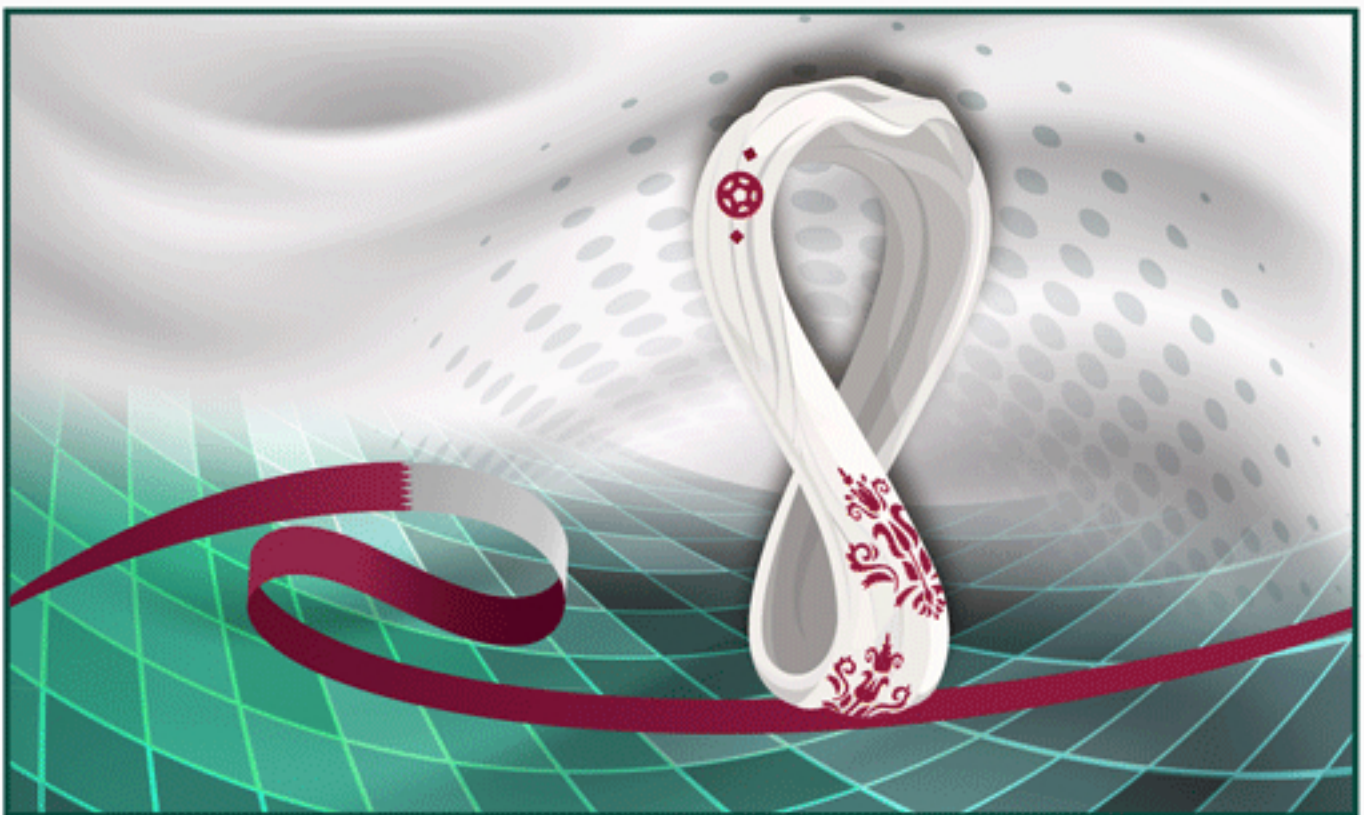




Academic Paper

Sport Diplomacy

World Cup Qatar as an Example



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January 2023



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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Sport Diplomacy: World Cup Qatar as an Example

Prof. Dr. Walid ‘Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

Aristotle’s saying that “Man is by nature a political animal” was not just a passing phrase, it means that humans have an impulse toward a partnership with others because they cannot flourish on their own. However, such a partnership requires rules that need an authority to overlook their application, and this is the essence of politics. Accordingly, man—represented by society and power—tries to employ any of his activities to achieve political goals, as we shall see.

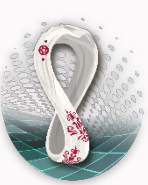
As for sports, all individual and group games aim to achieve a specific goal that brings material and moral benefits to the participants. This phenomenon not only includes players, but also includes the crowd, the referees who ensures the game rules are followed, coaches, sports experts, media specialized in sports activities, faculties of physical education in various universities around the globe, etc.



It’s important to point out here that in 2022, the sports industry revenue worldwide have reached \$501.43 billion and is expected to be \$707.84 billion in 2026.² The sports industry generates 1% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and this issue has become a major in universities titled “Sports Economics.”³

The relationship between politics and sports began in the 8th BCE in a religious setting, the Funeral Games, as one of the activities during the Gods’ festival. During the Olympic Truce, the athletes, spectators and officials from dozens of estranged political entities are allowed to travel safely, even while journeying through enemy territory, and where sport and war heroes are honored. It was abolished by the Roman Emperor Theodosius I as part of a campaign to abolish Paganism and impose Christianity as a state religion, for the emperor linked the glorification of heroes with Paganism.⁴

Contemporary and modern history has witnessed many events that used sports for political purpose, where sports teams are sent to other hostile countries for sports competition. Their objective would be to lay the groundwork for subsequent official



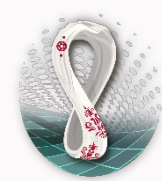
meetings. Perhaps the Ping-Pong Diplomacy between China and the US in 1971 was one of the most prominent manifestations of “Sport Diplomacy (SD).” It ended by having the then US President Richard Nixon visiting China, even when there were no relations between the two countries.⁵ Political writings also



introduced the term “Cricket Diplomacy” between India and Pakistan in 1987, when watching the India-Pakistan cricket match paved the way for Muhammad Zia ul Haq to visit India and diffuse the situation between the two countries.⁶ Political employment in sports is evident in other areas, for example, when South Africa, during the Apartheid, was formally expelled from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1970,⁷ or when the US boycotted the Moscow-held Olympic Games in 1980, and when the Soviet Union and the then socialist bloc countries boycotted the Los Angeles-held Olympics in 1984.⁸ Also, 18 Arab sports teams and individuals and 32 Iranian players or teams refused to participate in sports competitions with Israeli teams, in order to express an official and popular political position, or out of fear of the public’s reaction.⁹ There was even the Football War of 1969 between El Salvador and Honduras, a bloody conflict that erupted due the immigration of Salvadorans to the Honduran territories.¹⁰



The above indicates that sports may increase a nation’s soft power, in other words, sports achievements have the ability to influence others through culture, values, or the beautiful image of a certain society. Otherwise, why do countries care about counting the number of gold, silver and bronze medals they have won, or the number of times they beat an opponent, or the number of times they participate in international competitions, etc. Moreover, the symbols, images, logos, flags, etc., that these games contain, promote internally patriotic and national feelings, and increase the self-confidence, while externally, they improve the country’s image and international cooperation. However, they may also leave a negative psychological impact, due to what is involved in each competition and what is sometimes



associated with stadium hooliganism. All of this means that SD is the extension of public diplomacy, which is based on employing society or sectors of it for political purposes.

Based on the above, “Sports Diplomacy can be defined as the conscious, strategic use of sportspeople and sporting events by state and non-state actors to engage, inform and create a favourable image among foreign publics and organisations, to shape their perceptions in a way that is (more) conducive to the sending group’s goals.”¹¹

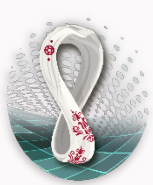
It can be said that SD constitutes a political tool in one of its dimensions as follows:

- ▶ 1. SD is “low-risk, low-cost and high profile.”
- ▶ 2. Informal relationships built through sport often lead to formal, long-term relationships, particularly between hostile countries or those having weak relations.
- ▶ 3. Sports diplomacy amplifies a nation’s foreign policy profile, brand, culture and values.
- ▶ 4. The concept is innovative and generates public interest in international affairs at home and abroad.
- ▶ 5. SD creates sustainable partnerships between government departments, sports organizations, businesses and academic institutions, inside and outside the country.



The SD Institutionalization

The relationship between politics and sports has gradually evolved, where the latter became more “institutionalized.” It was developed either academically, or by establishing bodies that organize the practice of such diplomacy, as shown in the following indicators:¹²



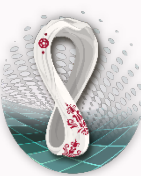
- ▶ 1. In 2015, the European Commission formed the High Level Group (HLG), which is composed of 15 personalities, whose mission is to use sport in the EU's diplomatic outreach.
- ▶ 2. In 2014, the IOC and the United Nations (UN) signed an agreement on the role of sport to support global peace.
- ▶ 3. International institutions that are directly related to sports have increased; such as the IOC, the International Association Football Federation (FIFA), and International Tennis Federation (ITF), which includes 205 national tennis federations.
- ▶ 4. Athletic events serve as a great venue for heads of state and diplomats to meet and discuss issues, and can enable the initiation of multilateral diplomacy.
- ▶ 5. Some countries have established SD departments under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After 9/11, the US State Department established the Sports Diplomacy Division. Its initial aim was to reach out to young people in the Middle East through soccer and social media, to champion related foreign policy priorities.
- ▶ 6. Establishing databases and libraries for studies related only to SD, such as the Sport Diplomacy Academy project website, co-funded by the EU.



SD Tools

In order for the SD to play its role, it employs a number of tools, of which the most important are:¹³

- ▶ **1. International Sport Organizations:** In addition to the regional or continental federations for many sports activities, there are the mega sports organizations such as the Olympics or the FIFA World Cup.
- ▶ **2. National Brand:** As per Keith Dinnie, every brand has its visual manifestation and its essence. The first includes the name, symbol, term, or design, or some combination, which identifies the product or body or a country as having a sustainable differential advantage. As for the essence or the implicit dimension, the brand must, on one hand, capture the feelings of the recipient in a positive way, and on the other hand, reflect a set of values.¹⁴



A wider set of potential rewards, political ones included, can be gained through nation branding, such as helping to restore international credibility and investor confidence; Reversing international ratings downgrades; Increasing international political influence; Stimulating stronger international partnerships; Enhancing nation building: by nourishing confidence, pride, harmony, ambition, national resolve; and a further objective that may be aspired to by transitional countries, may be to distance the countries from the old economic and political system that existed before transition.

► **3. Media and Technology:** As these are employed during sports activities, to achieve a positive image of countries, societies, or various symbols, or to improve prevailing negative ones.

► **4. Sport Ambassador:** Such as when President George Bush assigned the famous baseball player Ken Griffey to work in the field of public diplomacy. It is also seen that many sportsmen carry out their duty as Ambassador of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) or to mediate in international conflicts; as did Muhammad Ali Clay, when in early 1990s, he secured the release of US hostages in Iraq.¹⁵

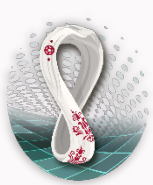


The Political Phenomenon in the Qatari World Cup 2022

In 1930, the FIFA World Cup matches were organized (in Uruguay) for the first time, but since then, no Arab or Muslim country has been able to host this sporting event. However, Qatar was able to do so, which, according to estimates of a study issued by the European Council on Foreign Relations, has spent about \$220 billion to ensure that the contest proceeds smoothly.¹⁶ It has succeeded in hosting the event, despite the political controversies surrounding it, and these are:



► 1. The political and cultural debate over Qatar's commitment to human rights, especially towards foreign workers and homosexuals, or allowing the sale of alcoholic beverages, or Iran's participation in matches. FIFA President Gianni Infantino defended the Qatari position regarding all these issues.¹⁷



- 2. Preparations for hosting the World Cup in Qatar were accompanied by official accusations from the US Department of Justice claiming that Qatar offered bribes to five members of the FIFA Council to ensure winning the organization of the competition.¹⁸ Later, claims emerged that Qatar provided bribes worth \$7.4 million to eight Ecuadorian players to ensure Qatar's victory in the opening game.¹⁹ However, Qatar denied all these accusations, and some of them failed to be verified or were proved false.

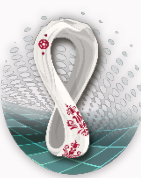
The Israeli Presence in Qatar

Qatar's organization of the World Cup was an opportunity for the Israeli diplomacy to test its relations with Qatar. Given that FIFA stipulates that no restrictions should be placed on anyone to attend sporting activities organized by the Federation, Qatar agreed to allow Israelis to attend via commercial transport planes and to grant them entry visas.²⁰ It also allowed the presence of an Israeli consular office in Doha throughout the period of the matches, as well as, Israeli satellite channels and press, not to mention the 15 thousand Israelis who requested to attend.²¹

However, linking the Israelis' entrance to Qatar to the conditions of FIFA is inconsistent with the Qatari policy before the World Cup. For within Israel's policy of normalization with the Arab world, Israeli sports teams participated in 12 sports events in Qatar since 2008, as the following table shows:²²

Table 1: Israeli Participation in Sports Tournaments in Qatar

Year	Israeli participation in Qatar
2008	Table Tennis
2012	Table Tennis
2014	Swimming
2016	Volleyball
2018	Table Tennis
2018	Handball
2018	Gymnastics
2018	Horse Riding
2019	Gymnastics (Israeli anthem was played)
2019	Various sports for world champions
2021	Judo
2021	Gymnastics



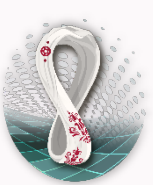
The fragility of this justification, i.e., FIFA's requirements, is reinforced by examining the Israeli-Qatari relations diplomatically and economically, in addition to the Israeli participation in sports events as mentioned above. The first public Qatari-Israeli relations began in 1996, when a commercial office for Israel was inaugurated by former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres in Doha, which he visited also in 2007, in addition to Al-Jazeera offices. In 2008, Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak met former Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa Al Thani, and the former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni met the Emir of Qatar, and she visited Doha in the same year.²³ Other manifestations of the relation include Al-Jazeera's hosting of Shimon Peres, besides its continuous hosting of Israeli journalists and commentators,²⁴ even after the killing of its correspondent, Shireen Abu Akleh, by Israeli soldiers in May 2022. Also, Qatar assisted in transferring Yemeni Jews to Israel in 2013.²⁵ All of this means that the sports relationship with politics has preceded the organization of the World Cup in Doha by about a quarter of a century, which makes the Qatari justification of hosting the Israelis based on FIFA's conditions insufficient.

Notably, the sports phenomenon is of a controversial nature like any social or political phenomenon. It was noticed that Israeli, and some Western media focused on the political aspect, rather on the sports' one, during this international event, like the "Arab popular rejection of Israel," the popular refusal to communicate with the Israeli media, the presence of the Palestine issue through Palestinian symbols (keffiyeh, Palestinian flags, etc.) carried by Arabs and others, as well as, singing and chanting in support of the Palestinians.²⁶



It is necessary to consider two issues regarding the Israeli coverage of this sporting event:

- 1. The permanent evocation of the popular Arab and Islamic rejection of Israel on the one hand, and obscuring the indications of Israeli presence in Qatar, which is within the increasing policies of Arab normalization on the other hand. The first aspect (popular rejection) is an issue which the Israeli media and intellectual elite are already aware of, not to mention the decision-makers in the previous and current right-wing government, as Arab and international opinion polls confirm this constantly. Thus, it is not a scientific discovery, and it is sufficient to review these polls to make sure that

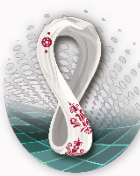


such popular stances were way before the World Cup Qatar,²⁷ not to mention that in the past few years, in more than 50 incidents, dozens of Arab and Muslim athletes refused to participate in competitions with Israelis. It seems that focusing on the popular Arab rejection of normalization leads to two contradictory results:

- a. Focusing on the Arab public hostility to Israel attempts to perpetuate a negative image of Arab society's attitudes towards "peace," in order to strengthen the extremist popular base in Israel. Hence, serving the Israeli right policies and broadening its voter base.
 - b. The corresponding result in this matter is that the Arab public opinion shows the Arab political regimes the wide gap between their orientations towards Israel and that of the Arab public, hence, the resistance orientations are supported.
- 2. Disregarding the continuation of Qatari-Israeli normalization falls, in my estimation, within the framework of "proxy diplomacy," which seeks to provide an atmosphere of communication between opponents in international conflicts. In this kind of diplomacy, the country offers benefits and has positive attitudes towards the two conflicting parties, so as to be accepted as a channel of communication between them, in return the "proxy diplomacy" country expects both parties to support it in critical moments. Thus, sports normalization is part of proxy diplomacy on the one hand, and the soft power of this country, on the other.

Accordingly, the intensification of Israeli propaganda about Arab and Islamic hostility aimed at perpetuating the Israeli society's inclination towards more extremism against Arabs, and absenting the issue of continuing Qatari-Israeli normalization, which is useful for Qatari SD.

Absenting the Arab normalization with Israel amidst the fervor for sports competitions also manifested when the Arab popular enthusiasm for the distinguished performance of the Moroccan team in World Cup Qatar obscured the announcement of the Israeli energy company "NewMed Energy" that it has signed an agreement with the Moroccan Ministry of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development for exploration and production of natural gas in Western Sahara near the city of Boujdour on the Atlantic Ocean. Also, in concurrence with sports fervor for the achievements of the Moroccan team, the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics announced an increase in trade exchange between Morocco and Israel by 25% in the first 10 months of 2022



compared to the same period in 2021,²⁸ and the ratification by both Israel and the UAE, during the same period, of the comprehensive economic partnership agreement which eliminates or reduces tax fees on 96% of trade exchanged between the two sides.²⁹ Thus, “Arab jubilation” over the good organization of the World Cup and the “euphoria over the football performance of the Moroccan team” were employed to cover up Israel’s continued penetration into the Arab political and economic body. This is the essence of one of the SD dimensions; using “pleasure to numb the pain.”

Iranian Presence in Qatar

The presence of the Iranian team in the World Cup competitions in Qatar raised political issues that various parties sought to exploit, evident in the following:

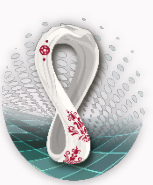
- ▶ 1. Linking the results of the Iranian team’s matches, especially the first match with Britain, to the political turmoil in Iran. The media, especially the Gulf, British, American and Israeli media, reported on joyous demonstrations by the Iranian opposition at home and abroad because of the heavy defeat of the Iranian national team.³⁰ Some focused on the incident when the Iranian team did not sing the country’s national anthem in the first match.³¹



- ▶ 2. The emergence of demands from several parties to prevent Iran from participating in the FIFA World Cup in Doha because of the “Iranian government’s policies towards the people.” These calls came from Iranian opposition parties, former FIFA officials and various Western parties.³²

Conclusion

Reiterating what Aristotle said that “Man is by nature a political animal,” it means that man cannot separate any of his activities from politics. Consequently, sports, which are viewed as an entertainment tool, have often overlapped with politics, even

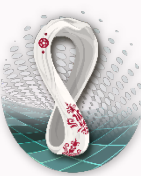


leading sometimes to military engagement, as we mentioned in the case of Honduras and El Salvador.

The SD expression, the establishment of departments in some foreign ministries for SD and the opening of academies and institutions for this style of diplomacy is something that should not be dealt with lightly.

What can be recommended is not to ignore the political side of sports. If sports mean achieving political goals, then Western thought, especially that which considers Machiavelli the pioneer of modern political science, will find nothing wrong with such an approach. Sports may enhance national unity on one hand, or may stir up national and ethnic conflicts and even historical sensitivities, on the other hand. This confirms that sports have more political dimensions than they seem, and this is the embodiment of SD.

The presence of the Israeli public in Qatar is a strategic breach, making Arab normalization with Israel further develop. It will pave the way for the transition of not only having official normalization but also having normalization with the public, even if the latter faces some obstacles. The presence of thousands of Israelis in the streets, hotels and football stadiums for around a month without any of them being subjected to any attack, even a quarrel, reveals the security effort made by the Qatari government to protect them.³³ While this facilitated Israeli presence during the World Cup despite popular rejection, it indicates that security coordination model that protects settlers in the West Bank has moved to other Arab cities, to protect Israeli tourists, merchants, politicians or soldiers.



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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