

# The Pillars of Qatar's International Sport Strategy

Written by Mahfoud Amara

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MAHFOUD AMARA, NOV 29 2013

Since winning the bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, all eyes of the world have turned toward Qatar. While some praise the development as an alternative platform for Qatar (and the region generally) to operate on the global stage, others question the legitimacy of this 'small' country in hosting this mega event. Suspicions are being raised about its lobbying method in sport, business and politics, its (in)tolerance to other cultures (including the consumption of alcohol), and, of course, its hostile summer heat. Yet Qatar's increasing visibility in sport is not a new phenomenon or a product of coincidence; it is rather evidence of a strategic approach that uses sport as a vehicle for development and public relations. This strategy can be divided into four major pillars: 1) the direct investment into sport industry; 2) the hosting of major sports events; 3) elite sport development; and 4) sport diplomacy.

### Investment in Sport Industry

The first pillar is that of the direct investment into sport industry. The past few years has seen Qatar engage in an aggressive campaign of investment in the global business of sport via its sovereign fund, Qatar Sport Investment (QSI). QSI, which was founded in 2005 as a joint initiative between the Qatar Olympic Committee and the Ministry of Finance, has been behind key acquisitions in the sporting world, including the Paris Saint-Germain football club, a sportswear brand (BURRDA), various football television rights for Al Jazeera Sport, as well as the sponsorship of top European clubs such as Barcelona FC (estimated at 30 million euros per year from 2011 to 2016). The 2012 London Olympic Village was sold to the QIA subsidiary Qatari Diar for £557m. The purpose of this investment, as stated by the ruling and business elites, was to help to promote other economic sectors such as retail, property, hospitality and tourism, as part of a wider strategy of reducing dependency on oil and gas, and thus exploring other secure economic ventures worldwide.

The strategy so far has been fruitful. One example is the Qatar-based sport channel, Al Jazeera Sport, which is now dominating the broadcasting rights of major sports competitions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It has recently extended its broadcast rights agreement with FIFA for the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups in Russia and Qatar. The agreement covers cable, satellite, terrestrial, mobile, and broadband internet transmission across twenty-three territories and countries in the MENA region, and the value of the deal was estimated to be in the region of \$1 billion US. The channel is also expanding its market to Europe and the US, competing thus with other major sport networks such as Canal + and ESPN. It has now four subscription-based channels (beIn Sport 1 and 2 in France, and beIn Sport in English and Spanish in the US) (Amara, 2013a).

### Event Hosting and Athlete Development

The organisation of the 2006 Doha Asian Games was a turning point for Qatar's strategy in hosting major sports events. In building up toward the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which will be the first mega sports event to take place in the region, Qatar has been successful in securing the hosting various international sport competitions, such as the 2014 FINA Short Course World Championships, the 2015 IHF Handball World Championships, the 2016 UCI Road Cycling World Championships and the 2018 FIG Artistic World Gymnastics Championships. In analyzing the statements of political leaders, decision makers in sport and the local press, the emerging dominant narratives in relation to the rationale behind staging international sporting events emphasize the following aspects (Amara, 2013b):

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- Qatar's response to globalization trends, which mixes traditional culture with modernity;
- Qatar's adhesion to the universal values of democracy, solidarity and human rights;
- Qatar's respect for cultural differences; and
- Qatar as a meeting point between East and West.

As part of its strategy, Qatar has the ambition to be the hub for sporting excellence in the region. Huge financial resources are being devoted to the building of state-of-the-art sports facilities and centres for elite sport development. Foreign players and coaches are recruited to contribute to the development of performance levels of local leagues and national teams in major sports, particularly in collective sports such as football, handball, basketball and volleyball.

Moreover, sports scientists are recruited from all over the world to support the development of an elite sports system in the country. Aspire Sport Academy and ASPITAR (Qatar's Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital) are the two pillars of this elite development strategy. They are both located in 'Aspire Zone' which is now the centre for the sports industry, elite sport and community sport in Doha. The motto of the Aspire Zone Foundation as stated in its webpage is that, by 2020, "we will be The Reference in Sports Excellence Worldwide".

In addition to the import of skilled migrants in sports, Qatar is also encouraging, via its *Qatarization* policy, the emergence of national coaches, elite athletes and sports administrators. The bronze medallist for Qatar in the 2012 London Olympics Mutaz Essa Barshim, who specialises in the high jump, was the first national to graduate from Aspire Academy to have won a medal in the Olympics. The recent data from Qatar Statistics about teams officials registered at sports federations shows that Qatari are now prominent competitors in a number of sports including handball, football and volleyball (Qatar Statistics Authority, 2011).

## Sport Diplomacy and Place Branding

Sport is an integral part of Qatar's diplomacy, in building alliances with the world of finance and politics and in establishing a presence in terms of international prestige, image-making and branding. Qatar holds decision-making positions in regional, continental, and international sports organisations. The International Centre of Sport Security (ICSS) and the newly-established Qatar Anti-Doping Laboratory are promoting Qatar as an international leader in the protection of international sport integrity, the fight against corruption, exploitation, and doping in sport. *Doha GOALS* (Gathering Of All Leaders in Sports) is becoming an annual occasion to gather world's leaders (in politics, business, media, and of course top stockholders in sport) in Doha to talk about the power of sport in 'bringing cultures together'. Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, during the inaugural speech of last year's forum, presented Qatar as a country where it is possible to reconcile faith, tradition and modernity (Le Nouvel Observateur 2012). To this end, the Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum was recently launched to promote and to protect the heritage of Arab sporting culture.

During the Olympic Games, the centre organised an exhibition (including photographs by Brigitte Lacombe and videos by Marian Lacombe) in the heart of London under the theme of "Arab Women in Sport". This was meant to be a strong message to the international community that Qatar, while being protective of its heritage as an Arab and Muslim country, is open to women in sport. The participation of Qatari women in the Olympic Games for the first time was welcomed by the Olympic movement. Sheikha Mozah bint al-Missned, the wife of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, former Emir of the State of Qatar and the head of the Qatar Foundation, was actively involved in the bidding team for the FIFA World Cup. Among all other bidding countries, she was the only women involved in the final presentation of the bidding file.

However, Qatar's growing influence in sport is not welcomed by everybody. Some analysts go as far as to claim that Qatar's investment in sport cannot be explained in mere economic terms. They argue that it is rather a political phenomenon resulting from the consequences of globalisation, which allows "small-peripheral wealthy countries to

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acquire tremendous political influence" (Borja and Amara, 2013).

## Conclusion

As a consequence of the significant investment in sport and the growing influence of the Al Jazeera News Channel in the Arab World and beyond (El-Oifi, 2011), Qatar has been successful in re-positioning itself as an influential actor in business and politics, and as a new world's destination for sport. Kamrava (2013) describes Qatar in his latest book as a "small state with big politics". Similarly, Qatar is becoming a "small state with a big sport ambition".

However, the branding strategy through sport has also exposed the country to the scrutiny of international media and non-governmental organisations in civil rights and environmental protection. The country is facing a number of challenges in relation to environmental concerns arising from the building of massive sports facilities, while human rights defenders have called for an improvement to the conditions of migrant workers mobilised for the construction of stadia for the World Cup. Concerns have also been raised regarding the employment rights and mobility of foreign professional players.

Questions are also being asked about the sustainability of Qatar's investment strategy in sport, considering the low level of sports participation among Qatari, the huge financial cost to maintain sports facilities, and the relative low-return on investment in relation to sports performance at international level. That being said, one can argue that Qatar, as with any other country, has the right to be ambitious and to protect its national interests. In sporting terms, Qatar wants to have a share of the international sports market, to play an active role in the bidding and staging of international sports events, and to dominate sport performance, at least in the Arabian Peninsula, and to improve its ranking in the Arab World and internationally.

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