

**SPORT
AND GEOPOLITICS
PROGRAMME**

**PLAYING GAMES IN THE GULF:
HOW GCC NATIONS USE SPORT
TO BUILD POWER AND POSITION**

**Interview with Simon CHADWICK /
Professor and Director of Eurasian Sport at EM Lyon**

Conducted by Estelle BRUN / Research Assistant at IRIS

JUNE 2020

GEOSTRATEGIC SPORTS OBSERVATORY



QATAR AHEAD OF THE 2022 FIFA WORLD CUP

Qatar has developed a particularly offensive sport diplomacy over the last ten years, and especially since Doha won its bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

IRIS: How would you sum up this decade?

SIMON CHADWICK: I would sum it up, I think, as having Qatar gone from anonymity to notoriety, and now, finally, something approaching legitimacy. Certainly, if you go back to 2009, I suspect that most people in the world had not heard of Qatar. They certainly did not know where it was, and I am guessing that a lot of people could not actually point to it on a map. I am sure that there are many people around the world who are still in that position. But obviously, having won the right to stage the 2022 World Cup it raised awareness of the country and its aspirations. Whether this was intended or not, it began to shine a spotlight on whom the country is, what it does, what its aspirations and relationships are with the rest of the world.

In terms of notoriety, I guess there are two principal issues that have confronted the country. One is around the accusations that the country had somehow bribed its way to successfully winning the World Cup bid, and the other one obviously is the issue around workers' rights and the exploitation of immigrant labour. These two issues, I think, have not gone away. Otherwise, there are further issues like the preparedness of the country to host the tournament, the inclination of people to travel there to watch sport – and I am thinking particularly about the World Athletics Championships as a comparison – that people would point to as grounds for concern. There are other issues too: the Gulf feud, FIFA sponsorships (for example with alcohol), brands playing out within a Qatari context. I think we can't forget that, in spite of Qatar's aspirations, there have been issues about the Tour of Qatar's cycling race which no longer runs because, essentially, it wasn't making money. And I think one of the reasons for that it that simply people weren't engaging with the event.

But at the same time, many of us now see Qatar as a legitimate part of the global sport landscape. I am thinking about, for instance, Nasser Al-Khelaifi, the owner of Paris Saint-Germain through Qatar Sports Investments, serving on UEFA's Council. What we've

increasingly seen is that global commentators, rather than criticising or condemning Qatar's hosting of 2022, are accepting it, even embracing it. I think the general nature and tone of the dialogue around the Gulf feud has really tended to tip towards Qatar, and so there is far more criticism against Saudi Arabia during the feud, and much less of Qatar. Qatar is seen as being arguably the innocent party, perhaps the more progressive and externally exchanged party. But, I think, certainly what Doha has done very well is to shift the narrative, the dialogue around the country.

Through their sport diplomacy, and particularly amid the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup, Gulf countries seem to have experienced greater international pressure from the global community, particularly in terms of human—and particularly that of women's—rights.

IRIS: Has the region's rising involvement in sport business and sport diplomacy led to concrete political and social domestic changes on the national level?

SIMON CHADWICK: I've got mixed views about what Qatar has done and continues to do because, I think, much like any other Gulf countries – and for that matter, much like other countries in the world, and my own country Britain is one of these – there is a tension between progressive reformers and the conservatives, who are resisting to change.

I've been involved in several events in Doha where I meet young people who are really hungry for change, and are making that change. And if you look at, for example, issues around gender in Qatar, I think Qatar is far more progressive than Saudi Arabia has been over the last decade. Females do hold very prominent positions in sport, as well as elsewhere in society, and I genuinely believe that there is a commitment to addressing workers' rights improvements linked to the World Cup. Qatar is not an evil empire with malicious and malign intent, this is a country that is in a phase of nation building, and the values associated with it, I find, are often misrepresented across the world. However, there is a hard core of conservatives, some of these people are religious conservatives, but there are also sociocultural conservatives as well. There are people who are older, very often, who remember Qatar when it was in a very different place. I think there are also people who worry about the adverse consequences of rapid change in Qatar. The opening and engagement with the world, the challenges that it poses are something that perturbs certain sections of society. What you see, what I perceive, is that there is this

tension between the two parties and it sometimes means that things don't change as quickly as perhaps they could or should. I think it also tends to draw the attention of people who are looking to criticise Qatar. There is this focus on the conservatives rather than on the progressives. And as far as the progressives are concerned, I guess politically, it means they have to seize the opportunity where they can. I think this sometimes means that, for a long period of time, it appears as though nothing's happening in Qatar and no progress is being made, and then, very quickly, something will happen and then it will go quiet again. And I know that's a characteristic of the Gulf region generally, but I think it is a particularly characteristic of Qatar because of this standoff between various internal factions within Qatar.

And then, adding more context, one of the things is that obviously much has been made of Qatar spending money, hosting events, its links to the Muslim Brotherhood and disagreement with Saudi Arabia, and that just tends to divert attention away from Qatar itself. It's important to recognise that, just as in any other country of the world, there are factions with different shades of opinion, different views about the way in which the country should develop. I actually would invite people not to succumb to the international media's view of Qatar or to the view that this is a really small, vulnerable state that is exposed to Saudi Arabia. I think people need to know and to understand Qatar more because there is a depth of richness and also a complexity to the country that most people don't understand.

IRIS: In several interviews, you said that the 2022 FIFA World Cup was extremely important for Qatar, and that it was “obliged” to organise the competition properly, otherwise it would make it geopolitically vulnerable again. Can you explain what you mean by this?

SIMON CHADWICK: I think in terms of national development, nation-branding, reputation management, images, trust and legitimacy, Qatar has to host 2022. The country would look bad if it didn't, because, obviously, that would be detrimental to them. But I think failure to host the tournament would also provide ammunition to not only parties within Qatar but obviously parties in the Gulf and elsewhere in the world to claim that Qatar is a country that is overcommitted, overstretched, doesn't have the strength,

the expertise, the competence to organise such a thing. Qatar is making a global plea for legitimacy and for engagement with the rest of the world. So, it needs the World Cup.

But I think, historically Qatar is a peninsula that was under the protection of the British until the 1970s and which, since then, has essentially stood on its own, with close relations to its Arab neighbours and particularly Saudi Arabia. But, you have to keep in mind that, in geopolitical terms - and this notion, or this term 'geopolitics' as the geographical context in which politics is set, which I think very often misused amongst academics, the media, the general public - it is vulnerable. It's essentially an island nation surrounded by the sea, with only one small land border with Saudi Arabia, so therefore it is reliant upon sea and air. In sea terms, what goes into Qatar or what comes out of Qatar has to go through the Strait of Hormuz. This is an incredibly unstable part of the world. Also, in the West of Doha is Saudi Arabia, one big regional force, obviously a Sunni Muslim-majority country and then to the East, there is Iran, the other big Gulf course, obviously Shi'a Muslim-majority nation. And, I think, you got to keep in mind the axes that are aligned with Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Iran is an axis that runs up through Syria, Russia, to China, and in Saudi Arabia's case, there's an axis roaming up now through Israel across Europe and to the United States.

At the same time, you need to keep in mind that there are historical tribal and family bonds between Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. There's obviously to the north, connections to Turkey, at the same time there are connections to the east. So, Qatar shares one of the biggest natural gas field in the world with Iran, essentially having to get along with Tehran otherwise it becomes problematic. This very small nation, with huge resources and big ambitions, is nevertheless stuck, caught in a very vulnerable, I might say even precarious geopolitical position. And so, the country is constantly hedging between these various stakeholders. To look at it in terms of the World Cup, I think what the competition does bring visibility for Doha, it brings a certain sense of legitimacy as I said already, but it also to an extent makes Qatar indispensable to the global sport community. It makes it visible; it makes it a country that the world of football at least needs to protect. This is not just about football, football fans and events, infrastructure and development, it is also cementing Qatar's position in the global firmament and sheering that the vulnerabilities and risks associated with its geopolitical positions are minimised as best as can be.

SAUDI ARABIA'S SPORT AMBITIONS

Saudi Arabia, in light of Qatari and Emirati's investments in foreign sport clubs and hosting of major sporting competitions, is now "playing catch-up in the global sports arms race". Through its Vision 2030 development plan, it has made the diversification of its oil-based economy a priority, subsequently largely investing in sport. Over the past few years, the kingdom has developed its sport diplomacy, based primarily on the hosting of major sporting events but also increase its influence (IOC, FIFA, etc.) Since 2018, Saudi Arabia has allegedly attempted to invest in various European football clubs (Manchester United, Newcastle United, or even the Olympique de Marseille), but it has been encountering various difficulties in doing so.

IRIS: In your opinion, how important is Saudi Arabia in sport?

SIMON CHADWICK: Probably up until very recently, certainly 2015, 2016, maybe even 2017, I would say that Saudi Arabia role or involvement in sport globally has not been very important at all. So, there is some evidence of going back to the 1970s, with Saudi Air, the national airline, which was involved in sponsorship of the Williams Formula 1 team. Obviously, we've seen so many infrastructural developments of sport, stadiums for instance, particularly football, and we can think of 1994 when Saudi Arabia qualified for football's World Cup in the United States and rose to a certain prominence then.

But really, Saudi Arabia has been largely anonymous, I don't think socio-culturally that sport was being actively encouraged historically as perhaps it is now. Certainly, women weren't engaged in sport in a way that some of them are now, as well as for some men. Although I am sure there were many sport fans, for religious, for socio-cultural reasons I don't think sport was prominent and it wasn't taken as seriously as certainly the country now seems to be taking it.

In those terms, I really didn't perceive it being a major player on the global sport landscape but obviously, that is now starting to change. From 2015 onwards, we've seen some significant development obviously, the formulation of a national vision for Saudi Arabia is important. As in Qatar, sport is viewed through various lenses in government as a means through which to diversify the economy. These are all gas-dependent economies, and I think that plays into not just the development of sport but the development of the

entertainment sector, of the digital system. We've seen, for example, a convergence of sport and entertainment business and digital. I also think that, for Saudi Arabia, sport is a way of addressing some of the issues around social development; social cohesion for example is a big issue, between males and females and in terms of the immigrant population and Saudi Arabians themselves. Sport contributes to a sense of social cohesion and social identity. It contributes to the health and lifestyle agenda. There are public health crises in Saudi Arabia right now and extremely high rates of diabetes are amongst those public health problems. And, by engaging people in sport, the government attempts to effect a change in their physical activity. Sport may be one of the ways in which public health problems can be addressed.

Also, there are wider political benefits and implications of what Saudi Arabia is doing. We know that Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is keen for the world to see Saudi Arabia in a different way, to be seen as more progressive, reformist, and as legitimate members of the international community. And I think sport enables that. My view of football is always that it's the world's most popular game, and so if you are a major part of the football landscape, you can address perceptions, change opinions and influence attitudes of multiple different audiences around the world as a consequence of your involvement in football. What I would imagine is that, over the five to ten years, we will see a more prominent and influential, maybe an even more influential Saudi Arabia across the world's sport.

This really depends upon the government getting it right, which I am not sure they are at the moment. I don't think they truly understand how to play the game of sport in the same way as, for instance, the government in Doha does. I am sure Saudi Arabia will learn but it will need to go hand in hand with genuine societal change. And I think this is one of the things that distinguishes Qatar from Saudi Arabia at the moment, it is this desire to embrace genuine societal change. It's important for the government in Saudi Arabia to realise that sport is not a plaything, it's a serious industrial and economic business, but it is also a serious political business too. And Riyadh therefore needs to become more adept, more strategic and much more considered in the way in which it goes about utilising sport as a policy instrument and as a strategy.

IRIS: Regarding the several attempts of investments, how can these difficulties be explained?

SIMON CHADWICK: Interestingly, just to go back to the previous question and to link my answer to this question, much of what Saudi Arabia has focused on in sport so far has been domestic. Its policy of sport has been premised upon building sports infrastructure inside Saudi Arabia, also attracting events as a result. And so, we see, for example, the development of the two megacities Neom and Qiddiya as examples of infrastructure, attracting events such as the Paris-Dakar rally and La Liga's Super Copa. But, as we saw from the Anthony Joshua vs Andy Ruiz fight when significant numbers of Western journalists travelled to Riyadh, these events immediately shined a spotlight on Saudi Arabia, and perhaps some of the politicians in Riyadh who thought that hosting sporting events would be a fast track to a better image in global legitimacy began to realise that it is not necessarily the case. There's an awful lot of coverage of sport washing, image washing, gender issues, political dissent, with obviously the issue of Jamal Khashoggi floating around such issues constantly. So, I don't think that Saudi Arabia had really appreciated just how stringent and meticulous the scrutiny of the country might become as a consequence of investment in sport. And obviously, this was whilst the focus was internal. We know that Jamal Khashoggi's fiancée has been lobbying very hard for the English Premier League to reject Saudi's acquisition of Newcastle United. We also know Qatar's beIN is seeking a legal route to stop Saudi Arabia acquiring Newcastle, and this is obviously a consequence of the beoutQ piracy scandal which continues to run after two or three years of causing problems and fractious relations between Doha and Riyadh.

I think what the Newcastle United acquisition's potential is just to reveal MBS, to Riyadh and to the public investment fund that money can't buy you love, that love and respect have to be earned, they can't be bought. One would hope that they will reflect upon how important sport is and how vital it is that sport is taken seriously, managed strategically, and that there's a proper policy and strategy in place. And it needs to exist in tandem with other policies, for example linked to gender equality, to issues around political dissent and so forth. And so, I think sport is a means to an end, it's a driver, it's not an end in itself and Saudi Arabia needs to understand this.

IRIS: Saudi sport diplomacy does not seem to follow a precise development plan and seems to be based on opportunities (clash of Dunes, Dakar 2020). Is this really the case?

SIMON CHADWICK: I genuinely want to believe that there is a planned, coherent, carefully crafted and well-managed policy and strategy for sport in Saudi Arabia, and to a certain extent, I think there has been. So, the creation of domestic infrastructure and the attraction of events to Saudi Arabia reflects, I think, a particular approach about benefiting the Saudi economy, providing a domestic focus for the creation of a coherent national identity into which the country's population invest. Obviously, by staging car races or boxing bouts in Saudi Arabia, there is an economic impact to all of this, in tourism, the hotel sector and touristic attractions forming the basis of the proposition it presents to the world. There's also something too about how Saudis spend their money, instead of spending their money abroad, they're being encouraged to spend their money in Saudi Arabia going to watch car races, staying in Saudi hotels, going to Saudi shopping malls and eating Saudi food. So, there is this kind of economic multiplier effect associated with it.

Certainly, in the last three/four/five years, this is what I have perceived, there have been some difficulties, but I think these were very interesting initial steps for the country to be making and it's a game plan we've seen played out in Qatar, in Abu Dhabi, in Dubai. More recently, I have sensed far less of coherent strategy and I think there has been a much more opportunistic tone to what Saudi Arabia is doing. And we've seen, during the pandemic, that the public investment fund has actually borrowed money from the Central Bank in Saudi Arabia to acquire significant stakes in Disney, in Facebook, in Live Nation. Saudi Arabia has actually been quite open in its opportunism.

You got to keep in mind that the Newcastle United deal was reported before the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was still a virus in China at that point. So this has been running for some time and I've always had some issues with the Newcastle United deal because my view is that the acquisition of an overseas football club, certainly when the story first emerged in January, seemed to me a really major policy departure for Saudi Arabia and I wasn't sure why this was happening and whether it was a true story. I must confess that I'm still not entirely sure that it's a true story, I think that it is inconsistent or has been

inconsistent with Saudi government policy up until now. What a lot of observers seem to be doing is conceiving of the Newcastle United deal in pandemic terms and seeing as the opportunistic acquisition of an overseas asset that potentially will form the basis for future revenue generating in lots of different ways. But the Newcastle United deal was already happening before the pandemic, so I still remain confused about what that is all about. And particularly because Saudi Arabian football is actually quite strong in its own right, and what we do know is over the last four or five years, the government has been trying to privatise Saudi Arabian football clubs with a view to being more commercially oriented, better managed, so there's a burden removed from the state and I think there is this vision that in the end Saudi Arabia's top clubs will somehow become major competitors for other clubs around the world, not just in Asia but even those in Europe. And so, this opportunism associated with Newcastle United, I just find this very odd, yet strange, and I don't really understand it. I remain to be convinced that it's actually true.

OTHER MEMBERS OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)

For the past few years, Oman seems to have also developed its own sport diplomacy through the sports of sailing and trialing particularly, and without comparison to its neighbours.

IRIS: How can Oman's sport diplomacy be described?

SIMON CHADWICK: Oman's sport diplomacy can be described as an under-utilised asset. I think that, really, GCC members in general have let Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in particular dominate the agenda, the development of sport and the way in which sport is utilised for sport diplomacy purposes. Dubai, apart from its Emirates airlines' sponsorship in some sporting events, has had its focus shifting to becoming a tourism destination, so the real seriousness is observed in Qatar and Abi Dhabi and by comparison with those two, I would say that Amman is virtually anonymous.

Obviously, Amman has recently revealed its own 2035 Vision, and having taken a look at this, there is no specific or explicit mention of sport as being a driver of the country's pursuit of its national vision. I would imagine that as we've seen elsewhere in the GCC, it is vision first and then policy and strategy afterwards, so the next year or two will be really interesting to see what role, if any, sport potentially might play in Oman. We do

need to set in the context of Covid-19 because we know that Oman does not necessarily have the oil and gas reserves or the wealth of some of its neighbours. Economically and financially, during the pandemic period, Oman has really been hurting. And so, I think we got to question whether Oman has either the intent or the resources to embrace sport in the same way as Qatar and Abu Dhabi. What we do know is, in my description of Oman as anonymous in sport, the same was true of Qatar ten years ago. So I'm not discounting the possibility that Amman might discover a vigorous appetite for sport and if Oman was to do that, I can envisage it following a very similar game plan to Doha or to Abu Dhabi, or perhaps looking towards the development path being followed by Saudi Arabia. But, at the moment, I think I would characterise sport and sports diplomacy in Oman as being an under-utilised asset.

Just as a further reflection on that, I think it's important, just to set this in a further context, because what we have seen throughout the Gulf feud is that Oman has tried to maintain a neutral position in its relations with Qatar and Saudi Arabia. So maybe, the government there foresees sport in much more diplomatic and consensual terms as a mechanism through which to bring about reconciliation, peace, cohesion. And I think, in terms of a nation-brand proposition, it's a very interesting place to be potentially because that would stand in stark contrast with the very politically aggressive tone of opposition of Saudi Arabia. Also the very economically and commercially aggressive position of Qatar, there is an opportunity there for Amman. And certainly, there is a history of success in Amman, if you look at football for example, football in Amman has historically been strong and so there are opportunities to look ahead, opportunities for Amman potentially to take advantage of.

IRIS: In the GCC, there seems to be great discrepancies between national sport diplomacy and international sport business's investments. What explains these differences?

SIMON CHADWICK: That's a really great question because, in my traveling to the region, very often I will speak to nationals in those Gulf countries who ask a very similar question which is: "Why are they spending millions and millions of dollars on football clubs overseas but not as much on our football clubs?". To me, that seems a perfectly legitimate question. And I flip that question several times in my conversation with Europeans; I'm a

football fan and if my football club was actually is struggling and the British government was to start spending on football clubs in Saudi Arabia or in China or in Brazil, I may be asking the question: “Why are you doing this when you’re not spending money supporting English football?”. So, I do understand these questions.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for these countries to do it, such as the fact that they are rentier states. Typically, rentier states look to utilise their oil and gas revenues as the basis upon which they can invest in assets overseas, which expected to generate revenues then repatriated and used domestically for various purposes, one of this is to subsidise tax so a tax burden on domestic populations within the Gulf region are not onerous. I think also investing overseas is a strategy of risk mitigation in the Middle East, a region we know as unstable with proxy-wars taking place there and terrorist groups posing threats. I also think that investing in assets, like Paris Saint-Germain, the McLaren F1 team, or like the City Football Group, is a root to soft power, to legitimacy, to building the nation brand, perhaps diverting attention away from some of the more negative activities in which some of the countries are involved. So I think there are reasons for doing this. And for me, the example that I always point to, to provide an illustration of what’s happening, is Abu Dhabi’s investment in Manchester City initially. This is very much about Premier League, with lots at stake, very high profile, and revenue – not huge revenues in global terms but certainly hundreds of millions of pounds in revenue. But I think, what’s really interesting about the way in which Abu Dhabi and City have gone about their businesses essentially, is that they are constructing global axes of power and influence, notably economic and commercial terms. And the way in which football entertainment and digital being connected to the Football Group network is really striking. We can see, for instance, this entertainment access, the Silver Lake involvement in City Football Group which is coming out of California, Los Angeles via Manchester and the Premier League which is creating the content through Mumbai, where one of the City Football Group’s franchises will be based. Mumbai is the financial capital of India, it is also the capital of Bollywood, it has a thriving tech sector there, right across to Chengdu in China. China is on the cusp of becoming the world’s biggest economy, the government pursuing a vigorous investment program into sport, Chengdu is also fast-emerging as the cultural capital of China, which resonates with the entertainment threat back to Mumbai and films put into Manchester which is also a big music and cultural capital in Europe.

So there's something there about business, and about politics too. For instance, the day before the Football Group announced its acquisition of a football club franchise in China, Etihad had announced improvements in service and closer relationships with Chengdu airport through Etihad airlines. So, I think what you see is the connectiveness and the network, it's not just about business but about politics either. And it's worth keeping in mind as well that the City Football Group is in majority owned by the Abu Dhabi government, but you also have Silver Lake, the US tech investor which invested into City Football Group as well, but also China's capital and more recently CITIC which has got a very ambiguous relationship with the Chinese government; but I think it's safe to say that the Chinese government does have an influence over City Football Group to an extent as well, so it's a very interesting amalgam of sport, entertainment, digital, business, politics. And it's a great example, I think.

THE "NEW COLD WAR" OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Long-standing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their use of a proxy warfare, best expressed by the 2017 diplomatic crisis during which Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of funding terrorism and criticised its relationship with Iran, have been studied under the framework of a "cold war" (Gause 2014¹).

IRIS: How have these regional tensions been expressed through sport, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran?

SIMON CHADWICK: I think there have been expressed economically. My view of, for example, the signing by Paris Saint-Germain of Neymar in 2017 was as much an off-field signing as it was an on-field signing. And what I mean by that is that at the start of the Gulf feud, I think government in Doha wanted to make a statement to its regional rival that it wasn't going to be pushed around or bullied and that it had the economic resources to fight and to sustain itself. If you want to demonstrate to your enemies that you're ready and able, then, go and sign the best player in the world at that time – or arguably one of the best players of the world and certainly, one of the most expensive players of the world at that time. I also think that was about a soft power play, so it wasn't just about hard

¹ Gause, F. G. (2014). Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War. *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf>

business and hard politics, it was also about soft power too, in the sense that what the Qataris were trying to do was to provide the basis for appeal, for attraction, so that people and football fans around the world would see that Qatar was doing good things, not just fighting with its neighbours, and trying to be associated with good players and good football. So that was significant, for me.

I think there has been something of a broader economic and political battle in this sense, with the way in which, for example, Qatar and Abu Dhabi have pursued their sport-related policies and strategies. And the two of them, together, have become very important global players in the sport industry as a consequence of that. There's something interesting politically in terms of the way in which various GCC nations have sought to gain political influence within FIFA, within the IOC. We can think about the way in which the Qataris have quietly gone about inserting key individuals in decision-making bodies in world sport to subtly build their influence and power from within governing bodies. What's in my mind is Manchester City's imminent appearance before the Court of Arbitration in Sport because I don't think Abu Dhabi has played a diplomatic game particularly well, it's certainly not played it as well as Qatar and they've suffered the consequences of that. And the fact that they have been founding breaches of UEFA's Financial Fair Play regulations is an illustration of their comparative lack of success – when I say comparatively, I mean compared to Qatar.

But otherwise, over the last five years, we've just seen skirmishes and we know for instance that, when Bahrain first won the right to host the Formula 1 Grand Prix nearly ten years ago now, there was a handshake agreement that only one other country in the world could host another Formula 1 Grand Prix. We know now that it was the United Arab Emirates. But before 2015, we know that Qatar really wanted to host a Formula 1 Grand Prix as well, and there were rumours that government in Doha was looking to stage a Grand Prix through the streets of Lusail, which is where the 2022 World Cup final will take place as a showcase for Lusail development. But because there was this handshake agreement, Qatar was having difficulty gaining any traction with that ambition, and so back in 2015, there were reports that Qatar was seeking to actually buy F1. People in Doha said to me at the time, "if you can't get a seat at the restaurant, buy the restaurant". There were widespread reports that Doha would make a move on buying Formula 1 and what people need to realise is that at that point, Bernie Ecclestone, the existing owner of

Formula 1 was looking to sell the asset. What we know now is that, in the end, Qatar didn't buy Formula 1, another organisation, Liberty Media, acquired it. But why this is significant is not just in terms of the kind of political gain into play between Bahrain, Abu Dhabi and Qatar, but from 2023, what we now know is that Saudi Arabia will host a Formula 1 Grand Prix. And so the old allies, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, presumably have a new handshake agreement involving the new Liberty owners so there can actually be more than two Grand Prix hosts in the Gulf region. What that means in contractual terms, in terms of the future of racing in Bahrain, Abu Dhabi... who knows? We simply don't know. I think, in amongst the big power plays, there have been lots of skirmishes and we see this too in cycling for example, something similar, we see it in other aspects of sport we're seeing something similar. So, this is important.

I think, in terms of Iran and Saudi Arabia, in terms of those big power blocs and in terms of the wider Gulf tensions, I actually don't sense that there has been any overt or specific use of sport. I don't sense that Saudi Arabia is investing in sport with a reference to Iran, nor do I perceive that Abu Dhabi or Qatar are investing in sport with reference to Iran. I think there is something about investing in sport to build global profile and legitimacy, to embed these countries within the global sporting ecosystem. Part of the reason for doing that might be Iran, but I don't sense that there has been explicit reference to Iran.

And that's as much because Iran, in global sporting terms, is by and large insignificant. Iranian football is huge, if you look at some of the attendance of Iranian football matches, it's clear the Iranian population is deeply engaged with football. But in international and global terms, it's not significant. And I think that, certainly in the West, for most people, Iranian football is anonymous. I think there is something interesting about Iranian football that we can talk about in the context of Asia, looking eastward. What is also interesting in Iran, for instance, is the soft power of Iranian wrestling and Iranian weightlifting looking eastward, but I just don't feel that there is any particular sensitivity amongst politicians and decision makers in Iran around sport and the role sport can play, globally, both in economic and commercial terms, but also in political terms as well.

IRIS: Amid rumours of Saudi Arabia's bid to takeover Newcastle United FC, can we consider that the Premier League has become a proxy site of this ongoing cold war?

SIMON CHADWICK: Maybe. If this story is true, *if* this story is true, that the Saudi Arabian government through the public investment fund will be acquiring Newcastle United, it is interesting because I am led to believe that leading figures in Saudi Arabia would actually quite like to purchase Manchester United; but of course, in Manchester already, you have another club own by Abu Dhabi, so that would be a direct confrontation, a direct rivalry with a close ally of Riyadh. So in that sense, it may be as an opportunity for the public investment fund to look elsewhere in England for an opportunity.

Now my view would be is that, if I was a powerful member of the Saudi Arabian government, I would be looking towards one of the London clubs, towards Westham, Arsenal, Chelsea, Tottenham Hotspur maybe, with a view to acquiring one of those clubs. As you can imagine, these are very close to the political and economic heart of Britain, very high-profile clubs, tremendous commercial potential, obviously linked very closely to the sport sector in London with many big decision makers – the football association, the Premier League and so forth – are based in London. But instead, the Saudi Arabians apparently choose to look at Newcastle United. Now, I just don't get it, Newcastle United can be as powerful as Arsenal for example, globally. And so, this tends to suggest other things are at play.

And one of the things that could be in play is the reported interest of Qatar in buying Leeds United. What's really interesting is that Leeds United is equidistant between Manchester and Newcastle and on that basis, I am inclined to wonder whether there is an element of proxy feuding taking place. So if you have Abu Dhabi owning a club in Manchester, you have Qatar potentially buying a club in Leeds and Saudi Arabia has countered to buy a club in Newcastle so that, essentially, Qatar is a waged between Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia and so there's a battle for on-field success, to be the best club, to win trophies, to become the Premier League champion, UEFA Champion League's winners but there's also a commercial battle that takes place too: who can generate the most revenue, who can make the most profit, who can draw a bigger share from sponsorship and so forth. But I think there's also a battle of images, profile, reputation and prestige, and I just feel that, if there is any substance to the Newcastle United stories, that an element of this is Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi together squeezing Qatar given that there are rumours that Qatar will buy Leeds United. ■

GEOSTRATEGIC SPORTS OBSERVATORY

**PLAYING GAMES IN THE GULF:
HOW GCC NATIONS USE SPORT TO BUILD POWER AND POSITION**

Interview with Simon CHADWICK / PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR OF EURASIAN SPORT AT EM LYON, BASED IN PARIS, WHO RESEARCHES AT INTERSECTION OF SPORT, BUSINESS, POLITICS AND TECHNOLOGY IN EURASIA

Conducted by Estelle BRUN / Research Assistant at IRIS

JUNE 2020

An observatory of the

SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PROGRAMME

Under the direction of Carole GOMEZ, Senior Research Fellow at IRIS (gomez@iris-france.org)

© IRIS

All rights reserved

INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES

2 bis rue Mercoeur

75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

contact@iris-france.org

@InstitutIRIS

www.iris-france.org