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Thierry Côme, Michel Raspaud

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Thierry Côme
University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne
Michel Raspaud
Université Grenoble Alpes

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Cadenza Academic Translations[1]

Sports diplomacy: A strategic challenge for Qatar

The values inherent to sports—universalist, apolitical, hedonistic, behavioral, hygienic—as well as its ability to inspire support, identification, and emotion, make it a fantastic tool of communication.

States have understood this well, and they have long integrated sports into their diplomatic efforts, especially in order to affirm the superiority of their own ideological model (as in the Spartakiades of the Communist countries from 1928, the "Mussolinian" World Cup of 1934, the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, etc).

Sports diplomacy is thus nothing new: it has long been integrated and institutionalized, particularly in France, as a tool of communication and international recognition. Indeed, as introduced by Laurent Fabius in 2014 (along with Valerie Fourneyron, the Minister of Sports at the time), sports diplomacy has become identified with the role of an Ambassador for Sports (Philippe Vinogradoff, since 2016) within the current Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. The ministry's website clearly states that its aim is to promote France's influence in the world, but also its economy, employment, and ability to draw, among other things, big sporting events.

Sports also serves as a means of mediation, making it possible to re-establish broken diplomatic ties, as illustrated by the historic example of ping-pong diplomacy or, very recently, during a moment of heightened tensions, the reunified Korean team at the last Winter Olympics.

For all that, sports diplomacy can also cause a breakdown in communication, especially when the sports values being highlighted (in particular humanism, neutrality, or politically correct moralism) blur the very meaning of the message sent, even emptying it of content. Thus, in June and July of 2018, Russia will become a showcase for democracy, respect for minorities, and gender

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equality, as much as a media platform for the positions of Putin's government. But communication can also break down because of the receiver's inability to decode the meaning(s) of the message sent or to understand the underlying relational, political, and economic issues, as well as the strategy being followed, whether this is because the message is too complex, or because the crowd-pleasing power of sports ("sports, the new opium of the people") is in full force.

The sports diplomacy pursued by the countries of the Persian Gulf, and more specifically by Qatar, constitutes a perfect example of this. For the Gulf States, the medium-term objective is to survive when the oil or gas supply has dried up; the short-term objective is to continue to profit from these without being attacked by their neighbors. In the short term, alliances are necessary. The big military contracts, the Arab sovereign wealth funds and their acquisitions of stakes in Western companies, to some extent binding the economic health of the Western nations to the maintenance of flows of investment, constitute so many diplomatic auxiliaries to hard power (Nye 1990) for the Gulf countries. For this reason, investments in sports clubs, by their image-burnishing and branding effect, form part of this diplomacy of influence as tools of soft power. In the medium term, they must find substitutes for an economy based primarily on oil and invest in new activities. Education, tourism, sustainable development, and new energy sources constitute major objectives of this strategy. While the diplomatic axis relies on image, the security axis relies on technological control. The organization of sporting events in areas as varied as golf (Dubai), Formula 1 (Bahrain, Abu Dhabi), and cycling (Qatar) strongly contributes to this objective through the contacts established in the process of obtaining them and their media effects. Sports diplomacy thus serves these countries as a complement to traditional diplomatic activity within a soft power framework. The situation is quite different for Qatar, which is making sports a central axis of its diplomacy.

Sports: A means for Qatar to earn international recognition

Sports has made it possible for Qatar to earn international recognition after its independence less than half a century ago (1971). The reigning monarchy quickly understood the need to exist on the international level following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, but also because of its geopolitical location, situated between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Admittedly, after Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani's coup against his father (June 27, 1995), the creation of the Al Jazeera media group (November 1996)—which had a relative freedom of tone, following the abolition of the control of information—gave him, and thereby Qatar, an unequaled audience in the Arabic-speaking world, providing it with a high degree of recognition (Talon 2011). Thereafter, Qatar followed a traditional strategy of substitution for its all-gas economy, via the sovereign wealth fund Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), created in 2005: the investment of petrodollars in a wide variety of companies on five continents (Barthe 2012) allowed it to diversify the economy while making the State more secure via its international partnerships. Qatar also engages in a traditional strategy of partnerships, particularly in terms of military strategy, with the Western countries, playing on their rivalry in order to obtain security pledges.

But the Qatari authorities went beyond these strategies when they decided to develop a diplomatic strategy relying on a henceforth universal language requiring no translation: sports. This primary objective of gaining recognition via sports has been achieved gradually.

It has been achieved through the participation of some of its nationals in international sports authorities, such as Mohamed bin Hammam, president of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), who joined the executive committee of the International Federation of Association

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Football (FIFA) in 1996, within which he has since played a decisive role. In the same way, the current Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, has been a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) since 2002.

The decisive impetus, however, came with his father's ascent to power in 1995, aiming at making sports a priority axis of local socioeconomic development, with a double objective: to encourage Qataris to practice sports and, most importantly to affirm the nation's place on the international diplomatic stage through the organization of major sporting events (Légisport 2017). Over time, these events have taken on more and more importance as a means of communication due to media globalization. Thus, after the first men's tennis open in Doha (1993), a women's version was created (2001), then the Qatar Athletic Super Grand Prix was established in Doha (since 1997), which is one of the fourteen competitions of the IAAF Diamond League; there followed the organization of the Asian Games, again in Doha (2006),[2] and the World Men's Handball Championship, to be followed by the World Athletics Championships, also in Doha, in 2019. Increasingly ambitious, Doha has already announced its candidacy for the organization of the Summer Olympic Games twice, bidding for the competitions of 2016 (Rio de Janeiro) and 2020 (Tokyo), without success, for now.

However, the event that has been written about the most is the organization of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. While this was plainly obtained by a strategy of intense lobbying (with corruption strongly suspected) on the part of the Qatari member of the FIFA executive committee, with the complicity of its then president (Blake and Calvert 2016), it will constitute the peak of Qatari sports diplomacy, since it will be the first World Cup to be held in an Arab country (moreover, in a geographically and demographically tiny country).

Sports: A tool of influence for Qatar

But Qatar's diplomacy and its instrumentalization of sports go well beyond this international recognition and the assertion of its place (and thus of its independence) in the concert of nations. Sports serves to increase its influence in Western countries, directly among the populations of these countries. Direct investment in professional sports is favored, in particular the acquisition of major football clubs like Malaga (2010) and especially Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), which was bought by Qatar Sports Investments (QSI). Nasser Al-Khelaifi, a former tennis player, is the president of both QSI and PSG. Above all, however, it is the creation of a media empire based on sports broadcasting that has increased Qatar's recognition and positive image beyond all measure. Thus, the Al Jazeera Sport chain was launched in 2003 (today beIN Media Group), of which Nasser Al-Khelaifi is also the president. The group became purchaser for the French territory of Ligue 1 football until 2020, the UEFA Champions League (2012–2015), but especially of the 2018 and 2022 World Cups.[3] This influence strategy carries significant costs. Thus, PSG invested more than 400 million euros to build a competitive team. The rewards on the pitch are rather unpredictable, as PSG has still not gone beyond the quarterfinals of the UEFA Champions League. But the rewards in terms of recognition and positive image are palpable. PSG's image is improving and was even greater than that of Olympique de Marseille in 2017, and Qatar's investment in football is regarded favorably.

But the communications policy in force has both short term economic objectives and objectives in terms of the country's post-petroleum survival. The infrastructures built as much for sporting events as for practice and research (especially for anti-doping control, physical training, etc.), organizational and event-driven competencies, and the media are so many elements making it possible to develop

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an economy based on sports and sports tourism that can ensure a future for this small country when the natural gas reserves are exhausted.

Certainly, there is a will to attract a great number of young athletes from developing countries, to train them (the Aspire program), to naturalize a certain number of stars (as with handball players in preparation for the 2015 World Men's Handball Championship), but the results remain for the moment anecdotal. Thus, the Aspire Zone is a luxurious sporting complex created in 2003, which occupies 250 hectares, among many facilities (Khalifa International Stadium, an Olympic swimming pool, the Aspetar clinic, etc); it includes the Aspire Academy, whose function is to train the Qatari sports elite (usually of foreign origin, as indicated above).[4]

Nonetheless, the formation of a national team, delivering results in international competitions and allowing the country to assert its power, which is the goal of most national sports policies, is only a secondary goal for Qatar.

This is not the case with Qatar's interest in the performance of the clubs in which it has invested, as these are an assertion of regional superiority, as shown by the rivalry between Manchester City and PSG.[5] The latter carries considerable symbolic and communicational importance in the overall Qatari strategy. Indeed, as Nabil Ennasri, director of the Qatar Observatory, emphasizes: "football is the second religion of the Middle East. If the national team fails to shine, PSG will do so in its place. And Tamim will be able to hold his head high" (Barthe and Dupré 2017).

By means of the soft power that sports diplomacy constitutes, Qatar thus seeks to enhance its recognition, to increase the current of global sympathy toward it, to render itself to some extent essential to sports authorities by means of its financing (through sponsorships such as the Qatar-Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, or Qatar Airways' major partnership with the Tour de France), but also to consolidate its financial and geopolitical positions by diversifying its economy for the sake of its own future.

Qatar's sports diplomacy: A sports-based communication strategy undermined by respect for sports values

Sports diplomacy must make it possible for Qatar to construct (or even to co-construct with its interlocutors) a brand identity, further guaranteeing its longevity and independence. By using sports, Qatari diplomacy does not directly implicate the State but manufactures an image considerably more important and effective in terms of independence than the extreme military policy of the other countries of the Gulf. However, the media exposure this entails compels it to evolve, whether slowly or more quickly, in accordance with sports values.

Indeed, sports functions according to a principle of transparency through performance under the unmediated public gaze in the stadium, within the framework of compliance with democratic and, above all, fair rules: the same rules for all, equal opportunity at the beginning, the presence of approved but independent referees to ratify results. This universalist character of sports (practiced under the auspices of federations following the same rules everywhere in the world) constitutes a communication system in itself.

However, Qatar's disproportionate investment in sports diplomacy can exercise a perverse effect on communications and turn against it. Such was the case with the handball team, a finalist against France during the 2015 World Championship organized in Qatar: out of seventeen players selected, twelve were naturalized (some Bosnians, a Frenchman, a Cuban, a Montenegrin, an Egyptian, etc.). The sarcastic remarks of the international press, emphasizing that the Qatari national team was

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mainly composed of "mercenaries," rankled the local sports authorities (Barthe 2017).

We can thus see that the messaging has backfired, as in the case of PSG's purchase of the contract of Brazilian footballer Neymar from FC Barcelona for the sum of 222 million euros in August 2017. Beyond its sporting ambition to strengthen the team with an eye toward winning the Champions League, Qatar was also concerned with generating positive news coverage after having been ostracized by its own allies among the Gulf States, who accused it of colluding with Iran and funding terrorism. Nevertheless, the major European clubs (Real Madrid, Juventus, FC Barcelona, etc) saw this transaction as an affront, and were sickened by the nouveau riche behavior of PSG and its Qatari president (Barthe and Dupré 2017). This did not prevent all of them from donning jerseys sponsored by Gulf companies: Fly Emirates for Arsenal, Real Madrid, and PSG itself; Etihad for Manchester City; Qatar Airways for AS Roma, and even FC Barcelona, which ended its tradition of a jersey free from commercial sponsors for a deal with the Qatar Foundation and its thirty million dollars per annum (2011–2016).

However, the risk of sports diplomacy backfiring and causing misunderstandings probably lies in the organization of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. The sum of current investment in all of the infrastructures needed to organize the event (stadia, of course, but also airport, subway, tram line, hotels, hospitals, etc.) is colossal. Qatar thus prides itself on spending 500 million dollars a week for an astronomical total budget of 200 billion dollars, the highest ever, including some ten billion for the stadia (Barthe 2017).[6]

But the major obsession, regarding the contents of the message conveyed by this sports diplomacy, consists in the fact that this World Cup is at the same time a logistical triumph and a sporting debacle, a flawless organization but a soulless team, top-flight facilities for a bottom-rung team that will be eliminated in the first round:[7] "The symbolism of the contrast is devastating. It reduces the little monarchy to a caricature that it so desperately wants to leave behind, that of the 'fake,' the artificial, stuffed with petrodollars" (Barthe 2017).

Sports diplomacy and social reality in Qatar

The positive message of sports diplomacy also runs up against the social realities of a country comprising three hundred thousand Qataris and more than two million immigrant workers, many among them originally from Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, at work on the many construction sites. They are subjected to two major hardships: working conditions and trade-union rights on the one hand, and the *kafala* on the other hand (the system of sponsorship that binds workers to their employers).

Although a Workers' Charter has been drawn up by Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, this "is neither a law nor a decree. It is a mere commercial arrangement between Qatar and its clients" laments James Lynch of Amnesty International (Barthe 2014a). Moreover, it only covers workers assigned to the construction of the stadia. Additionally, Qatar has not released statistics concerning the deaths of workers on the construction sites since 2012. During that year, the Qatari authorities reported 520 deaths in the Indian, Nepalese, and Bangladeshi communities, which supply three quarters of the immigrant workforce (Barthe 2017b). Concerning these deaths, the majority of the certificates mention "heart attack" or "respiratory failure." This makes it possible to not attribute these deaths to the brutal working conditions. Thus, for 2016, Qatar declared "only" thirty-five deaths of foreign workers following an accident at a construction site.

As for the *kafala*, all workers are subject to the conditions: thus, French footballer Zahir Belounis (2015)

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and French football manager Stéphane Morello (2015) were held for eighteen months and five years respectively because of disputes or simply administrative problems with the local authorities. While some advances have been made on this front, it remains true that "one feels that Qatar wants to abolish the word *kafala*, but that it is not ready to abolish the reality that it entails," as Nicholas McGeehan of Human Rights Watch put it (Barthe 2014b).

In an interview, Pascal Boniface highlighted that "sports can make power sympathetic and popular. The display of military power elicits fear, and that can lead to rejection. But not the victory of an athlete" (Delteuil 2016). But Qatar is playing through sporting proxies, since, in spite of all its efforts, it scarcely has the demographic dimensions needed to produce its own champions in abundance. The messaging is then undermined by the sums invested in grandiose projects that lack the ability to win public sympathy for the expression of a nouveau riche power that the little emirate presents, all the less so since the media exposure that comes hand in hand with these sporting events spreads awareness of the massive inequalities in the distribution of this wealth.

NOTES

1. Translator's note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.
2. This drew 9,520 athletes from 45 nations for 424 events in thirty-nine sports.
3. beIN Sports boasts 3.5 million French subscribers (*Le Figaro*, September 15, 2017).
4. The only big sports star of Qatari origin is the high jumper Mutaz Essa Barshim, gold medalist at the 2014 IAAF World Indoor Championships and the 2017 World Championships, bronze medalist at the London Olympic Games (2012) and silver medalist at Rio (2016).
5. Since 2008, Manchester City has been the property of Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a member of the royal family of Abu Dhabi.
6. The 2018 World Cup will have cost ten billion euros. See Emmanuel Botta, "Très chère coupe du monde de football en Russie," *L'Express*, December 3, 2017, available at: https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/sport/football/tres-chere-coupe-du-monde-de-football-2018_1965083.html.
7. Qatar's national team has never qualified for a World Cup, not even at the Russia World Cup of 2018.

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A B S T R A C T

Sports, driven by its humanitarian values and its ability to inspire support, identification, and emotion, has become a communication tool for the diplomatic aims of many countries (China, Korea, Russia, and, more recently, countries of the Persian Gulf). Sports is a tool for a diplomacy of influence and mediation. Qatar is noteworthy in having gone beyond this, making sports a major diplomatic axis that provides the country with international recognition, affirming its role as a regional player and contributing to its security, becoming a sort of all-purpose safety valve for tension in the short and medium term. Qatar's sports diplomacy delivers a positive message that can nevertheless be undermined by the contradiction between the values of sports that are emphasized (respect, progress, fairness, etc.) and the social and political situation in a country where labor rights and the status of women and foreigners remain problematic. This contradiction has been revealed in the preparations for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which have shed light on the *kafala* system in particular.

Thierry Côme *is a lecturer in management science, a specialist in public management, working for the Unité de Formation et de Recherche Sciences et Techniques des Activités Physiques et Sportives (UFR STAPS) (Department of Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sports Activities) at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne, and co-editor of* Esthétiques de la ville, équipements et usages *(Harmattan, "Local & Global" series, 2014) and* Management de la diversité culturelle: quels enjeux en Europe? *(Bruylandt, "Identités et cultures en Europe" series, 2012).*

Michel Raspaud *is a sociologist and professor of sports science and technology at Université Grenoble Alpes. He is the author of* L'Aventure himalayenne. Les enjeux des expéditions sur les plus hautes montagnes du monde, 1880-2000 *(Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2003),* Histoire du football au Brésil *(Chandeigne, 2010), and* Le Sport au Brésil, XIX^{e}-XXI^{e} siècles *(Chandeigne, 2016).*

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