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# **Sports for Politics: Sportswashing and Soft Power Strategies**

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## **Abstract**

This research explores sports washing tactics employed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, highlighting the strategic use of football as a tool for enhancing global perception and soft power. Accordingly, it examines how these nations leverage sports to rebrand themselves on the international stage, projecting an image of modernity and progress while diverting attention from internal socio-political challenges, including human rights issues. By analysing historical precedents and contemporary practices, the research underscores the nuanced relationship between sports and politics, illustrating the effectiveness of sports washing in shaping international narratives and influencing geopolitical dynamics. This study ultimately confirms that Qatar and Saudi Arabia's usage of sports washing strategies serves broader socio-political motives aimed at consolidating influence and managing international perceptions.

## **Keywords**

Sportswashing, Football, Media, Qatar, Saudi Arabia

## **Introduction**

In the field of International Relations, the intersection of sports and politics has long been recognized as a space wherein nations wield influence, project power, and strategically shape narratives on the global stage. Ewald Lienen, the technical director of FC St. Pauli says that Sports is always to do with politics. Sports is a part of our society, and the society is political (Grüll, 2020). In line with this perspective, the deepest interconnection between these two fields is particularly evident in the sport of football which has been used by countless nations around the world as a means of diplomacy.

In this interplay between sports and politics, the concept of ‘sports washing’ has emerged as a strategic tool employed by nations to enhance their global image while simultaneously also advancing their socio-political agendas (Smith, 2020). Etymologically, the term sportswashing has been coined in recent decades, however the practice of sports washing can be traced back to Ancient Greece and Italy. Although there is no universally accepted definition of ‘sportswashing,’ the term has become a shorthand for criticising non-democratic regimes or large corporations. It refers to their use of investments in world-class sports infrastructure, famous athletes, sports teams, and major sporting events as a means of enhancing their image and projecting modernity. Often used as a “ruse to detract from illiberal, non-democratic, and/or exploitative practices” such as human rights abuses, suppression of dissent, lack of freedom of expression, limitations on political participation, and disregard for the rule of law in their home countries or businesses (Ettinger, 2023).

In ancient Greece, organising the Olympic Games served as an effective diplomatic tool for enhancing a country’s image and reputation, as well as strengthening relations between nations (Pigman, 2010). Similarly, in ancient Rome, those in power used gladiator games and chariot races to divert public attention and address the basic needs of the population (Hathtotuwa, 2022; Sveriges Radio, 2022). Germany is another nation accused of sportswashing, notably during the 1936 Olympic Games. As host, Germany sought to promote a positive international image despite having enacted discriminatory laws against certain ethnic groups the year before (Carpenter, 2016; New Hampshire Public Radio, 2022; Sveriges Radio, 2022). Argentina also allegedly engaged in sportswashing during the 1978 FIFA World Cup. The tournament served

as a distraction while the ruling military regime attempted to enhance the nation's global image (Ellis, 2020).

Two of the most recent examples of sportswashing that can be seen are that from the State of Qatar (hereby referred to as Qatar for the rest of the paper) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereby referred to as Saudi Arabia for the rest of the investigation). Qatar and Saudi Arabia are hardly the first nations to employ the tools of sports diplomacy for their own gain with Nazi Germany's 1936 Summer Olympics, Fascist Italy's 1934 World Cup, and Communist China's Winter Olympics preceding them. These gulf states have certainly proved themselves among the ablest practitioners of sportswashing by demonstrating a high level of adeptness and effectiveness in using sports to shape a positive international image.

Sportswashing has been long used as a means of projecting soft power by organisations and countries in order to fulfil their own geo-political agendas of enhancing their influence, securing their positions regionally and internationally, and shaping the global narrative to align with their interests from the ancient times to the contemporary world we live in. Existing research has explored sports washing strategies employed by these nations and there remains a significant gap regarding the underlying socio-political reasons and motives behind their emergence in the contemporary period. Consequently, this paper seeks to delve deeper into the motivations propelling Saudi Arabia and Qatar towards these strategies, while also examining the implications of their pursuit in terms of 'rebranding their global image'. Through the lens of sports diplomacy and sports washing, this research aims to shed light on the interplay between socio-political dynamics and international perception management. These nations in their pursuit of strategic goals have led to a political amnesia about the humanitarian issues/crisis that still persists in these countries.

### **Research Question**

What are the socio-political motives driving Qatar and Saudi Arabia to employ sports washing strategies as part of their sports diplomacy efforts?

### **Hypothesis**

The employment of sports washing strategies by Qatar and Saudi Arabia is driven by a combination of socio-political motives aimed at improving their global image, legitimising

their regimes, and exerting influence on the international stage. This paper wants to highlight that through the strategic use of sports diplomacy, these nations seek to divert the attention from humanitarian issues, showcase themselves as progressive and influential players, and shape the global narrative that is favourable to their geo-political goals.

## **Understanding Sportswashing**

Sportswashing is a term that has been used a lot by the English-language media and press in recent years. A search of the Nexis UK database reveals that the term 'sportswashing' was first linked to a sporting event in 2015. Human rights campaigner Gulnara Akhundova used the term in an article for the UK Independent, where she criticised the decision to host the European Games, a major athletics event, in Baku, Azerbaijan, despite the country's poor human rights record (Akhundova, 2015). Prior to 2018, the term 'sportswashing' was used informally in public discourse to highlight various instances where it had occurred, such as Israel hosting a stage of the Giro d'Italia, Leeds United's planned pre-season tour of Myanmar, and Russia hosting the FIFA World Cup. In each of these instances, the term "sportswashing" was used casually to draw attention to the perceived manipulation of sports events for political or public relation purposes, rather than purely for their athletic or entertainment value. This usage highlights the broader social and political context surrounding sporting events and underscores the potential for sports to be exploited as a tool for diverting attention from controversial issues. The growing recognition of the term 'sportswashing' beyond mainstream media was marked by its inclusion in the 2018 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (Skey, 2023).

While the term 'sportswashing' has been frequently used by the press and media to describe various instances of the practice, it has largely remained outside the focus of academic research. A notable exception is Simon Chadwick, who defined it in a recent paper as "a means by which a country can deflect audiences' attention away from less favourable perceptions of a country via a program of investment in sport" (2022: 12). Jules Boykoff, a scholar who has extensively written about the Olympics (2013, 2016), has also discussed the term in media interviews and grey literature, offering a similar definition: "using sports mega-events to try to launder your reputation on the world stage" (Francis, 2022). However, academic interest in the subject has been limited. One goal of this paper is to explore the etymology of 'sportswashing' and examine contemporary issues through case studies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

One way to understand the concept better is to understand where the term comes from. The word ‘washing’ pertains to a metaphorical meaning of deception, cover-up and distraction. When organisations and nations, as a whole, use sports for the very reasons of covering up or distracting the world to enhance their image on the international stage and foster their own socio-political agendas, it is called sportswashing. It is only in the past 30-40 years that academic scholars have acknowledged the impact sports can have in promoting a country’s agenda or shaping inter-state relations. Sports has been used as a means of propaganda for a long time with notable case studies such as the 1936 Berlin Olympics organised by the Nazis, and the Soviet investment in sports during the Cold War to promote Communism acting as a few examples.

Sportswashing has revealed itself in various instances across the globe, often intertwined with geopolitics and controversial regimes. The European Games held in Baku in 2015 drew criticism from human rights campaigners due to the country’s poor human rights record. Gulnara Akhundova, a prominent activist, highlighted the contradiction of holding a high-profile athletics event in a nation with documented human rights abuses (Akhundova, 2015). Similarly, the organising of the Formula One Grand Prix in Bahrain has faced scrutiny for providing a platform for the government to deflect attention from its repressive actions against dissidents and activists. Despite calls for boycotts and protests, the event has continued annually, contributing to the regime’s efforts to portray a positive image internationally.

Football, often referred to as the “Beautiful Game” has become the main target of all nations and organisations for the use of sportswashing because of its unparalleled global popularity and cultural significance that is held by most countries of the world. With over two billion viewers, it is the most popular sport of the world with a massive fan base and huge media coverage. Unlike other sports, football’s universality makes sure that the influence it has, resonates across different spheres on the globe. Making it the most convenient vehicle for projecting soft power and shaping narratives on the global stage.

From the passionate support of clubs in South America to largely celebrated domestic and national leagues in Europe, football has a place and history in the hearts of millions. This widespread appeal provides nations and organisations with a ready-made platform to showcase their domestic achievements and divert attention from the less favourable aspects of their governance and policies. While considering the focus on football particularly in the context of

sportswashing, it is important to understand the unique aspects of football that make it so susceptible to manipulation on the political end. Unlike individual sports or niche competitions, football's team-oriented nature and mass appeal ensure that its events attract global attention. Whether it's the FIFA World Cup, UEFA Champions League, or domestic leagues such as the English Premier League or La Liga, football competitions offer unparalleled visibility and reach.

The hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2018 by Russia serves as a perfect example of demonstrating the enormity of football as a sport and the way it can be used by countries for their own personal gains. The World Cup gave the Russian government a chance to demonstrate its strength on the international scene and deflect criticism away from its controversial foreign policy and abuses of human rights. The event went forward as scheduled in spite of objections expressed by a number of human rights organisations and political figures, giving Russia the opportunity to present a positive image to a worldwide audience. The Russian government's participation in sports, which includes faking drug tests and using players for political ends, further demonstrates the power that football has. Furthermore, the Russian government's involvement in sports, including the manipulation of doping tests and the use of athletes for political campaigning, further demonstrates the power that sports yields (MacKinnon, 2018).

The emotional connection that has been formed through football creates opportunities for nations to leverage the sport as a tool for diplomacy and national branding. By associating themselves with successful football teams or hosting internationally acclaimed tournaments, countries can enhance their soft power and develop positive perceptions among international audiences. In the case of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, their focus on football as a means of sportswashing is particularly strategic. Both nations have invested heavily in the sport, using it as a way to showcase their modernisation efforts and projecting a progressive image to the world. Qatar, in particular, has used football as a centrepiece of its broader strategy to position itself as a global hub for sports and culture, culminating in its successful bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Bergkvist, 2023). Similarly, Saudi Arabia has recognized the potential of football to enhance its international standing and has made significant investments in the sport, including hosting high-profile events such as the Spanish Super Cup and investing in European football clubs. By aligning themselves with football, these nations seek to divert attention from serious issues such as human rights concerns or geopolitical tensions, instead presenting themselves as vibrant and forward-thinking societies on the world stage. In the following

sections we shall be critically investigating these two case studies and their relationship with football.

## **Case Studies**

### **a) Qatar**

Qatar has been characterised as a 'serial user' (Black, 2014) of sports events and has hosted no less than 30 regional or international sporting events between 2000 and 2023 (Brannagan and Reiche, 2022). Qatar's active engagement in global sports follows a recent trend where resource rich autocratic states increasingly and heavily invest in international sports as a part of their public diplomacy policy (Krzyzaniak, 2016). This paper also seeks to examine the various dimensions of Qatar's sports diplomacy strategy, particularly in the context of hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022. By analysing the country's investment in sports events and infrastructure, as well as its engagement with international sporting bodies and diplomatic channels, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Qatar's motivations and objectives.

When Qatar won the bid to host FIFA World Cup 2022, it had sent shockwaves through the entire sporting world and many had questioned Qatar's ability to host one of the biggest cultural events in the world. It had sparked debate on multiple stances ranging from concerns over infrastructural preparedness to critiques of the country's labour practices and human rights record. Such concerning issues threatened to overshadow the relevance of the event, raising important questions about the ethical implications of Qatar's bid victory. However, the Qatari government didn't back down and instead utilised the World Cup as a means of diplomacy, leveraging the event to foster international relations and showcase its capabilities on a global stage.

The goal was to rebrand or reshape their image as modern, liberal, and Western-friendly, attracting attention through their association with global sports (Lenskyj, 2020). This strategy is most evident in the hosting of mega sporting events like the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup, as well as significant investments in global sports, particularly football. Football has been the primary target, with multimillion-dollar sponsorship deals for both clubs and tournaments, along with the acquisition of elite European football clubs (Ronay, 2019).



In recent decades, the Qatari government has recognized the need to diversify its economy to reduce dependence on fossil fuels. Diversifying would not only make Qatar less vulnerable to energy market fluctuations but also generate revenue from new sectors. Aligned with this goal, the Qatari General Secretariat for Development Planning launched the Qatar 2030 Vision, aiming for fossil fuel independence by 2030. A key sector in Qatar's ambition to become an advanced society by 2030 is sports. Qatar views sports as a vital tool for achieving its domestic and international goals, using it for diplomacy, strengthening global relations, and attracting tourists, investments, and trade (Qatar Olympic Committee, 2011).

From all of their official documents, it is quite evident that they view sports not just as a means of making their economy less fuel dependent, but also as an instrument that can improve international relations with other nations and organisations as well as change the global image of the Qatari nation. Hosting major sporting events that attract hundreds of millions of viewers globally provides Qatar with a unique opportunity to present itself to the world and challenge stereotypes about the country and the region. This, in turn, helps Qatar gain soft power on the international stage (Soyland, 2022).

Several notable studies have explored Qatar's sports diplomacy. Amara's (2005) research on the 2006 Asian Games in Doha was the first academic work on the topic, offering valuable insights into Qatar's motivations for hosting major sporting events. Campbell (2011) and Reiche and Tinaz (2018) have examined Qatar's policy of naturalising foreign athletes, while Rolim Silva (2014) focused on the creation of the Qatar National Olympic Committee. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2014; 2018) provided important studies on Qatar's use of soft power through investments in global sports, particularly centred around the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Dorsey (2014: 18) further analysed Qatar's public diplomacy and soft power efforts both regionally and internationally.

In the aftermath of Qatar winning the bid to host the FIFA World Cup 2022, the nation embarked on an extensive campaign to address concerns and present itself as a capable and progressive host. One of the primary focuses was on infrastructure development, with Qatar investing heavily in state-of-the-art stadiums, transportation systems, and accommodation facilities to ensure a successful and memorable event. Despite these efforts, Qatar's hosting of the World Cup remained a subject of controversy and scrutiny. Reports of migrant worker exploitation, including issues related to low wages, poor living conditions, and restrictions on movement,

continued to emerge, prompting renewed calls for accountability and reform. However, Qatar had learnt how to deal with external denouncement and how to succeed in achieving legitimation and support of sports governing bodies, international political organisations, and foreign celebrities.

The hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup has significantly accelerated Qatar's modernization efforts. According to Qatar's finance minister, Ali Shareef Al-Emadi, over €200 billion will be invested in infrastructure, including a new metro system in Doha, roads, a new airport, hospitals, hotels, and an entirely new city named Lusail, along with seven state-of-the-art stadiums for the World Cup (ESPN, 2017). Qatar has spent an estimated \$7 billion specifically on stadium construction for the event. Former English captain David Beckham remarked that "Qatar is leaving no stone unturned in its quest to impress." While such statements are endorsed by prominent figures, they can overshadow the significant issues faced by migrant labourers, thereby allowing Qatar to continue its practices with less scrutiny.

During the preparations of the FIFA World Cup, media and press outlets worldwide have been increasingly vocal in their outrage over the treatment of migrant labourers involved in the construction projects. Reports detailing dire working conditions, exploitative labour practices, and human rights abuses have sparked widespread condemnation and calls for accountability. The contrast between the lavish stadiums with state-of-the-art facilities against the backdrop of migrant workers enduring hazardous conditions and receiving inadequate wages has fueled a growing sense of moral outrage and indignation. Media outlets have persistently scrutinised Qatar's labour practices, amplifying voices of advocacy groups and human rights organisations demanding systemic reforms and justice for the affected workers.

However, while the media outlets have called Qatar to justify the violation of labour rights taking place, the government has been much more focused on the impact of a global sporting event such as the World Cup on their domestic economy. The event is said to have generated US\$2.3 - 4.1 billion just alone from tourism spending by visitors and world-cup related broadcasting that was done. Through the opportunity of this World Cup, the country also managed to further develop its hydrocarbon economy which set its economy steady for years to come.

The government also in large part censored the media surrounding the World Cup to ensure that the economic boom continued and the violation of labour rights was not brought to light. The Qatari government implemented several media censorship measures surrounding the World Cup. Journalists faced significant restrictions, including the requirement to apply for special permits to cover the event, with applications subject to stringent review processes. Additionally, reports critical of the government or highlighting labour issues were often blocked or removed from local news outlets. International journalists also reported being surveilled and even detained when attempting to investigate worker conditions, with their footage confiscated or destroyed.

It is very clear that Qatar's socio-political motives behind hosting the World Cup extend far beyond the sphere of sports. The nation is leveraging this global event as a strategic tool to bolster its international image, seeking to portray itself as a progressive and liberal state while simultaneously diverting attention from its repressive domestic policies and labour rights violations. The World Cup serves as a grand spectacle to distract the global audience from the systemic exploitation and suppression that underpin Qatar's rapid development. This strategic move is aimed at gaining soft power and political leverage on the international stage, rather than genuinely addressing the humanitarian crises within its borders. This issue has also been more prominently addressed now that Qatar has won the bid

The Qatari government's efforts to control the narrative through media censorship and suppression of dissent further underline the difference between their public relations campaign and the on-ground reality. By stifling critical reports and intimidating journalists, Qatar aims to maintain a polished image while continuing practices that starkly contradict the values of human dignity and rights. The 2022 FIFA World Cup, rather than being a genuine step towards progress, has become a calculated endeavour to hide serious socio-political shortcomings and project a misleadingly positive image to the world. This research aims to highlight the imperative need for the international community to see beyond the event and hold Qatar accountable for its ongoing humanitarian crimes and ethical transgressions.

## **b) Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Vision 2030, introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, aims to diversify the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's economic, social, and cultural sectors. A key objective of this vision

is to promote widespread participation in sports and athletic activities and to position the country as a leader in selected sports both regionally and globally. Football, being the most popular sport in Saudi Arabia, has become the focal point of significant financial investment and sportswashing strategies employed by the government to enhance its global soft power. This paper seeks to explore the socio-political motives behind these decisions and their broader implications on the global stage.

According to The Guardian (2021), Saudi Arabia has invested at least USD 1.5 billion in hosting high-profile international sporting events since 2014. These events include several Formula 1 Grand Prix, major boxing matches, as well as handball and football cup finals. The U.S.-Saudi Business Council (USCCB) (2020) highlights hosting such events as a strategic move for Saudi Arabia to secure lucrative sponsorship deals and partnership opportunities. However, Saudi Arabia's significant investment in international sports serves various socio-political objectives beyond just economic benefits.

The Kingdom's strategy of investing heavily in international sports has a lot of motives behind it aiming to bolster its global image, stimulate national pride, and promote a healthier, more active population. By hosting prestigious events, Saudi Arabia seeks to showcase its modernity and openness, countering negative perceptions related to its human rights record and conservative societal norms. This deliberate effort to rebrand the nation is part of a larger soft power strategy to gain influence and foster diplomatic relations through sports diplomacy. Additionally, these events provide opportunities for economic diversification by attracting tourism, creating jobs, and fostering infrastructure development. As highlighted by Krajewski (2020), sports investments are not only about immediate financial returns but also about long-term socio-political benefits, enhancing the Kingdom's stature on the world stage and aligning with the broader goals of Vision 2030.

The Public Investment Fund (PIF), Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, plays a central role in driving the Saudi Vision 2030 agenda, which aims to transform the country's image through strategic investments both domestically and internationally (Grand & Wolff, 2020). The role of PIF has come under scrutiny, particularly with its acquisition of the English Premier League club Newcastle United (NUFC), which was perceived as an attempt at sportswashing. In October 2021, PIF successfully acquired an 80% stake in the club, with Pharma Capital Partners and Reuben Brothers Sports & Media each purchasing a 10% share (Kelsey, 2021).

The initial reaction to the Saudi-led takeover was largely critical, with accusations that it was a strategy to improve Saudi Arabia's human rights image and rebuild its reputation following the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi (The Guardian, 2021). Despite this, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Conservative Party viewed the takeover as crucial to the UK's strategic and economic interests, and as a means to attract continued investment from Gulf states into major UK cities (The Guardian, 2022).

Since then, Saudi Arabia has also been linked to acquiring high-profile sports brands in Europe, including the Italian Serie A club Inter Milan and the French Ligue 1 club Olympique de Marseille (MEMO, 2022). By acquiring these clubs, Saudi Arabia strengthens its alliances with English and French football entities and showcases its growing wealth and influence. These clubs, with their extensive international followings, offer platforms for positive engagement with fans and governments worldwide, further reshaping perceptions of Saudi Arabia.

The country has also secured a landmark deal as the first-ever sponsor of the shirts for Spanish football club Barcelona, a position described as “the most prestigious advertising space in the world” (Conn, 2017). This can be seen as another attempt to use football as a branding vehicle. By securing this sponsorship, Saudi Arabia aims to align itself with one of the most globally recognized and respected football clubs, thereby enhancing its international visibility and prestige. This move not only promotes the Kingdom’s brand on a global stage but also reinforces its strategic use of sports to achieve broader socio-political and economic objectives such as that of projecting a progressive image to the international community

The strategic recruitment of football superstars Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi further emphasises Saudi Arabia’s commitment to leveraging sports for socio-political gain. In January 2023, Cristiano Ronaldo joined Al-Nassr, a prominent Saudi Pro League club, marking one of the most high-profile signings in the league’s history. This move was not just about enhancing the league’s competitive stature but also about using Ronaldo’s global appeal to attract international attention to Saudi football and, by extension, to the country itself. Ronaldo’s presence in the league has already drawn significant media coverage, increased viewership, and attracted sponsorships

Similarly, Lionel Messi's role as a Saudi tourism ambassador, announced in May 2022, aims to capitalise on his immense popularity to promote Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination. Messi's involvement in promoting Saudi tourism aligns with the Kingdom's efforts to diversify its economy by developing its tourism sector, a key component of Vision 2030. By associating with globally recognized sports icons, Saudi Arabia seeks to enhance its image, attract tourists, and foster economic growth through increased tourism revenue. These high-profile endorsements not only help rebrand the nation's international image but also serve to mitigate the negative perceptions associated with its human rights record and conservative societal norms, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's strategic use of sports as a tool for soft power and economic diversification.

Saudi Arabia is not the only nation which leverages sports as a means of boosting tourism and bettering the international image. The Madrid government has used its money to create better facilities and players for football clubs such as Real Madrid, FC Valencia, and FC Barcelona making them into high profile clubs. An article from the Sports Honours magazine claims that using taxpayers' money to "finance professional football clubs can create unfair competition" in the footballing world where all domestic clubs try to attain the same level of prestige by financing every aspect of the club (Biggs 2019). However, Saudi Arabia has become a focal point for sportswashing due to the abrupt and aggressive nature of its sports investments. This approach has drawn global scrutiny, with critics arguing that these efforts aim to overshadow the kingdom's human rights issues and conservative societal norms, leveraging sports to polish its international image and divert attention from its controversial policies.

Despite the ambitious goals and high-profile initiatives under Saudi Vision 2030, a significant barrier to fully understanding and critically evaluating these efforts is the media censorship and limited availability of literature on Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom exercises stringent control over domestic media and restricts foreign journalists, creating a narrative that aligns with its national interests. This censorship stifles critical discourse and limits the flow of information, making it challenging for external observers to access unbiased and comprehensive insights into the socio-political impacts of Saudi Arabia's sports investments. In the following sections, this paper will delve into the mechanisms of media censorship in Saudi Arabia, the impact on public perception and international scrutiny, the challenges faced by researchers and journalists, and the broader implications for global understanding of Saudi socio-political dynamics.

Media censorship in Saudi Arabia is an issue that greatly impacts the dissemination of information and the global understanding of the Kingdom's socio-political arena. The government maintains tight control over both traditional and digital media, employing sophisticated surveillance and regulatory mechanisms to suppress dissent and critical reporting. This environment creates a significant gap in independent and investigative journalism, resulting in a lack of critical literature and academic research on Saudi policies and initiatives, including its extensive sports investments. Consequently, the narrative surrounding Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and related activities is predominantly shaped by state-approved perspectives, complicating efforts to critically assess the true socio-political motives and implications of these ambitious projects.

The government employs a combination of legal restrictions, technological controls, and economic incentives to regulate the media landscape. Laws such as the Anti-Cyber Crime Law and the Press and Publications Law impose severe penalties for disseminating content deemed harmful to public order, religious values, or national security. Additionally, the state exerts control over internet access, blocking websites and monitoring online activities to suppress critical voices. Journalists and media outlets are often subject to self-censorship due to the threat of punitive actions, including fines, imprisonment, or closure. Economic control further extends the government's influence, as state-owned companies and businesses with government ties are major advertisers, providing financial leverage over media outlets.

This can be extended to the world of football as well. Coverage of football events and deals, including high-profile acquisitions and sponsorships under Vision 2030, have been carefully curated to highlight the positive aspects of these initiatives while downplaying or omitting any critical perspectives that highlights any labour and women rights issues. This selective reporting ensures that the narrative remains favourable, aligning with the government's broader socio-political objectives. As a result, the transformative impact of football investments on Saudi society is often presented and exaggerated without scrutiny of potential negative implications, such as issues of sportswashing or human rights concerns. This controlled media environment not only shapes public perception within the Kingdom but also influences international audiences, who rely on limited and often state-approved sources of information. The true socio-political motives and broader implications of Saudi Arabia's sports investments, particularly in football, remain obscured, complicating efforts to engage in a nuanced and critical analysis of these high-profile initiatives.

The hold that the government has on media and press coverage further highlights the need for independent analysis and critical discourse on Saudi Arabia's ambitious projects, including its significant investments in football. This sanitised version of events hinders the global community's ability to engage in informed discussions and assessments, reinforcing the importance of independent journalism and research in providing a more balanced and comprehensive perspective on Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and its extensive sports investments. This research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how football is being used as a strategic tool to achieve Saudi Arabia's long-term socio-political objectives and help in its soft power projections in order to alter the perception about the country on the global platform.

### **Comparative Study**

In both the case studies, it is clear that the strategic utilisation of football as a tool for sportswashing has garnered significant attention on the global stage. Both nations have invested heavily in the sport, leveraging it to showcase their modernization efforts and project a progressive image to the world. Qatar, notably, has placed football at the forefront of its broader strategy to establish itself as a global hub for sports and culture, culminating in its successful bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has recognized the potential of football to enhance its international standing and has made substantial investments in the sport, including hosting prestigious events such as the Spanish Super Cup and acquiring stakes in European football clubs. By aligning themselves with football, these nations seek to deflect attention from pressing issues such as human rights concerns or geopolitical tensions, instead portraying themselves as dynamic and forward-thinking societies on the global stage. In the following sections, this paper will build a comparative analysis between these two Gulf nations on their various motives behind these sports washing techniques.

One crucial aspect of the comparative analysis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in their utilisation of football for sports washing revolves around the treatment of labour rights, particularly concerning the construction and maintenance of sports infrastructure. Qatar's preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup have drawn significant scrutiny due to reports of widespread labour exploitation and human rights abuses among migrant workers involved in stadium construction projects. Despite pledges to improve labour conditions, the reality on the ground often falls short, raising questions about Qatar's commitment to upholding human



rights standards amidst its sporting ambitions. In contrast, while Saudi Arabia has faced similar criticism regarding labour rights violations, its focus on football investments has somewhat diverted attention away from these issues. However, it remains essential to critically examine the working conditions of those involved in the construction and operation of sports facilities in Saudi Arabia, especially as the nation continues to expand its sports infrastructure as part of Vision 2030.

One common tactic used by both was the hosting of high-profile sporting events, such as football tournaments and championships, which serve as showcases for the nations' modernization efforts and projected progressive image. Football has emerged as a powerful carrier of modernity in the recent decades especially for countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. By investing in renowned football teams, these nations present themselves within the fabric of a globally celebrated sport, gaining both visibility and credibility. Investments of this stature often come with the modernization of the clubs themselves, bringing in better facilities such as proper dressing rooms, equipment, and stadiums, managerial expertise, and star players, thereby enhancing the clubs' global appeal and success (Rostow, 1960). Such a symbiotic relationship benefits the host nations by associating their national image with the prestige and modernity of these football brands. Events often accompanied by extravagant ceremonies and infrastructure developments, were strategically utilised to portray Saudi Arabia and Qatar as dynamic and forward-thinking societies on the global stage (Said, 2019). Additionally, both nations have invested substantially in acquiring stakes in European football clubs and securing sponsorship deals with prestigious teams, aligning themselves with the global footballing community to enhance their international standing. By associating themselves with popular football brands and events, Saudi Arabia and Qatar seek to project an image of cultural openness and modernity while deflecting attention from underlying socio-political issues. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have employed similar sports washing techniques to enhance their international image and divert attention from humanitarian issues.

Moreover, the motives driving these sports washing techniques are rooted in broader geopolitical and economic agendas. For both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, football serves as a means to bolster their soft power and influence on the global stage, allowing them to cultivate favourable international perceptions and forge diplomatic ties with other nations. The hosting of major sporting events, in particular, presents an opportunity for these Gulf nations to showcase their economic prowess and attract foreign investment, furthering their goals of

economic diversification and development (Cherkaoui, 2018). Additionally, by investing in football clubs and securing sponsorship deals, Saudi Arabia and Qatar aim to position themselves as key players in the global sports industry, leveraging their financial resources to gain strategic alliances and partnerships with influential stakeholders.

While assessing the credibility of these events, examining both their short-term achievements and long-term impacts on the sport of football is important. In the short term, both nations have undeniably succeeded in raising their profiles within the global football community through high-profile investments, sponsorship deals, and the hosting of prestigious events. These efforts have garnered significant attention and generated positive publicity, positioning Saudi Arabia and Qatar as emerging forces in the world of football (Petrov, 2020). However, the extent to which these initiatives contribute to the actual development and promotion of the sport remains questionable. Both of these nations, in particular, have successfully turned themselves into destinations for football events and tournaments that can be seen in the way Qatar will now host the U-17 Fifa World Cup every year from 2025-2029 which points toward Qatar's growing influence as a decision-making body within FIFA. Saudi Arabia too has won the rights to host the upcoming 2030 FIFA World Cup, thereby showcasing its prominence within FIFA as well as its image of being one of the best destinations for Football.

Despite the spectacle surrounding major sporting events and the acquisition of football clubs, the grassroots development of football in Saudi Arabia and Qatar may not receive the same level of attention and investment. Critics argue that the focus on high-profile initiatives overlooks the importance of investing in grassroots infrastructure, youth development programs, and community engagement to foster long-term growth and sustainability in football (Noureddine, 2017). Without intensive efforts to develop the sport at the grassroots level, the impact of Saudi Arabia and Qatar's sports washing strategies on promoting football may be limited to superficial achievements and fail to address underlying issues within the domestic footballing ecosystem.

Furthermore, the profit-driven nature of many of these sports washing techniques raises questions about the sincerity of Saudi Arabia and Qatar's commitment to promoting football for the benefit of the sport itself, rather than for geopolitical or economic gains. While hosting major events and investing in football clubs may enhance their international prestige and attract lucrative sponsorship deals, the ultimate beneficiaries of these initiatives may primarily be the

nations' ruling elites and corporate interests rather than the broader footballing community (Horne, 2019). The vast sums of money poured into high-profile football clubs and mega-events often do not trickle down to grassroots football, where funding is most needed. Instead of developing local talent and improving community sports facilities, the investments frequently focus on attracting star players and building state-of-the-art stadiums that cater to international audiences. Therefore, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar may have succeeded in projecting a positive image through their sports investments, the true impact on the promotion and development of football remains subject to scrutiny and debate.

Moreover, the profit-driven nature of many sports washing techniques raises doubts about the sincerity of their commitment to football's advancement. As such, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar may achieve short-term gains in terms of international prestige and visibility, the long-term impact on the promotion and development of football remains uncertain as the true socio-political motives behind all of this can only be revealed in due time. This research, in hand with this statement, highlights the need for the international community to direct its critical gaze on the events of the Gulf region.

## **Conclusion**

In examining the socio-political motives driving Qatar and Saudi Arabia's sports washing techniques, it becomes evident that these efforts are linked to the broader objectives of rebranding and enhancing their soft power on the global stage. Through substantial investments in high-profile sports events and teams, both nations have sought to reshape their international image, projecting themselves as modern, progressive, and influential players within the global arena. This rebranding effort serves not only to attract tourism and investment but also to legitimise their regimes and deflect attention from ongoing humanitarian issues. The strategic use of sports diplomacy has allowed Qatar and Saudi Arabia to craft a narrative that aligns with their geopolitical ambitions, positioning themselves as key actors in international relations while mitigating negative perceptions associated with their domestic policies.

The findings of this research highlight the socio-political motives behind Qatar and Saudi's sports washing are rather multifaceted. They leverage sports not just for economic gain, but also as a means to foster national pride, promote social cohesion, and distract from international scrutiny. By hosting global sporting events and acquiring stakes in prominent sports clubs, they aim to cultivate a positive image that hides the less favourable aspects of their governance,

such as human rights abuses and restrictions on freedoms. A calculated approach to the international community's perception highlights the relationship between sports and politics, demonstrating how sports can serve as a powerful diplomatic tool.

The research paper also illustrates how sportswashing operates as a form of soft power that transcends traditional diplomatic channels. By aligning themselves with globally celebrated sports and athletes, these countries not only enhance their visibility but also build that can be leveraged in international forums. This strategy enables them to engage with diverse audiences, from sports fans to political leaders, thereby extending their influence beyond regional boundaries. The substantial media coverage and international attention garnered through sports events help these nations to craft a narrative of modernization and progressiveness, which can deflect attention from the ongoing domestic issues and present a progressive image to the global community.

By systematically examining historical precedents and contemporary practices, it becomes clear that several nations strategically employ sports to divert attention from domestic issues and project an image of modernity and progressiveness. This research highlights the need of the international community to take notice of the nations and their tactics before it is too late and historical precedents start to take place again leaving the nations in a much worse situation. The hypothesis postulates that Qatar and Saudi Arabia's employment of sportswashing strategies is driven by a combination of socio-political motives aimed at improving their global image, legitimising their regimes, and exerting influence on the international stage. This research has substantiated this hypothesis by highlighting how these nations have successfully utilised sports diplomacy to overshadow their humanitarian crises and reshape global narratives in their favour. The evidence points to a calculated effort to cultivate a positive international image, align with global values, and secure socio-political advantages, thereby validating the hypothesis of this study. Through the critical case studies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the paper has illuminated the broader implications of sportswashing in international relations, offering insights into the themes of soft power and global influence.

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