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Soft Power as “Beauty, Brilliance, Benignity”: The Case of the Aspire Zone Elite Sports Complex in Qatar

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Abstract

This paper examines the soft power capabilities of Qatar’s Aspire Zone elite sports complex by using Alexander Vuving’s categories of “beauty”, “brilliance”, and “benignity”. The study demonstrates how the Aspire Zone produces soft power for Qatar in a number of ways. First, the knowledge and world-class expertise on hand at the Aspire Zone have helped situate the Aspire Zone as the “go-to” place for sports training, science, and medicine. Through the Aspire Zone, Qatar has garnered prestige, leadership, and influence. As others regularly turn to the state for solutions to shared problems, Qatar extends its network of allies through those it helps. Second, the Aspire Academy’s Football Dreams project reminds others of Qatar’s desire to help those beyond its borders. This not only situates Qatar as a “good global citizen”, but positions the state as a welcoming destination which others can easily seek best practice knowledge and advice. Finally, the production of elite athletes adds to the expertise power of both the Aspire Zone and Qatar. With every success of Qatari athletes, the state shows its capacity to overcome a typical small state problem — to produce a high-quality stock of athletic talent despite significant limitations linked to its small population.

Keywords: soft power, global sport, sports events, expertise power, branding

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, the State of Qatar (henceforth “Qatar”) has invested heavily in sport. The state has, for example, sought to acquire and stage multiple sports mega-events, culminating in the country’s hosting of the 2015 IHF World Handball Championships, the 2019 World Athletics Championships, and the Middle East’s first FIFA World Cup, staged in November and December of 2022. Furthermore, the state has actively sought to secure overseas sporting investments, largely through its sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority, and its subsidiary, Qatar Sports Investments. Most notable in this regard is the 2011 purchase of Paris Saint- Germain by the Qatar Sports Investment Group, for a reported fee of €100 million (£89 million). At home, Qatar has also actively endeavoured to attract some of football’s most notable names to its domestic league, the Qatar Stars League, including ex-Real Madrid CF forward Raúl González, former FC Barcelona captain and Spain midfielder Xavier “Xavi” Hernández, former Arsenal FC and CF Villarreal midfielder Santi Cazorla, and former Bayern Munich midfielder Javi Martínez.¹

For many academics, Qatar’s multiple investments in sport can, in part, be explained through Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power” — referring to the tools through which states look to carve out for themselves an attractive global profile. Some scholars, for instance, have pinpointed how Qatar’s staging of sports mega-events, and particularly the 2022 World Cup, intended to showcase to the world the country’s myriad of modern architectural wonders, and, in doing so, to position the state as an attractive, innovative, and forward-thinking place to live, work, and invest in.² In similar terms, others have located how the World Cup looks to act as a “bridge” of communication between the East and the West, in part to demonstrate the cultural similarities that exist amongst Arab and non-Arab populations, as well as to highlight the hospitality and heritage of the Arabian Gulf and its peoples.³

One significant facet of Qatar’s sporting investments that has yet to receive noteworthy academic analysis is the country’s Aspire Zone, a state-of-the-art elite sports complex situated in Qatar’s capital, Doha. Since its establishment in 2005, the Aspire Zone has gone on to become one of the most sought-after international destinations for elite athlete training, development, and medical care, and thus a significant soft power tool for Qatar. Given this, this paper looks to make an original

contribution to knowledge by being the first to provide a fully dedicated soft power analysis of the Aspire Zone. While the concept of soft power has been widely applied to state's staging of major sports events, little work has been dedicated towards understanding how national athletic training centres, such as Aspire, produce soft power for the state. Thus, our rationale for applying soft power to Aspire stems from a desire to expand application of the concept beyond sporting contexts that focus purely on sports events. Furthermore, our application of soft power to the Aspire Zone seeks to take place through the prism of Alexander Vuving's⁴ soft power categories of "beauty", "brilliance", and "benignity", which seek to add much needed clarity to Joseph Nye's concept. Thus, while the paper advances academic understandings of the Aspire Zone, and the soft power role of national sports centres, so too does it add to those studies that have sought to clarify how exactly soft power works more broadly, both in theoretical and practical terms.

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows. In the next section we unpack the concept of soft power, and, in doing so, highlight how and why it has been critiqued for lacking clarity. In offering a solution to this, we then discuss Vuving's soft power categories of "beauty", "brilliance", and "benignity", and highlight the need to understand soft power as the conversion of "resources" into "outcomes". Following this, we then provide an overview of the Aspire Zone, and detail the complex's main facilities. Then, we apply the categories of "beauty", "brilliance", and "benignity" to the Aspire Zone and show how the elite athlete complex generates soft power for Qatar. We conclude by detailing the paper's key findings and pinpoint how Aspire may add to Qatar's soft power in the post-2022 World Cup era.

¹ Brannagan and Reiche, *Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup: Politics, Controversy, Change* (2022).

² Scharfenort, "Urban Development and Social Change in Qatar: The Qatar National Vision 2030 and the 2022 FIFA World Cup", *Journal of Arabian Studies* 2.2 (2012), pp. 209–230; Brannagan, Reiche, and Bedwell, "Mass Social Change and Identity Hybridization: The Case of Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup", *Identities* 30.6 (2023), pp. 900–918.

³ Reiche, "Investing in Sporting Success as a Domestic and Foreign Policy Tool: The Case of Qatar", *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 7.4 (2015), pp. 489–504; Brannagan and Giulianotti, "Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment: Qatar, Global Sport and Football's 2022 World Cup Finals", *Leisure Studies* 34.6 (2015); Brannagan and Giulianotti, "The Soft Power-Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar", *International Affairs* 94.5 (2018), pp. 1139–1157.

⁴ Vuving, "How Soft Power Works", *JSRN* (2009).

2 Soft power as beauty, brilliance, benignity

The concepts of “hard” and “soft” power were coined by the American political scientist, Joseph Nye. For Nye, hard power refers to “the ability to get desired outcomes through coercion and payment.”⁵ Here, national leaders may achieve outcomes through force or economic (dis)incentive. As one form of hard power, military assets can be used to physically engage, weaken, and/or destroy others, as demonstrated with Russia’s military attack on the state of Ukraine in February 2022. Furthermore, such assets may also be used to back up threats in coercive diplomacy, as was the case in 2003, when ex-Libyan Prime Minister Muammar Gaddafi dismantled Libya’s weapons of mass destruction program after America’s commitment towards forceful change was showcased with the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and in Iraq two years later. Additionally, national leaders may endeavour to get what they want in hard power terms via the use of monetary incentives, such as through the implementation of cross-border tariff reductions, favourable market access, and/or investment guarantees; or via economic disincentives, in the form of sanctions, embargoes, the suspension of aid, or unfavourable taxation.⁶

In contrast, soft power denotes the “ability to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”⁷ This form of power stems from qualities such as an attractive culture, appealing policies and institutions, or a state’s acclaimed accomplishments. Examples include the country of Italy, previously dubbed a “cultural superpower” for its “global omnipresence of Italian cuisine and its iconic, internationally-renowned luxury brands”.⁸ Or the country of Peru, which regularly benefits from increasing international tourism gains, a result of the country’s iconic cultural historical attractions, such as Machu Picchu. In cases such as these, states endeavour to get what they want not through coercion, but via adapting international agendas and influencing tastes in order to align the preferences of others to their own.⁹

Nye argues that the most successful states in the 21st century will be those whose leaders are effective in successfully combining hard and soft power in mutually beneficial ways, to bring about what he refers to as “smart power”. This is for three reasons. First, while states may still get what they want through coercive hard power, thanks to developments in information and communications technologies, in the contemporary epoch, they cannot afford to ignore the need to also cultivate the attraction generated by soft power. This is because the digital revolution has increased the volume of information in circulation, which has led to states’ behaviour being subject to a greater degree of inspection and scrutiny, resulting in the importance for states to maintain attractiveness. Second, target audiences have themselves become smarter. With the worldwide spread of secondary and higher education, as well as the availability of widely accessible information, populations are today more knowledgeable about their own and other societies, and, in turn, have become more judgemental about governments’ use of coercive measures.¹⁰ And third, hard and soft power are not enough on their own to achieve all desired outcomes. Leaders cannot always get what they

⁵ Nye, “Power and Foreign Policy”, *Journal of Political Power* 4.1 (2011), pp. 9–24.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008), pp. 94–109.

⁸ *Soft Power 30* website (2019), <https://softpower30.com/>.

⁹ See: Brannagan and Grix, “Nation-State Strategies for Human Capital Development: The Case of Sports Mega-Events in Qatar”, *Third World Quarterly* 44.8 (2023), pp. 1807–1824; Grix, Brannagan, and Lee, “Russia’s Unique Soft Power Strategy”, in Grix, Brannagan, and Lee (eds), *Entering the Global Arena: Emerging States, Soft Power Strategies and Sports Mega-Events* (2019), pp. 53–68.

¹⁰ Wilson III, “Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008), pp. 110–124.

want solely through the use of hard power means — investing great sums of money into the construction of cultural and leisure facilities and other tourism attractions is only beneficial if foreign audiences find that culture and amenities appealing in the first place. Similarly, soft power on its own cannot solve all problems — even though North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un is a fan of the US's National Basketball Association (NBA), this alone is unlikely to deter his ongoing nuclear weapons program, which has generally been considered a threat to American national security.

Although soft power has grown in both its academic usage and significance in recent years, many have, however, criticized Nye's work. Notable in this regard is the claim that, although Nye offers examples of how states can acquire soft power internationally and domestically, numerous scholars have suggested the concept lacks a clear description of exactly how and in what ways these examples equate to forms of "attraction" or "power". Victoria Hudson, for example, argues that soft power continues to be "a deeply contested concept";¹¹ while Ivan Bakalov similarly notes that, while soft power has become one of the "most recognisable terms in the discipline of international relations", this "growing attention has not resulted in an improved understanding of how to deal with some of the [term's] persisting conceptual problems";¹² more recently, Peter Henne classifies soft power as "simultaneously ubiquitous and unclear".¹³

In responding to calls for added conceptual clarity, several scholars have sought to redefine and re-examine the concept of soft power.¹⁴ In doing so, scholars have reminded us of the need to consider two key facets of soft power. The first is that soft power is not simply "nation branding", which is focused most on raising awareness of a country. Rather, soft power is more akin with strategies of "public diplomacy", which crucially also include creating mutual understandings, active cooperation and long-lasting relationships. Indeed, as Nye himself repeatedly advocates, soft power is not simply the ability to raise awareness; it is the ability to entice and attract, leading to acquiescence or imitation.¹⁵ If a state's culture, values, and/or policies are not themselves attractive, no soft power will be gained. Soft power cannot be achieved through slick marketing alone, but emanates from, above all else, *credibility* — a value that simple nation branding campaigns often lack.

Second, soft power should not be incorrectly reduced to either soft power resources or soft power outcomes alone. Reducing power down to either its resource or outcome has been previously referred to as the "vehicle fallacy" and "exercise fallacy", respectively. In the former, (neo)realists enter into a fallacy when they incorrectly reduce power to power resources (wealth, status, etc.).¹⁶ However, we must remember that the simple possession of power resources does not alone guarantee an actor's capacity to successfully transform them into preferred power outcomes.¹⁷ Additionally, the "exercise fallacy" is expressed by those who mistakenly reduce power to visible structures of events. In this sense, power becomes incorrectly

¹¹ Hudson, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate as a Potential 'Tool' of Russian Soft Power in the Wake of Ukraine's 2013 Euromaidan", *Europe-Asia Studies* 70.9 (2018), p. 1355. ¹² Bakalov, "Whither Soft Power? Divisions, Milestones, and Prospects of a Research Programme in the Making", *Journal of Political Power* 12.1 (2019), p. 129.

¹³ Henne, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Soft Power", *International Studies Perspectives* 23.1 (2022), p. 95.

¹⁴ Bengt "Turkey's Potential as a Soft Power: A Call for Conceptual Clarity", *Insight Turkey* 10.2 (2008), pp. 21–40; Fan, "Soft Power: Power of Attraction or Confusion?", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 4.2 (2008), pp. 147–158; Feklyunina, "Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the Russian World(s)", *European Journal of International Relations* 22.4 (2016).

¹⁵ Nye, "Limits of American Power", *Political Science Quarterly* 117.4 (2002), pp. 545–559.

¹⁶ Barnett and Duvall, "Power in International Politics", *International Organization* 59.1 (2005).

¹⁷ Hayden, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts* (2012).

defined as the outcome of its own application (success in decision-making, prevailing over others in conflict situations, etc.).¹⁸

In order to avoid such reductionism, we need a definition of what “power” is. This is a difficult task, however, as little consensus exists concerning how power can and should be defined. Consequently, as debates surrounding the definition of power are far from settled, we simply offer our own perspective on the concept. In doing so, it should be noted that we align with those who do not see power as simply denoting its respective resource or outcome; rather, we would advocate that “power [merely] identifies a capacity: power is a potentiality, not an actuality — indeed, a potentiality that may never be actualised”.¹⁹ In other words, power is not any resource or outcome per se, but rather the quintessential crux of power “is being able to make or to receive any change, or to resist it”.²⁰ It is, in other words, the *capacity* to have an impact on, modify things, or cause effects in the physical or social world.

One scholar who has correctly identified the need to see power as capacity is Alexander Vuving,²¹ who argues that we can trace how soft power works by first identifying the types of soft power resources that are available to state leaders. Here, Vuving suggests that we can group these resources into the three categories of “beauty”, “brilliance”, and “benignity”, which enables us to identify how such resources convert into power outcomes:

- (1) “beauty” refers to a state’s respective international and/or domestic ideals, values, causes, and visions. National governments experience power outcomes when they are jointly pursuing these shared ideals, visions, causes, and values, and, in turn, encourage confidence, friendship, and cooperation, ultimately leading to others seeking guidance, encouragement, inspiration, and/or leadership;
- (2) “brilliance” as a power resource refers to accomplishments via high performance that a state can achieve through its various international or domestic ambitions. On the inter- national scene, brilliance refers to a state’s ability to portray its domestic capacity to achieve a wealthy and vibrant economy, rich and radiant culture, scientific and techno- logical abilities, or peaceful and well-run society. As a power outcome, brilliance works through the production of admiration, encouraging others to emulate one’s achievements through assistance seeking; and
- (3) “benignity” refers to a state’s harmonious relations with others. As a power resource, it denotes the positive attributes a state actively portrays in treating others in a positive, generous, and supportive manner. As a power outcome, benignity generates the pro- duction of gratitude, which, in turn, encourages reciprocal cooperation.

In advocating the above, it is important to note that we are not suggesting the existence of a universal or concrete model of achieving soft power. Indeed, soft power depends on the “credible attraction filter”,²² as any understanding of what constitutes both attractiveness and credibility needs to be *shared* by the soft power sender and receiver. Soft power rests on the ability to entice others through various forms of “attraction”, and thus we need to remember that the power sender and receiver may have different understandings of what exactly constitutes “attraction” and “credibility”. Soft power should therefore be understood as a *relational* and

¹⁸ Lukes, “Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds”, *Millennium* 33.3 (2005).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 478.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Vuving, “How Soft Power Works”; Vuving, “The Logic of Attraction: Outline of a Theory of Soft Power”, *JSRN* (2019).

²² Brannagan and Giulianotti, “The Soft Power-Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar”.

intersubjective process, one that requires a shared understanding of the values, norms, and beliefs that establish the very meanings of both credibility and attraction.²³

Having detailed the concept of soft power, in following sections we apply the soft power categories of “beauty”, “brilliance”, and “benignity” to Qatar and the Aspire Zone. Before doing so, we offer our methodological approach before providing crucial background information on the Aspire Zone elite sports complex.

3 Methodology

To examine the extent to which Qatar’s development of the Aspire Zone and subsequently its use of global sport and the ways in which these have been utilised as a vehicle for cultivating soft power, a document analysis was chosen as the form of data collection. Document analysis can be defined as a way in which documents are reviewed or evaluated in a systematic fashion.²⁴ Documents can be from “official” sources, these can include public records or state documents, while other documents can be from more informal sources that capture practices of social life.²⁵ Whether documents fall into official or informal categories, we must recognise the ways in which documents construct facts, rules, or meanings for social life and how this can be reproduced and maintained.²⁶ As documents carry meanings, it is important to address the ontological and epistemological position of the researchers.

When discussing ontological positions, there are two broad perspectives for researchers. These perspectives include foundationalism, which is commonly defined as either objectivism or realism and the second position is anti-foundationalism, which is known as either constructivism or relativism.²⁷ The position of constructionism highlights that social phenomena and their meanings are in a constant state of flux which are under revision by the social actors that continually accomplish their meanings.²⁸ Although, as Paul Furlong and David Marsh reinforce, due to the greater scope that this position entails, it is more difficult to define.²⁹ Primarily, the position shares commonalities, in which realities are local and specific, and reality is not discovered, but rather constructed.³⁰ Furthermore, social, political, and cultural processes shape the views of the individual.³¹ Moreover, “the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive”.³² Taking this view into account, we must acknowledge that it is the members of society that create its culture and that we cannot explain societal problems through a universal set of cultural understandings.³³ The

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bowen “Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method”, *Qualitative Research Journal* 9.2 (2009), pp. 27–40.

²⁵ Coffey “Analysing Documents”, in Flick (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* (2014), pp. 367–379.

²⁶ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd edn (2014).

²⁷ Furlong and Marsh, “A Skin Not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science”, in Lowndes, Marsh, and Stoker (eds), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 4th edn (2017), pp.184– 210; Grix, *The Foundations of Research*, 2nd edn (2017).

²⁸ Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th edn (2016).

²⁹ Furlong and Marsh, “A skin Not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science”.

³⁰ Guba and Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research”, in Denzin and Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994), pp. 105–117.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p. 29.

³³ Becker, “Culture: A Sociological View”, *Yale Review* 71 (1982), pp. 513–528.

ontological position of the researcher shapes the direction of the study and, consequently, the research has been conducted through a constructionist ontological approach.

Moving on to epistemology, this research has been conducted through an anti-positivist approach, namely interpretivism. At its core, interpretivism seeks to understand interpretations, which are at the centre of social and political life.³⁴ This view, therefore, favours the idea that the world is socially constructed and is related to an anti-foundationalist ontological position.³⁵ Interpretivists consider that research of society and its inhabitants are fundamentally different from that of which are studied in the natural sciences.³⁶ As such, reality is constructed through its inhabitants and is a product of the cultural and social meanings that its members reproduce.³⁷ However, interpretivism is complex in nature due to the interpretation of meanings of actions and practices.³⁸ It is only when the researcher starts to uncover the social rules and behaviours that are associated with specific outcomes that beliefs and desires of a social group can be understood, and how these practices relate to broader society. Having now established the philosophical concerns of the researchers, a document analysis was deemed the most appropriate form of data collection.

The importance of documents has long been established in social science research and that all social life is permeated by written texts.³⁹ While as previously mentioned, documents are “social facts” according to Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey, it is important to realise the extent to what documents can be used for and what they cannot be used for.⁴⁰ Documents, and we include media articles here, are not always transparent representations of a government or organisation and there should be caution over the extent they provide a true representation of what they report.⁴¹ This is particularly pertinent for any research on Qatar, which is careful in the image that it cultivates domestically and internationally. This study has made use of various media articles from both domestic and international outlets, and extensive analysis of documents from the following official Qatari sources:

- Aspire Academy
- Aspire Zone
- ASPETAR
- Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–16
- Qatar Sports Sector Strategy
- Qatar Olympic Committee
- Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–22
- Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy 2022

Finally, our documents were then subjected to a thorough thematic analysis. This specific analytic procedure saw us adhere to the following five stages:

³⁴ Hay, “Interpreting Interpretivism Interpreting Interpretations: The New Hermeneutics of Public Administration”, *Public Administration* 89.1 (2011), pp. 167–182.

³⁵ Furlong and Marsh, “A Skin Not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science”.

³⁶ Bryman, *Social Research Methods*.

³⁷ Blaikie, *Designing Social Research*, 2nd edn (2010).

³⁸ Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science* (1996).

³⁹ Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967).

⁴⁰ Atkinson and Coffey, “Analysing Documentary Realities”, in Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn (2011).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

- (1) We read and re-read our documents until we became familiar with the breadth and depth of the content we were dealing with.
- (2) We then created initial codes. Working through our documents, we pinpointed key points/aspects/issues — these were then colour-coded using highlighter pens, and each highlighted passage was allocated a few words of text.
- (3) Once our documents were coded, we progressed towards the identification of themes. Here, we sorted all codes into categories, providing consideration towards how various codes could be combined to form overarching- and sub-themes.
- (4) We then ensured each theme consisted of coherent data that came together meaningfully; we also ensured that each theme was significant and unique in its own right. Once all the codes and themes had been through this review process, we were left with a list of themes and their corresponding sub-themes.

4 The Aspire Zone elite sports complex in Qatar

The Aspire Zone is an elite sports complex located in the east of Qatar’s capital city, Doha. Originally built in 2005 for the state’s staging of the 2006 Asian Games, the complex spans 250 hectares. The complex comprises thirteen “core” facilities/areas, presented and numbered in Figure 1. In this section, we briefly introduce each in turn.

- (1) *The Aspire Dome*: the world’s largest indoor multi-purpose sports complex, inclusive of thirteen multi-sports halls, and a total audience seating capacity of 15,500. The Aspire Dome is used for both athlete training and international competitions.
- (2) *The Aspire Academy of Sports Excellence*: a world-leading institution that couples sports training with educational delivery, and houses Aspire scholars, some of whom are considered to be the future athletic stars of tomorrow.
- (3) *ASPETAR*: a leading specialized orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital, and the only FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence in the Middle East.
- (4) *The Khalifa International Stadium*: originally built in 1976, the stadium has been renovated twice. It currently holds a maximum seating capacity of 45,416 and staged several matches of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.
- (5) *Ladies Sports Hall*: a female-only, indoor facility that provides court sports such as basketball, handball, and volleyball.
- (6) *Ladies Club*: a female-only facility that provides multiple spaces for various recreational activities.
- (7) *National Tennis Club*: Qatar’s central hub for tennis training, development, and competition.
- (8) *Hamad Aquatics Centre*: an ultramodern water sports training and competition complex, inclusive of a seating capacity of 4,500 spectators.
- (9) *Aspire Zone Offices*: The Aspire Zone administrative headquarters.
- (10) *Aspire Park*: an 88-hectare park, inclusive of running and walking tracks, various green spaces, cafes, and children’s playgrounds.
- (11) *Villaggio Shopping Mall*: a shopping and entertainment destination.
- (12) *Al Aziziyah Boutique Hotel*: a five-star Victorian-style hotel, designed to accommodate professional sports teams and athletes who visit Aspire.
- (13) *The Torch Hotel*: a 300-meter high, five-star hotel, originally built to symbolize a torch and flame to commemorate Qatar’s staging of the 2006 Asian Games.

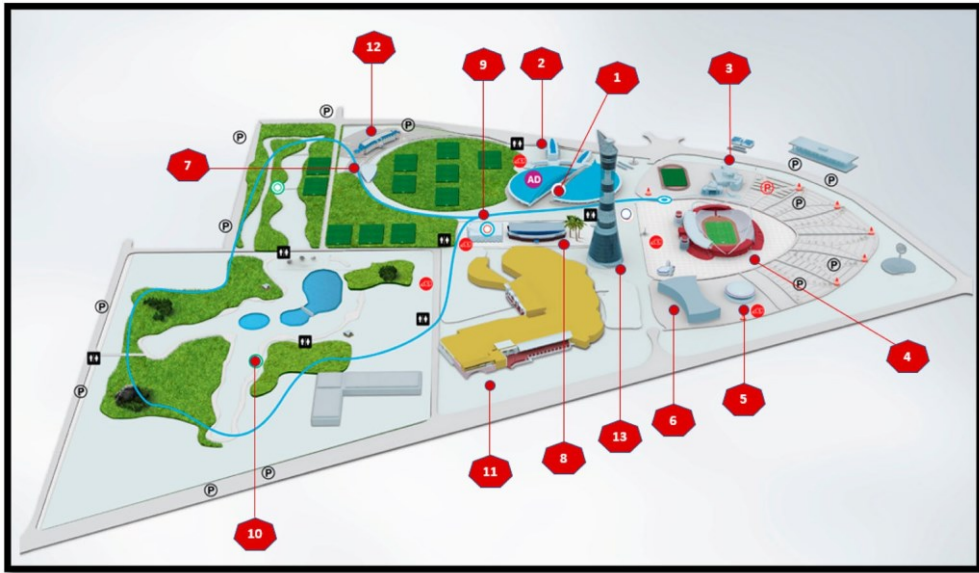


Figure 1: Map of the Aspire Zone Complex.⁴²

5 Qatar, soft power, and the Aspire Zone

In this section, we look to investigate how the Aspire Zone acts as a soft power tool for Qatar. We do so by returning to the soft power categories of beauty, brilliance and benignity. Important to note at the outset, however, is that many of the examples we use in this section do indeed traverse notions of beauty, brilliance, *and* benignity, and thus cannot be simply confined to one single category.

5.1 *Beauty*

For Vuving, in soft power terms, “beauty” refers to the “resonance that draws actors closer to each other through shared ideals, values, causes, or visions”.⁴³ When a state “holds fast on a cause, champions a value, devotes itself to an ideal, compellingly articulates a vision, it gains credibility as a representative, a torch, or a firm supporter and guardian of the cause, the value, the ideal, or the vision”.⁴⁴ Actors who jointly seek to advance and pursue shared ideals, values, causes, or visions help build confidence, friendship, and cooperation between these parties. As an outcome, beauty leads others to look to you for guidance, encouragement, and inspiration in the protection and maintenance of shared values and causes.

In terms of the Aspire Zone, there are a number of facets that could be included within this “beauty” category. Most prominent, however, is ASPE TAR, the range of conferences the Aspire Zone stages annually, and Aspire Logistics. As mentioned in the previous section, the former is a world-leading specialized orthopaedic and sports medicine hospital. Opened in 2007, the mission

⁴³ Vuving, “How Soft Power Works”, p. 10.

⁴³ Vuving, “How Soft Power Works”, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

of ASPETAR is to “be a global reference centre in sports medicine”.⁴⁵ In seeking to do so, ASPETAR offers services in the areas of sport medicine, orthopaedic surgery, rehabilitation, clinical and scientific support, and athlete diagnostics and evaluation. Such services take place in the centre’s multiple facilities, which include movement assessment labs, hydrotherapy pools, altitude and climate chambers, and dormitories, athlete screening units, digital and virtual reality units, operating wards, and sports dentistry areas. ASPETAR even houses its own Sports Surgery Training Centre, “the first of its kind in the region ... where sports surgeons share their skills, experience and knowledge” as part of a training, teaching, and best practice exchange program.⁴⁶

The unique and high-quality services that ASPETAR offers attracts more than 35,000 athletes per year in their search for the very latest sports medicine research and procedures.⁴⁷ The result is that ASPETAR has quickly developed into *the* global centre for athletic medical care, attracting some of the world’s most prominent professional athletes for treatment and rehabilitation, such as: Spanish tennis star, Rafael Nadal; British long-distance runner, Mo Farah; Paris Saint-Germain and Brazilian forward, Neymar Jr; French and FC Barcelona winger, Ousmane Dembélé; and Manchester City and Norwegian striker, Erling Haaland. Additionally, ASPETAR has become a key destination for sports teams and clubs when seeking medical examinations before the signing of professional contracts: note, for example, how ASPETAR was the chosen pre-contract medical examiner for all of Paris Saint-Germain’s signings in 2021, which included the club’s acquisition of Argentinian superstar Lionel Messi, Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma, and the free transfers of Gini Wijnaldum from Liverpool FC and Sergio Ramos from CF Real Madrid.⁴⁸ While ASPETAR has gained a global reputation for providing medical services to international professional athletes, it also performs a significant function for its national athletes. Through the National Sports Medicine Programme (NSMP) ASPETAR has also created a national approach to injury prevention, education, and illness management, which is available to the 23,000 registered athletes within Qatar.⁴⁹

Alongside ASPETAR, key here is also Aspire’s staging of various sports conferences.⁵⁰ In 2013 and 2014, the Aspire Zone played host to the Doha GOALS Forum, considered to be the “premier platform for world leaders to advance social and economic change through sport”.⁵¹ Attracting over 1,500 guests each year — the majority of whom Qatar fully funds to attend — the Forum welcomes over 450 students from around the world, as well as renowned guest speakers, such as two-time boxing heavyweight champion George Foreman, former German goalkeeper Oliver Kahn, six-time Grand Slam champion Boris Becker, ex-FIFA President Sepp Blatter, former-French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and UK Politician Lord Peter Mandelson.⁵² Then there is the Aspire4Sport Exhibition, which invites some of the world’s leading sports experts from fifty international clubs and federations to share best practice knowledge around youth development, performance, and science. Further, in March 2022, the Aspire Zone staged the 7th edition of the Asian Football Confederation Medical Conference, “a platform

⁴⁵ Aspetar, “Mission and Vision”.

⁴⁶ Aspetar, “Sports Surgery Training Centre”.

⁴⁷ Mazur, “Aspetar: The Ultra Modern, Elite Sports Hospital that Imports Body Parts” (2019)

⁴⁸ Aspetar, “Partnerships”.

⁴⁹ Aspetar, “Aspetar NSMP Delivers Sports Medicine and Sports Science Services to Qatar’s Over than 23K Registered Athletes”.

⁵⁰ See: Reiche and Brannagan (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East* (2022).

⁵¹ Aspire Academy, “Doha Goals Forum Gathers the Leaders in Sport”, 5 November 2014.

⁵² Brannagan, *The State of Qatar and Global Sport: A Case Study of Globalization, The Nation-State and Soft Power*, PhD diss. (2017).

to gather renowned medical experts to share the latest information and development in sports science”.⁵³

Additionally, Aspire Logistics was established in 2006 to offer “world class services” in “event planning and venue management”, including providing clients with “detailed insight into the venue layout and facilities, as well as the services and logistics necessary for their event”.⁵⁴ Aspire Logistics is comprised of a “multifunctional IT team that can assist with all event requirements, including electronic equipment and media electronics services to complement an event of any scale.”⁵⁵ Aspire Logistics has even developed its own venue and events management system known as “Bridge”. which “seamlessly integrates all functional areas including facility bookings, accreditation, volunteer management, security, catering and other services.”⁵⁶

Within the category of “beauty”, these three forms of resources add to Qatar’s soft power outcomes in a number of ways. First, these resources help situate Qatar as a world-leading hub for sport and event knowledge, advancement, and practice. Indeed, as one media article claimed, “if Nasa has its Mission Control Center in Houston, Texas, the sports medicine world has Aspetar.”⁵⁷ As an outcome, this provides Qatar with influence and leadership, as others come to regularly look to the state for solutions for shared causes, visions, and agendas. In this sense, Qatar develops credibility as a torch bearer for (sports) science and knowledge development. In doing so, Qatar gains forms of what we may term as “expertise power” — that is, the symbolic power and real influence that comes with being an expert in a highly sought-after area. Other examples of how soft power is gained in this way include: the way a country such as Cuba has gained soft power through being an active player in inter- national health assistance, advice, and guidance.⁵⁸ Or we may point to states such as the US and the UK, and the way their prestigious higher education institutions are promoted as part of a soft power drive, along with their housing of world-leading experts in subjects such as science, technology and literature. Or the way states such as Switzerland and Singapore have gained soft power via their expertise in investment banking and financial services.⁵⁹ For Qatar, it is athlete medical care and knowledge exchange that act as vehicles through which the state seeks to become known as a “go-to” destination for expertise, best-practice advice, and progression of a specific industry or field.

Second, for those who seek out Qatar’s help and guidance in this regard, so too does this provide the state with the opportunity to develop friendship, cooperation, and trust with other states, as well as with various external institutions, groups, and personnel. In doing so, Qatar extends its network of influential, overseas allies. Evidence of this can be found in the amount of public thanks various athletes and sport dignitaries have given to Aspire and its various sub-services, including ASPETAR: note how in 2020, after several players visited ASPETAR for “treatment and medical advice”, the President of the Moroccan club Raja Casablanca thanked “Aspetar and its experts as a contributor to the crowning of his team”, shortly after

⁵³ Aspetar, “7th AFC Medical Conference Qatar 2022 Set for March” (2021).

⁵⁴ Aspire Zone, “Sports Events”.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ BBC Sport, “Aspetar”.

⁵⁸ Baggott and Lambie, “Hard Currency, Solidarity, and Soft Power: The Motives, Implications, and Lessons of Cuban Health Internationalism”, *International Journal of Health Services* 49.1 (2019), pp. 165–185.

⁵⁹ Chong, “Small State Soft Power Strategies: Virtual Enlargement in the Cases of the Vatican City State and Singapore”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23.3 (2013), pp. 383–405.

the club won the national championship;⁶⁰ while in the same year Paris Saint Germain and French striker Kylian Mbappe remarked how “Aspetar is incredible and the infrastructure is perfect to work and recover, everything is optimised for the athletes at its best”.

5.2 Brilliance

Brilliance refers to the exceptional qualities for which a state becomes known, such as an effective military, economic, scientific, or technological success, or the presence of a rich and radiant culture. The key to brilliance lies in success. For Vuving, success showcases one’s capability to meaningfully overcome challenges and solve problems.⁶¹ When successfully demonstrating the ability to tackle widely-shared challenges — through effective practices, policies, institutions, ideologies, values, or visions — others look to learn from that success. This, as an outcome, in turn “generates admiration, which can lead to imitation, or emulation, and respect, or fear, or reverence.”⁶² By doing so, the “brilliant” state finds itself in a position of both leadership and influence.

In terms of the Aspire Zone, crucial in this regard is the Aspire Academy of Sports Excellence. The Aspire Academy was established in 2004 with the underlying mandate to create, manage, and maximize talent pathways to turn young athletes into tomorrow’s champions.⁶³ The core sports of Aspire Academy include football, athletics, squash, table tennis, and fencing, while also supporting athletes nominated from various Qatari national governing bodies.⁶⁴ The key target group here are of course Qataris themselves. The Aspire Academy not only houses leading facilities, but also world-class coaches and sport scientists who are sourced from across the globe in order to nurture and develop any young Qatari athlete who shows promise. Those Qataris who have come through the Academy’s ranks to reach international success include: Mutaz Barshim, the Qatari high jumper, who took gold at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games; and female professional swimmer, Nada Arkaji, the first woman to represent Qatar at the Olympics in 2012; additionally, in 2019, Qatar won its first ever AFC Asian Cup, with a team largely comprised of Aspire Academy graduates.⁶⁵

Alongside the Academy, the Aspire Zone itself has attracted some of world’s leading athletes and teams, who have chosen the complex as their preferred training destination. Examples include Premier League club Manchester United FC choosing Aspire as its destination of choice for winter training in 2013; and, in 2020, German Bundesliga champions, FC Bayern Munich, attending their tenth winter training camp at the Aspire Zone. Furthermore, several teams and athletes have used the Aspire Zone as a preparation and conditioning base ahead of major international events such as the Olympic Games or Commonwealth Games. In cases such as these, the Aspire Zone prides itself on being able to provide international athletes and teams with a fully inclusive venue for sports excellence, be that in terms of hosting friendly or competitive sports matches and events, or training and pre-competition camps, as well as full injury diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation services. With two five-star hotels also on

⁶⁰ Aspetar, “Aspetar Demonstrates Sports Medicine Leadership Despite COVID-19 Pandemic”, 23 December 2020.

⁶¹ Vuving, “How Soft Power Works”.

⁶² Ibid., p. 10.

⁶³ Brannagan, *The State of Qatar and Global Sport*.

⁶⁴ Aspire Academy, “Federation Sports”.

⁶⁵ Price, “Qatar’s Asian Cup Win was a Fairy-Tale: Now It Faces the Reality of 2022”, *Forbes*, 6 February 2019.

site, the Aspire Zone offers what it considers to be “the most integrated sports training facility in the world.”⁶⁶

As outcomes, world-leading on-hand sports expertise and facilities — such as those found at the Aspire Zone and Aspire Academy — do of course help with Qatar’s desire to become a visibly successful competitor at major international athletic events. Consistent engagement with global sport provides small states like Qatar with a unique opportunity. The hosting of sports events, membership to transnational governing bodies (such as FIFA or the IOC), and athletic competition not only offer these states the opportunity to showcase their cultural distinctiveness, but also provides them with symbolic status equivalent to their larger peers through, for example, equal recognition of their statehood at opening and closing ceremonies.⁶⁷ Additionally, athletic competition at major global sports events also provide small states with opportunities to compete with larger, more established states. Note, for example, how the world-class facilities of the Aspire Academy produced eighteen of the twenty-six-man squad for Qatar’s selection at the 2022 World Cup, while the Aspire Zone was also selected as a training base for the hosts, Australia, and Ghana during the tournament.⁶⁸

Aspire also has the potential to play a significant role in the normalization of women athletes in the region. As previous research in the Gulf has demonstrated, despite some shift in attitudes, women’s sport is still marginalized.⁶⁹ In 2015, the French Women’s football team Paris Saint-Germain trained at Aspire in preparation for the semi-finals of the UEFA Champions League, and, in 2018, the German football team FC Bayern Munich Women trained for one week at the academy, following in the footsteps of their male compatriots who trained at the venue a few weeks prior.⁷⁰ The FC Bayern Munich Women’s visit was significant as it included a mixed friendly with Qatari girls aged between 14 and 19 years old in front of 400 spectators.⁷¹ While we must acknowledge the sociocultural and religious barriers that can limit female participation in sport and physical activity, these training camps, alongside Aspire Active,⁷² have the potential to improve the visibility and accessibility of sport and physical activity for women. If successful, Qatar and Aspire could become a leader in the advancement of certain established norms across the Middle East.

Whilst the desire to welcome and train athletes from other countries further showcases Qatar’s willingness to assist others, and thus further expands its network of foreign allies, under the heading of brilliance, most notable is the way Aspire helps the state gain soft power by showing how Qatar can punch above its weight in key areas, and, in doing so, successfully overcome its challenges as a small state. Outside of sport, examples of small states gaining soft power through showing their ability to excel, and thus meaningfully compete with their larger peers, include: the European small state of Iceland which has received praise and admiration for its high level of human development at home, and is regularly ranked in the top ten of the

⁶⁶ Aspire Zone, “Sports Services”.

⁶⁷ Houlihan and Zheng, “Small States: Sport and Politics at the Margin”, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 7.3 (2015).

⁶⁸ FIFA, “Aspire Academy: The Foundation of Qatari Dreams”, 19 November 2022; The Peninsula, “Aspire Academy Plays Key Role as Qatar Hosts FIFA World Cup”, 18 November 2022.

⁶⁹ Perkin and Howe, “A Foucauldian Interpretation of Paralympic Sport in the United Arab Emirates: An Exploration Through a Virtual Lens”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34.13 (2017), pp. 1418–1435.

⁷⁰ Aspire Academy, “PSG Women Conclude Training Camp in Doha”, 5 April 2015; Aspire Academy, “FC Bayern Munich Women: Determined to Give It All”, 7 February 2018.

⁷¹ Aspire Academy, “FC Bayern Munich Women: Determined to Give It All”.

⁷² Founded by the Aspire Zone, Aspire Active is a fitness and wellness programme that offers fitness programmes for both men and women.

United Nations' annual Human Development Index.⁷³ Then there is Belgium, which has successfully carved out for itself a leading position in international politics, in part due to its role in the founding and housing of major transnational organizations, such as the EU and NATO; and finally is the example of the UAE, which, in a matter of decades, has emerged as one of the world's most-visited business and leisure destinations.⁷⁴ For Qatar, Aspire thus provides the kind of admiration other states have received for their excellence in other, non-sporting sectors. Evidence of this can be found via, for example, comments made by Tim Cahill in 2022, when after the Australian Men's National Team agreed to train at Aspire during the 2022 World Cup, he remarked how 'the Aspire Academy is recognised as one of the world's leading sports academies and I am thrilled that we have been able to secure these facilities for our national team during this tournament'.⁷⁵

5.3 Benignity

Benignity refers to the way states treat others. It is those moments when states are generous, kind, good, supportive, protective, and/or respectful of others. For Vuving, "the promise of benignity lies in its kindness, its being nice. Kind people attract because they are unlikely to hurt you and they are likely to take your interests seriously."⁷⁶ As an outcome, benignity produces gratitude, and thus invites cooperation, or what Vuving calls "reciprocal altruism".⁷⁷ Reciprocity can be key during states' time of need, or in helping them get what they want in given moments. It creates self-protection and expands one's network of allies and friends.

Noteworthy in this regard is the Aspire Academy's "Football Dreams" program. Launched in 2006, Football Dreams was a project that lasted until 2014 and has been described as "the most ambitious scouting programme in sporting history".⁷⁸ The program acted as "a unique humanitarian project" whose goal was "to empower the youth of the world by identifying, nurturing and providing life skills and an education to football talent scouted throughout the globe."⁷⁹ During its existence, the program scouted more than 3.5 million boys in seventeen countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin American.⁸⁰ Those who excelled were invited back to Aspire on a full scholarship, which covered everything from training expenses to education and accommodation costs.⁸¹ According to the Aspire website, the motivation of the program was "to support developing countries in combination with helping local Aspire talents in their development."⁸² While no explanation for why the programme was shut down has been officially provided by Aspire, it has been reported that Football Dreams may well have been used by Qatar mainly for its bid for the 2022 World Cup — indeed, out of the fifteen countries scouted by the Football Dreams programme, five were also the home nations of a "FIFA executive committee member" in 2010 (the year Qatar was awarded the World Cup).⁸³ As it is these committee members who decide where

⁷³ United Nations, "Human Development Report 2021–22", 8 September 2022.

⁷⁴ Perkin and Howe, "Understanding the Cultural Landscape of Sport in the United Arab Emirates", in Reiche and Brannagan (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East* (2022), pp. 310–320.

⁷⁵ The Guardian, "The Socceroos' \$1.3bn Qatar Training Base Is Beyond Luxurious, but also a Symbol of World Cup's Wider Issues", 17 November 2022.

⁷⁶ Vuving, "How Soft Power Works", p. 9.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ The Economist, "An Epic Search for Football's Next Superstars" (2018).

⁷⁹ Aspire Academy, "Football Dreams".

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Brannagan, *The State of Qatar and Global Sport*.

⁸² Aspire Academy, "Football Dreams".

⁸³ The Guardian, "Was Aspire Project a Vehicle to Deliver Votes to Qatar's World Cup Bid?" (2022).

the World Cup is to be hosted, the claim here, therefore, is that the Football Dreams programme may well have been used as a vehicle to deliver votes for Qatar, a vehicle no longer needed once Qatar had been awarded the rights to the 2022 finals.

Nonetheless, the Football Dreams program had some success stories of players who made it to top European football clubs, usually after first playing for K.A.S. Eupen, a Belgium First Division A professional club that was purchased by the Aspire Academy in 2012 to act as a feeder club for Football Dreams graduates. Diawandou Diagne, after playing two seasons in Eupen, was signed by FC Barcelona in 2014. In 2021, he played for an Indian professional football club. For fellow Football Dreams graduate Henry Onyekuru, Eupen became a stepping stone to English Premier League club Everton in 2017. In 2021, he was under contract with French club AS Monaco and played for the Nigerian national team. After graduating from Aspire in 2016, Moussa Wagué played for Eupen, before he moved to FC Barcelona in 2019, and became a Senegalese national team player. So far, more than forty of the Football Dreams scholarship recipients have represented their national football associations (including Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, Thailand, Paraguay, and Mali) from under-17 to senior national teams.⁸⁴

While Aspire has been successful in developing talent — seventy percent of Qatar’s national team were academy graduates in its 2019 Asian Cup success — critiques have been levelled against Qatar due to the naturalization of athletes.⁸⁵ FIFA, for example, has previously labelled Qatar’s policy of athletic naturalization as “absurdity”, one that “contradict (ed) the spirit of a national team”.⁸⁶ representing the state at international competitions,⁸⁷ which raises an important point in terms of the objectives of Aspire and whether it fosters local talent development and international talent for the purposes of naturalization. Although, as stated by Aspire Academy with regards to the Football Dreams project, “None of the players were ever naturalised by Qatar or played for the national team as this was never the aim of the project.”⁸⁸ While Aspire facilitates Qatar’s soft power strategies and positions the country as a global destination for sport, the fact that it is government funded and incubates athletes with no prior connection to the state, the academy will arguably always be entangled with criticism regarding naturalizing players. Of course, we should recognize that Qatar is not alone in the naturalization of athletes and there are similar examples throughout the world of sport.⁸⁹ Qatar’s scouting in global south countries for talent and “buying” athletes for international competitions, has led to instances of “soft disempowerment”⁹⁰ and damages to Qatar’s soft power through perceptions that the state has acted in ways that have had a direct and negative impact on other countries or communities.

However, through its resources, Qatar endeavours to establish its standing as a “good global citizen”. Outside of sport, states endeavouring to position themselves in such terms

⁸⁴ Aspire Academy, “Football Dreams”.

⁸⁵ The Peninsula, “A Leader in Football Development: The Story of Qatar’s Aspire Academy”, 29 March 2022; Reiche and Tinaz, “Policies for Naturalisation of Foreign-Born Athletes: Qatar and Turkey in Comparison”, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 11.1 (2018), pp. 153–171.

⁸⁶ Doha News, “Blatter: Qatar’s Reliance on Foreign Handball Players an ‘Absurdity’” (2015).

⁸⁷ Beech, “In Qatar, the Olympic Team (Like Much Else) Is Mostly Imported”, *The New York Times*, 6 August 2021; Hopps, “Qatar Flexes the Wrong Muscle”, *The Guardian*, 25 August 2004.

⁸⁸ Aspire Academy, “Football Dreams”.

⁸⁹ Griffin, “National Identity in the Qatar Men’s National Football Team”, *Center for International and Regional Studies*, 12 October 2020.

⁹⁰ Brannagan and Giulianotti, “The Soft Power-Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar”.

include a state such as India, who in the post-Covid era has sought to engage in a “health diplomacy” offensive in Africa, delivering key health advice and support, and in doing so, positioning itself as a “compassionate and benevolent actor in the African continent”.⁹¹ Or we may point to the way states actively seek to help those in their time of need, such as through the donation of aid and other forms of disaster relief, as illustrated by the support shown by multiple members of the international community to Ukraine since Russia’s invasion of the country in February 2022.⁹² Along these lines, Qatar’s humanitarianism-through-sport initiatives look to situate the state in-and-amongst those who seek to showcase their desire to achieve various positive social outcomes. Qatar not only seeks to garner benevolence and friendship, which fosters gratitude and reciprocal cooperation, but also arguably to demonstrate the state’s desire to be involved in attractive causes that extend beyond its borders. This, in turn, creates favour among global organizations that champion such endeavours, and that hold the power to grant Qatar influential space. Furthermore, the educating of future (overseas) elite athletes not only adds to the admiration of Qatar, but also potentially provides it with an opportunity to shape the minds of future athletic talent. Indeed, Nye has shown how those studying abroad develop more positive images of a host country and its policies, and Qatar is thus presented the opportunity to build lasting relationships with the regional and international sports leaders and athletes of tomorrow.⁹³

6 Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the soft power capabilities of Qatar’s Aspire Zone elite sports complex by using Vuvving’s categories of “beauty”, “brilliance”, and “benignity”. We have demonstrated how the Aspire Zone produces soft power for Qatar in a number of ways. First, the knowledge and world-class expertise on hand at the Aspire Zone — and at ASPETAR and the Aspire Academy of Sports Excellence — have helped situate the Aspire Zone as the “go-to” place for sports training, science, and medicine. Through the Aspire Zone, Qatar has garnered prestige, leadership, and influence. As others regularly turn to the state for solutions to shared problems, agendas, and visions, Qatar extends its network of friends and allies through those it helps. Second, the Aspire Academy’s Football Dreams project reminds others of Qatar’s desire to help those beyond its borders. This not only situates Qatar as a “good global citizen”, but also positions the state as a welcoming destination through which others can easily seek best practice knowledge and advice. Finally, the production of international elite athletes further adds to the expertise power of both the Aspire Zone and Qatar. Indeed, with every success of Qatari athletes, the state shows its capacity to overcome a typical small state problem — through Aspire, the state can meaningfully produce a high-quality stock of athletic talent, despite significant limitations linked to its small population.

With few locations across the world able to compete with the facilities at the Aspire Zone, the complex is likely to continue to act as a highly sought-after sports training and medicine destination for some time to come. In the post-World Cup 2022 era, how the Aspire Zone might be used for the state’s staging of other major sports events remains to be seen. While Qatar previously failed to secure the rights to the 2020 Summer Olympic Games, it is likely only a matter of time before we witness an Olympic Games taking place in the Middle East; it will be interesting

⁹¹ Mol et al., “India’s Health Diplomacy as a Soft Power Tool Towards Africa: Humanitarian and Geopolitical Analysis”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57.6 (2022), pp. 1109–1125.

⁹² The Economist, “Which Countries Have Pledged the most Support to Ukraine?” (2022).

⁹³ Nye, “Power and Foreign Policy”.

to see how Qatar might use the Aspire Zone as leverage in any renewed desire to become the region's first Olympic host destination. When we consider the questions raised around the sustainability of Qatar's hosting of the FIFA World Cup, and around the sustainability of sport mega events more broadly, the Aspire Zone provides significant infrastructure in terms of a ready-made sport facility, inclusive of athlete accommodation. This, therefore, could make Qatar an attractive proposition in potentially hosting a Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games in a more sustainability conscious world.

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