identification and advanced sports science and medicine) (Dennis and Grix 2012). Mike Carlson, who wrote Manfred Ewald’s obituary (East Germany’s sports minister) for the Guardian newspaper on his death in 2002 (The Guardian 2002) made the valid point that ‘despite being disgraced, in the end he (Ewald) had won, because the entire sporting world followed down the path he had blazed’ (Carlson 2008; our emphasis). This does seem to be borne out by states emulating East Germany’s sports system with, for example, the well-regarded Australian Institute of Sport is, in part, being based on it (Hoye and Nicholson 2009).

Soviet satellite states all faced the pressure of striving to excel at elite sport in order to showcase their regimes (Houlihan and Green 2008). They also faced another pressure—that of domestic political legitimacy, thus, elite sport success was part of a social contract that appeased citizens and ought to be understood as part of the wider notion of ‘bread and circuses’ that helped keep these states together (Fulbrook 1995). Such a practice benefited both rulers and the ruled, as sport served as a source of pride for citizens in the majority of Soviet satellite states, while food and (alcoholic) drink was subsidized. Such an arrangement led to an acquiescence of citizens to the regime(s) over a long period of time (Ibid.).

While there is evidence of countries’ awareness of policy developments in different jurisdictions, it is often the case that the need for learning from abroad is precipitated in times of ‘crisis’, that is, a poor performance at an Olympic Games, or failure to win a Test series, or a major international championship in a culturally significant sport, such as cricket (Australia), rugby union (Wales, New Zealand) or skiing (Norway). For example, there are many ‘critical junctures’ in elite policy development that spur on national reflection on elite sport investment. The 1996 Atlanta Olympics was the site of a number of poor national performances that went on to kick-start the UK’s, Japan’s and Australia’s journey towards an elite-focused sport policy. All three states recorded dismal performances that led to policy re-calibration. Norway experienced a similar disappointment during the 1980s and Netherlands in the 1970s. All of these experiences—coupled with the external success of the Eastern Bloc—prompted a major rethink in sport policy priorities. In these instances, national sports ‘crises’ acted as ‘disrupters’ to normal sport policy and set nations on a similar path—or ‘convergence’ of attempting to achieve elite sport excellence (Grix et al. 2024).

### 3. The ‘New’ Authoritarian States and Sport

Our historical case has a number of parallels with the ‘new’ authoritarian states we analyze below. Both groups of ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ authoritarian states are subject to similar external and internal pressures to adapt. The key difference is that the Gulf states are not first and foremost interested in sports performance on the field of play. Whereas ‘traditional’ authoritarian states sought sporting excellence on the playing field, and the

external recognition and domestic political legitimacy it engendered, the 'new' authoritarian states seek to buy into the cultural power and prestige of ('Western') global elite sport, a practice wrongly termed 'sportswashing' (see [Grix et al. 2023](#); [Ettinger 2023](#)). We focused on the three largest and most active nations in the Gulf region in relation to sport. While the small state of Bahrain punches above its weight in terms of hosting sporting events, the scale of its sports investment strategy is yet to reach that of the following cases.

Heavy investment in 'Western' sport brings with it external recognition (not always positive, initially) and goes some way to contribute to the specific kind of social contract at play in the authoritarian states of the region. In terms of 'authoritarian transfer', our case studies of Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia appear to be responding to very similar internal and external 'drivers' or 'pressures', pushing them towards specific investment strategies that include professional sport. While the reasons for sport investment outlined in the state strategy documents below must be viewed as aspirational and long-term (especially given that many of the causal links between sport and physical activity promotion remain unproven), they accompany another set of broader motives. These have more to do with image politics, influence and power. Buying into 'Western' sport is one way of attempting to accrue just that (see [Grix et al. 2023](#)).

Each case study state has produced a 'vision' document that discusses their strategy for future development and investment in detail; each of these documents contains the words 'Vision 2030'. We now turn to our three case studies, briefly outlining their core socio-economic data before analyzing their respective 'visions' where they relate to the hosting of sporting events.

#### 4. Qatar

The first of our case studies is Qatar. With a population of just over 3 million, Qatar is a small state located on the Arabian Gulf peninsula. Despite its size, Qatar is nonetheless one of the wealthiest states in the world: the latest figures show that Qatar's nominal GDP per capita is currently the eighth highest in the world, standing at \$71,568, while it wields the world's fourth-highest GDP per capita by purchasing power parity, at \$115,075 ([International Monetary Fund 2024](#)). Such wealth derives from Qatar's abundance of natural resources: Qatar is the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas, and the world's 15th largest exporter of crude oil, producing on average 1.9 million barrels per day ([U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023a](#)). Qatar's significant sums of capital reserve have supported its 'National Vision 2030' (henceforth 'QNV'), which documents the state's ambition to develop into 'an advanced country by 2030, capable of sustaining its own development and providing for a high standard of living for all of its people' ([Qatar National Vision 2008](#)). Guided by three iterations of the ([Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011](#); [Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018](#); [Qatar National Development Strategy 2024–2030 2024](#)) (henceforth 'QNDS'), the state's blueprint for achieving the National Vision, Qatar's nation-building project is built on the advancement of four pillars: economic development; human development; social development and environmental development.

A crucial facet of Qatar's attempts to achieve its National Vision has been engagement with global sport. Indeed, like many of its Gulf neighbors (see: [Reiche and Brannagan 2022](#)), notable here has been Qatar's desire to bid for, and stage, multiple sport events. Key highlights include the state's staging of the 2006 Asian Games, the 2011 Asian Cup, the 2015 Handball World Championships, the 2019 World Athletics Championships and the 2022 FIFA World Cup (see: [Reiche 2015](#); [Al Thani 2021](#)). The staging of such events serves, we argue, three core objectives that are shared across each of our three case studies. The first is the desire to use sports events to achieve the economic development pillar of its National Vision, and, in particular, to assist the state with diversifying its national economy away from a heavy reliance on the sale of hydrocarbon resources. It is estimated that 70% of Qatar's total revenues, 85% of its export earnings and 60% of its gross domestic product are derived from the sale of oil and natural gas (see [Brannagan and Reiche 2022a](#)). For the state,

the staging of major sports events, such as the World Cup, help move Qatar away from such a reliance on hydrocarbons by taking advantage of 'the thriving sports tourism sector' ([Qatar National Development Strategy 2024–2030 2024](#), p. 17). Notable in this regard is the belief that such events provide Qatar with an unrivalled opportunity to showcase to the world its cultural amenities, heritage sites and other tourist-related industries, and in doing so, to significantly raise its 'attractiveness and competitiveness' as a global sport and tourism hub (*ibid.*, 17).

Second, is the evidential need to use sport events to inspire Qatar's population, and in doing so, attempt to meaningfully address a national health concern linked to high rates of obesity and diabetes. The Qatar Public Health Strategy 2017–2022 identifies how 70% of Qataris are 'overweight', 41% of whom can be classified as 'obese', while 17% of Qatari adults suffer from diabetes; additionally, amongst Qatar's under-18 population, 32% of boys and 33% of girls can be categorized as either 'overweight' or 'obese' (*ibid.*). According to the [World Health Organization \(2024\)](#) these figures situate Qatar as the world's 11th most obese nation per capita. To address this national health crisis, the state's staging of multiple sports events provides 'exceptional circumstances to make sport a public activity' ([Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018](#), p. 6; see also [Brannagan and Grix 2023](#)). The central notion here, therefore, is that by raising Qatar's 'sporting excellence', in terms of both the state's hosting of prestigious sports events, and the performance of Qatari athletic achievement, this will, in turn, help to 'develop [a] national commitment to a healthy and active lifestyle', the lack of which has been identified as one of the key drivers underpinning the state's high obesity and diabetes rates (*ibid.*, p. 251).

Third is the desire to use sport events to help place Qatar on the world stage and increase its influence and soft power overseas. As one of the smallest states in Asia, the staging of sports events such as the World Cup help Qatar punch far above its weight in soft-power terms ([Brannagan and Reiche 2022b](#); [Brannagan and Rookwood 2016](#)). A common problem faced by small states, such as Qatar, is the continuous 'need to differentiate themselves from their [larger] neighbours who are often culturally similar' ([Houlihan and Zheng 2015](#), p. 334). This is exactly what Qatar has sought to achieve through its staging of sports events: to carve out for itself an independent foreign policy, one that helps it separate itself from the foreign policy of its much larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia (see also: [Khatib 2013](#)). For Qatar, sports events thus help in the state's attempt to achieve what [Chong \(2010](#), p. 386) calls 'audience socialization': that is, increasing visibility and separating oneself from larger neighbors by educating global audiences on one's existence, individuality and, most importantly, right to sovereign rule and authority. This is something alluded to by the [Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 \(2011](#), pp. 19–196) which acknowledges how 'Qatar has enjoyed unprecedented global recognition' through sport, with events such as the World Cup greatly enhancing 'the nation's regional and international image'.

Ironically, while events such as the World Cup have raised awareness of Qatar, so too have they dealt a significant blow to the state's soft power, acting as highly contested events in and of themselves. Notable here has been the wide-spread critique—led by the global media and international non-governmental organizations—of Qatar's human rights record, and specifically the state's treatment of its blue-collar construction workers (see [Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018, 2023](#)). Accusations have centered on the poor living and working conditions faced by expatriate workers in Qatar, some of which have been directly linked to World Cup-related projects, leading to groups such as [Human Rights Watch \(2013](#), 7 February) labelling Qatar a 'crucible of exploitation and misery'; elsewhere, [Amnesty International \(2020](#), 27 January) has argued that the situation in Qatar equates to one where foreign workers were literally 'being subjected to forced labour'.

## 5. UAE

With a population of just over 9 million inhabitants, the UAE is larger than Qatar, but nonetheless still qualifies as a 'small state'. Like Qatar, the UAE holds significant wealth: it currently has the 21st highest nominal GDP per capita in the world, at \$49,550,

and the 14th highest GDP per capita at purchasing power parity standing at \$77,251 ([International Monetary Fund 2024](#)). Like its wealthy Gulf neighbors, the UAE economy benefits from significant hydrocarbon sales: the UAE is, for example, currently the world's 9th largest exporter of crude oil, exporting on average 3.3 million barrels per day ([U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023b](#)). In 2023, the UAE launched its 'We the UAE 2031', the state's vision for the future. The vision has four key pillars: forward society; forward economy; forward diplomacy and forward ecosystem.

Unlike Qatar, the UAE has yet to stage what we may term a 'first-order sport event', that is, a FIFA World Cup or Summer Olympic Games. However, the UAE has staged a number of smaller events, such as the annual Abu Dhabi Formula 1 Grand Prix, the 2019 Asian Cup, the annual Dubai Rugby Sevens, the annual PGA European Tour of professional golf and the seasonal ATP and WTP Dubai Tennis Championships ([Swart et al. 2021](#)). The UAE's economy is far more diversified than that of Qatar: in 2022, for example, only 27.6% of the UAE's GDP came from the sale of oil and natural gas ([UAE U.S. Embassy 2022](#)). Crucial in the UAE's diversification of its national economy has been the role of tourism: at present, the UAE is the world's 18th most visited tourist destination, and the top destination in the Middle East and North Africa (see: [Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024](#)). Crucial in this regard are the two major cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which have positioned themselves as vital global hubs for leisure, culture and business tourism (see: [Bodolica et al. 2020](#)). It is here where the regular staging of sports events help ensure the UAE remains economically diversified. The staging of sports events not only creates added forms of inbound sports tourism, but the range of sports and leisure activities on offer also help the cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai remain 'attractive destination[s] for global talent' and a 'powerful magnet for [international] entrepreneurs and innovators' ([We the UAE 2031 n.d.](#), p. 31). In doing so, sport plays a key role in continuously improving and maintaining the UAE's 'economy and the nation's competitiveness' (*ibid.*, p. 47).

Furthermore, like in Qatar, sport also plays a key role in the UAE's desire to address issues linked to the health and well-being of its national citizens. Previous research has demonstrated that 42% of the adult population of the UAE are 'overweight', with 28% considered 'obese' (see: [Mamdouh et al. 2023](#)). Currently, the UAE is the world's 46th most obese nation ([World Health Organization 2024](#)). For UAE authorities, sport arguably plays an identical role to that of Qatar: that is, to produce a national society that includes 'physically and mentally healthy, active individuals that positively contribute to their communities and the economy' ([We the UAE 2031 n.d.](#), p. 23). Furthermore, a key objective is to foster a society which 'enables individuals to prosper mentally, physically, socially and economically, and strengthens social cohesion through community building activities, cultural events and sports' (*ibid.*, p. 23). Sport thus plays a pivotal role in the physical, mental and human capital development of the UAE's 'forward society' aspirations.

Finally, there is the role sport seeks to play within the UAE's diplomatic and soft power ambitions. For the UAE, the desire to position the country as a 'leading global dialogue on diversity, tolerance and peace', and as 'a role model for adopting ecofriendly best practices in economy and society' is key ([We the UAE 2031 n.d.](#), p. 39). In relation to the latter, sport plays a vital role in this regard; note, for example, the Dubai Sports Council's 2024–2030 strategic plan, a key tenet of which includes the use of the sports sector 'to contribute to Dubai's ambitious sustainability targets, including a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030' ([Government of Dubai 2023](#), 14 December). Such an attempt has included the 'use of renewable energy and effective waste management in stadiums', as part of 'Dubai's dedication to making sports events more sustainable', and to 'elevate sustainability within the UAE's sports ecosystem' ([Government of Dubai 2024](#), 22 October). The need to present the UAE as an environmentally aware country is, arguably, paramount given the state is currently the world's seventh largest per capita producer of carbon dioxide emissions ([European Commission 2022](#)).

In the realm of sport, it has, however, been in the area of human rights that the UAE has received, arguably, its greatest level of international scrutiny. Like Qatar, the

contested nature of sport can be found in accusations that the UAE has sought to use sport to divert attention away from its human rights abuses at home. [Human Rights Watch \(2024, 3 October\)](#), for example, has argued that the decision by the U.S.'s National Basketball Association (NBA) to stage several pre-season matches in Abu Dhabi equates to an attempt by the latter to project an image of 'openness', whilst failing to meaningfully address its ongoing human rights violations, nor sufficiently protect its large segment of migrant construction workers. Similarly, so too have sports such as Formula 1 received criticism for their decision to stage races across the Arabian Gulf states; in 2020, seven-time world champion, Lewis Hamilton, for example, publicly critiqued the 'consistent and massive problem' F1 has in awarding states with poor human rights records the opportunity to partner with the sport (see: [The Guardian 2020, 12 December](#)). Despite this, the sport's governing body has since extended its partnership with the Gulf states, now including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE as established destinations within the F1 calendar (see: [Financial Times 2022, 18 November](#)).

## 6. Saudi Arabia

Our final case study is Saudi Arabia, officially known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is one of the most important states in the Gulf region. With a population of 33 million, Saudi Arabia is the largest state in the Gulf with a GDP per capita by purchasing power parity of \$63.12 ([International Monetary Fund 2024](#)), similar to that of the UK. However, Saudi has the second-largest number of oil reserves in the world, amounting to some 17% of the world's petroleum ([U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023a](#)). This has led to Saudi building up immense levels of wealth, which it invests via its sovereign wealth fund (Public Investment Fund, or PIF), which is among the largest in the world ([Reuters 2023](#)). The significant sums of capital reserve have, like Qatar, formed the bedrock of Saudi's 'Vision 2030', which, according to the official Government website '... is a blueprint that is diversifying the economy, empowering citizens, creating a vibrant environment for both local and international investors, and establishing Saudi Arabia as a global leader' ([Vision 2030 2016](#)). Similar to Qatar, Saudi's 'Vision' is built on three 'pillars': 1. a 'thriving society' that will continue Saudi's leading role 'as the heart of Arab and Islamic worlds' ([Vision 2030 2016, p. 13](#)); 2. creating a sustainable and more diverse economy through investment and 3. leveraging Saudi's strategic location to develop its role 'as an integral driver of international trade and to connect three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe' (*ibid.*).

As with the two cases above, Saudi Arabia has chosen professional sport as an investment to achieve many of the aims set out in the Vision 2030, starting immediately after the document's publication in 2016. The Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, was behind both the publication and articulation within the 'Vision' document and has spearheaded the Kingdom's investment in European sport, making a number of major investments in sports, sports events and sports sponsorship, often for eye-watering sums. (See [Ettinger 2023](#), for an overview of all sports-related investments). The Crown Prince, who is also the Prime Minister of Saudi and effectively the ruler of the Kingdom, is the Chair of the state's PIF and has also set about hosting a myriad of sporting events in the Kingdom. The majority of academics and commentators have focused their attention on the external aspect of Saudi's sports investment strategy—especially the cases of their controversial investment in England's Premier League football club, Newcastle United (see: [Black et al. 2024](#); [Roslender 2024](#); [Ettinger 2023](#); [Crossley and Woolf 2024](#)), and the massive investment in shaking up professional golf by launching the LIV Golf tour to rival the Professional Golf Association tour ([Davis et al. 2023](#); [Johnson 2024](#); [Jephson et al. 2024](#)), two entities which have since 'merged'. More striking, perhaps, has been the Kingdom's investment in bringing sport to their state, including recurring F1 events, golf, tennis, football—including hosting other states' national 'cups' in Saudi—World Wrestling Entertainment events and, increasingly, global boxing matches (see [Ettinger 2023](#); [Brannagan et al. 2024](#)).

The first reason for Saudi's investment in hosting major sporting events is economic. After witnessing Qatar's successful staging of the FIFA 2022 Football World Cup, Saudi



Arabia sought to attract the most-watched sporting spectacle in the world to its country. After FIFA announced it was seeking prospective hosts for the 2034 version of the World Cup (and allowing just 25 days for a response), Saudi Arabia was the only party interested. Thus, this global event with upwards of 4.8 billion cumulative viewers (FIFA 2023) will now be held in the Gulf for a second time. This is the pinnacle of a sport-hosting strategy that began prior to the launch of the nation's 'Vision 2030' with the World Wrestling Entertainment events in 2013, part of a 10-year deal costing the Saudis some \$500 million (Ettinger 2023).

A second reason for sustained investment in sports is seen as improving the health of Saudi citizens. Currently, the average life expectancy is 74 (Vision 2030 2016, p. 31), which is far lower than the 81.5 average in the European Union in 2023 (Eurostat 2024). Similar to Qatar and the UAE, rising levels of prosperity have been accompanied by decreasing levels of physical activity and a rise in sedentary behavior (Al-Hazzaa 2018). For this reason, the Saudi Government launched the 'Quality of Life' (QoL) program as part of its Vision 2030 stating that a 'healthy and balanced lifestyle is an essential mainstay of a high quality of life' (Vision 2030 2016, p. 22). The task of helping Saudi citizens become more physically active is clearly an urgent one, for, according to Albujulaya et al. (2023), the 'latest national survey conducted by the Saudi General Authority for Statistics in 2019 concluded that 78% of Saudis were inactive'. As with most countries, there are specific cohorts in Saudi society who fare worse when it comes to levels of physical activity. Whereas in the UK some minority groups record the lowest levels of activity, in Saudi Arabia it is schoolgirls who are among those least active (ibid., pp. 5–6), in part due to a severe lack of sports facilities and teachers.

The third reason for investing in the hosting of events is to put Saudi Arabia on the map. Quite apart from the key investment in Newcastle Football Club in 2021, which caused a stir in the media among cries of 'sportswashing' (see above), the Saudis have been investing heavily in football—both in hosting the Italian and the Spanish 'Super Cup' (in the Saudi capital Riyadh), paying around EUR 30 million for each year the games are played (Reuters 2022) and in buying up top-class footballers (many coming to the end of their careers) to play in the domestic Saudi Pro League. In 2022, Cristiano Ronaldo signed a 2.5-year contract with Al Nassr FC, and the hope is his presence will increase attendance at games (The Guardian 2021). There followed a number of other big-name signings, including Neymar, Karim Benzema and N'Golo Kante (BBC Sport 2023). All of this created a great deal of publicity for the Kingdom, the majority of which was (initially) negative.

Saudi Arabia's sports investment strategy is among one of the most contested of all our cases, especially after Jamal Khashoggi, a US-based journalist and critic of Saudi Arabia's government, was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul (BBC 2021). His murder has been linked to the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, by US intelligence agencies (The Guardian 2021). This, and a number of issues with human rights in Saudi Arabia, has led to an avalanche of criticism of the state's investment in European sport, led mostly by international organizations, such as Amnesty International, which described FIFA's awarding of the 2034 World Cup to Saudi as 'blatant sports washing' (Amnesty International 2023). The continued contestation inherent in the 'sportswashing' debate obfuscates more than it clarifies. By reducing the above sports investment strategies to an attempt to cover up human rights abuses at home, there is a risk of losing sight of what is actually happening, that is, a long-term shift in who owns and controls professional sport.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper identifies a group of 'new' authoritarian states that each pursue similar sports investment strategies in response to similar external and domestic impetuses—a process that has a number of parallels with the 'traditional' authoritarian states during the Cold War in relation to their reliance on sport for external recognition and domestic political legitimacy. All three of the cases introduced above are (in their own words) investing in sport for economic gain, to improve the health of their populations and to gain global

recognition. Although this development is relatively new and the consequences of these state-led sports investment strategies are only beginning to come to light, it is clear that the impact on shaping modern professional sport, including how and where it is played and how it is consumed, is likely to be profound. The contestation that has accompanied the massive financial investments in sport by Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and, above all, the ‘sportswashing’ accusations and debate, has, we believe, led to a lack of understanding of how and why these investments are taking place.

If Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia continue to invest in global professional sport at the same rate as at present, it is very likely that these three authoritarian states will, in the long-term, extend their influence and power in global sport. Thus, such sport investment strategies as outlined above are neither simply an attempt to ‘wash’ a country’s image (there is little evidence that this actually works), nor is it just an economic decision with which to secure the future. Rather, there is much more at play here for the long-term development of professional sport if it is funded and shaped by the resource-rich, authoritarian Gulf states.

A limitation of our paper is the fact that the authors offer a ‘Western’ lens on the three authoritarian cases; we have mitigated this somewhat by attempting to show their sports investment strategies via their own materials and sources.

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