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# The soft power–soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar

PAUL MICHAEL BRANNAGAN AND RICHARD GIULIANOTTI

In 2010, the state of Qatar became the smallest, and the first ever Middle Eastern, country to win the rights to hold the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup (to be staged in 2022). Then, in 2011, Al Jazeera, the state-funded international news broadcaster, won the Royal Television Society's 2012 'News Channel of the Year' award for its coverage of the Arab Spring.[1] In 2015, the state-sponsored Qatar Investment Authority became the majority shareholder in the UK property developer the Canary Wharf Group, adding to its growing portfolio of high-status assets, which already included Barclays, Miramax Films and Royal Dutch Shell.[2] And in 2017, the state-owned Qatar Airways was named 'the world's top airline' in the annual Skytrax World Airline Awards for its high levels of passenger 'service excellence'.[3] Collectively, these episodes appear to reflect Qatar's success in pursuing a new, high-profile image as an ambitious, pioneering and vital actor in international affairs.[4] Consequently, several academics have pointed to Qatar as a powerful illustration of how states seek to exercise 'soft power', defined as the 'ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion' within the global arena.[5]

While agreeing that this exemplifies how states pursue transnational appeal, we argue here that Qatar also highlights the complexities and reversibility of soft power, as well as the fuzziness of the concept *per se*. For example, as we go on to show, the 2022 World Cup, although largely intended to position Qatar as an attractive global tourist destination, has also unintentionally drawn international attention to the state's human rights record.[6] Moreover, in 2017, Qatar's closest Gulf neighbours severed diplomatic links with the state, primarily on the grounds

[1] Diana Bosio, 'How Al Jazeera reported the Arab Spring: a preliminary analysis', *Media Asia* 40: 4, 2013, pp. 333–43.

[2] Rhiannon Curry, 'Qataris own more of London than the Queen', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 March 2017, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2017/03/17/qataris-london-queen/. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 4 July 2018.)

[3] 'The world's top 10 airlines 2017', Skytrax, n.d., http://www.worldairlineawards.com/the-worlds-top-10-airlines-2017/

[4] Lina Khatib, 'Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism', *International Affairs* 83: 2, March 2013, pp. 417–31.

[5] Richard Keohane and Joseph Nye, 'Power and independence in the information age', *Foreign Affairs* 77: 5, 1998, pp. 81–94 at p. 86.

[6] James Montague, 'A respite of soccer for Qatar's laborers', *New York Times*, 23 April 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/24/sports/soccer/world-cup-qatar-laborers-workers-cup.html.

*International Affairs* **94**: 5 (2018) 1139–1157; DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiy125
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of its alleged support for various Islamist groups—despite Qatar garnering international praise for mediation work in the region.[7] In short, Qatar shows us that soft power strategies in sport, media, travel and tourism and other fields may also have unintended and weakening consequences; in other words, that these strategies may produce 'soft disempowerment'. Crucially, in the academic context, the processes by which soft power and soft disempowerment intersect and interact have remained largely unidentified, and essentially unexamined.

In responding to this broad gap in knowledge, this article sets out to achieve three interrelated ends. First, and most significantly, we seek to introduce a systematic framework for examining the nexus of soft power and soft disempowerment. Our motivation for identifying and conceptualizing the 'soft power–soft disempowerment nexus' lies in the lack of specific recognition and examination of the variety of outcomes, including negative outcomes, that soft power strategies may have. We intend this analytical model to be applied in diverse international contexts for the analysis of soft power strategies, relations and outcomes. Second, we seek to advance our conceptualization of soft disempowerment *per se* in order to understand better how such negative scrutiny materializes, and in what ways it threatens and impedes states' endeavours to wield international power. Finally, we deploy Qatar as our illustrative case-study in order to develop and demonstrate our analytical model, as well as to provide a nuanced account of how the state's soft power strategies have had empowering and disempowering effects—with, in respect of the latter, a particular focus on the widespread negative scrutiny prompted by the state's endeavours in global sport and, specifically, its acquisition of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Before setting out our theoretical model, we first examine the key aspects and criticisms of soft power, and establish the national context of Qatar.

## The concept of soft power

In coining the term 'soft power' in 1990, the American political scientist Joseph Nye sought to respond to two interlinked shifts in relationships between states and international society. First, following advances in global communications, a growing range of actors—states, non-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, specific media companies and various social movements—had gained the capacity to collate, shape and distribute ever-expanding volumes of information to different audiences.[8] Second, these diverse actors were transforming how political powers are acquired and exercised. On the one hand, the new information age was leading to state behaviour being subject to a greater degree of inspection and scrutiny; on the other, an informational 'paradox of plenty' was emerging. The result was that it became progressively more important for states to promote

[7] Elizabeth Dickinson, 'Qatar builds a brand as mediator', *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 March 2012, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0328/Qatar-builds-a-brand-as-mediator; see also Mehran Kamrava, 'Mediation and Qatari foreign policy', *Middle East Journal* 65: 4, 2011, pp. 539–56.

[8] Joseph Nye, 'The information revolution and American soft power', *Asia Pacific Review* 9: 1, 2002, pp. 60–76, and 'The decline of America's soft power: why Washington should worry', *Foreign Affairs* 83: 3, 2004, pp. 16–20.



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their legitimacy and attractiveness, yet increasingly harder for national leaders to do so successfully amid the ever-increasing 'white noise' of diverse information from state and non-state actors.[9]

In this context, Nye argues, a new variant of international politics has emerged, not solely based on the 'hard power' of financial incentive or military force, but focused more on the 'soft power' of reputational management. The state exercises soft power by adapting international agendas to shape the preferences and behaviours of others in line with its own strategic interests, for example by gaining the admiration of others through cultural achievements, educational performance or sporting success. Importantly, soft power does not replace or eradicate hard power; the two usually operate together in interdependent ways—for example, through a state's high spending on infrastructure to host major cultural or sporting events. Thus, Nye suggests that states should look to combine soft power with hard power, to acquire and to exercise 'smart power'.[10]

Crucially, soft power is not simply a form of 'nation branding'. The latter is, at its core, focused on simply 'raising awareness of a country'.[11] In contrast, soft power aligns more with strategies of 'public diplomacy', which also include creating and maintaining mutual understandings, long-lasting relationships and active cooperation. While branding *informs* others of national uniqueness, public diplomacy seeks to *exercise influence* by building positive and resilient affiliations, which other parties consider to be attractive and valuable. Subsequently, if a state's culture, values or policies are not attractive to others, no soft power will be gained.

The concept of soft power has undergone critical analysis by a wide range of academics, journalists and politicians on a number of fronts. In the context of this article, four key points emerge from these critical debates. First, most research on soft power has centred on large and/or developed nations, notably in North America, Europe, east Asia and the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China). Second, although Nye offers examples of state soft power in action, scholars have called for greater clarity and academic refinement of the concept, noting a lack of consideration of different power outcomes.[12] Third, given Nye's predominant use of examples from the United States, others have suggested that he produces an Americanized understanding of soft power, and hence a narrow account of what the 'attractive' features of non-American states may include.[13] Finally, through our own investigations into global sport, we have argued elsewhere that more consideration is needed of the risk of unforeseen contingencies and unintended outcomes, when states risk a loss of attractiveness or credibility, leading to their

[9] Nye, 'The information revolution and American soft power'.
[10] Nye, 'The decline of America's soft power'.
[11] Gyorgy Szondi, *Public diplomacy and nation branding: conceptual similarities and differences* (Antwerp: Clingendael, 2008), p. 16.
[12] Janice Billy Mattern, 'Why "soft power" isn't so soft: representational force and the sociolinguistic construction of attraction in world politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33: 3, 2005, pp. 583–612; Ying Fan, 'Soft power: power of attraction or confusion?', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 4: 2, 2008, pp. 147–58.
[13] Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, 'American primacy in perspective', *Foreign Affairs* 81: 4, 2002, pp. 20–33; Geun Lee, 'A theory of soft power and Korea's soft power strategy', *Korean Journal of Defence Analysis* 21: 2, 2009, pp. 205–19.



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*soft disempowerment*.[14] Drawing on our short case-study of Qatar in subsequent sections, we respond directly to these criticisms, refining the concept of soft power to take account of variegated power outcomes, and focusing on a small state and a non-American context, in order to advance a theoretical model of the soft power–soft disempowerment nexus.

## The state of Qatar

Qatar, a sovereign Arab state, is situated on the Arabian peninsula of the Persian Gulf, and was a British protectorate from 1916 until gaining independence in 1971. Since then, it has been ruled as an absolute monarchy under the leadership of the Al Thani dynasty, members of which have occupied key national political positions since the mid-nineteenth century. The state is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an interstate grouping of neighbouring countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—with the goal of ensuring a stable and positive environment for fast-paced national and regional development. Qatar is one of the smallest states in Asia, covering an area of just 4,416 square miles and with a population of 2.6 million inhabitants, 88 per cent of whom are migrant workers.[15] Qatar is also one of the world's wealthiest countries, with annual GDP per capita of £96,827, more than double that of the United States (£43,633) in 2016.[16] Following the discovery of major offshore oil and gas fields in the 1960s, Qatar has become one of the world's largest producers of crude oil and the leading exporter of liquefied natural gas, supplying on average 30 per cent of annual worldwide total gas demand.[17]

Qatar's strategy of national modernization and global integration began in the 1980s, culminating in a bloodless *coup d'état* in 1995, when Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani seized power from his father.[18] In 2013, in a move seldom witnessed anywhere in the Middle East, the reigning emir voluntarily abdicated, handing power to his son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who has since continued the modernization agenda. Consequently, throughout the rule of both Sheikh Tamim and his father, Qataris have lived through unparalleled rates of change, particularly evident in the transformation of the capital Doha from a poor, pearl-fishing town into a globally recognized metropolis. By 2017, over £350 million was being spent weekly on urban infrastructure projects,[19] including roads, hotels

[14] Paul Michael Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti, 'Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals', *Leisure Studies* 34: 6, 2015, pp. 703–19.

[15] Allen James Fromherz, *Qatar: a modern history* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012); Jure Snoj, *Population of Qatar by nationality—2017 report*, Priya DSouza Communications, 7 Feb. 2017, http://priyadsouza.com/population-of-qatar-by-nationality-in-2017/.

[16] World Bank, *GDP per capita, 2016*, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?view=chart%2C&year_high_desc=true.

[17] Zahraa Alkhalisi, 'Qatar flaunts gas strength with plans to boost output', CNN, 4 July 2017, http://money.cnn.com/2017/07/04/news/qatar-increases-gas-production/index.html.

[18] Mehran Kamrava, 'Royal factionalism and political liberalization in Qatar', *Middle East Journal* 63: 3, 2009, pp. 401–420; David B. Roberts, *Qatar: securing the global ambitions of a city-state* (London: Hurst, 2017), and 'Understanding Qatar's foreign policy objectives', *Mediterranean Politics* 17: 2, 2012, pp. 233–9.

[19] 'Qatar spending $500 million a week on World Cup infrastructure projects', BBC, 8 Feb. 2017, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38905510.



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and sports facilities, as well as an entire new city (Lusail) which, on completion in 2019, will house an expected 250,000 inhabitants. The modernization programme, including these infrastructure projects, is largely being implemented by expatriate workers, most of whom come from some of the poorest areas of south and south-east Asia.

Qatar's international endeavours have generated especially keen public, political and academic interest. Scholars largely identify three interlinked drivers for Qatar's foreign policy. First, and typically for a small state, Qatar is seeking to enlarge its global presence primarily to safeguard its security in relation to larger neighbours.[20] Second, it is seeking to become a key regional tourist centre,[21] in part to diversify the national economy, 55 per cent of which is centred on natural resource sales. Third, there is a widely held view that Qatar is embarked on a concerted pursuit of international soft power. For example, Antwi-Boateng points to Qatar's mediation in regional conflicts as evidence of its exerting 'soft power influence in a troubled region';[22] similarly, Nuruzzaman argues that Al Jazeera and the Qatar Investment Authority are deftly wielded as 'soft power tools' in international affairs.[23]

In order to understand how these 'tools' generate particular outcomes in Qatar and in other settings, we now turn to our soft power–soft disempowerment nexus.

## Power and the 'soft power–soft disempowerment nexus'

In the following sections of the article, we examine how soft power and soft disempowerment are intertwined. The nexus which we set out schematically in figure 1 has emerged from our research into Qatar's soft power endeavours, and into the ways in which national leaders exercise soft power through the staging of international sporting events.[24] In figure 1, we have numbered the stages of soft power pursuit in order to pinpoint which part is under discussion. This is not to suggest that the nexus always works sequentially, as a state's soft power strategy may emerge from—and, at times, increase—the desire to overcome instances of disempowerment. Germany's soft power strategy, for instance, has been built largely on the aim to rid the country of its historical association with Nazism,[25] while Japan's contemporary 'hip and cool' soft power image has sought in part to counteract the country's reputation for militarism and protectionist economics.[26]

[20] Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: small state, big politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
[21] Hanan Hazime, 'From city branding to e-brands in developing countries: an approach to Qatar and Abu Dhabi', *African Journal of Business Management* 5: 12, 2011, pp. 4731–45.
[22] Osman Antwi-Boateng, 'The rise of Qatar as a soft power and the challenges', *European Scientific Journal* 9: 10, 2014, pp. 39–51 at p. 39.
[23] Mohammed Nuruzzaman, 'Qatar and the Arab Spring: down the foreign policy slope', *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8: 2, 2015, pp. 226–38 at p. 227.
[24] Jonathan Grix and Paul Michael Brannagan, 'Of mechanisms and myths: conceptualising states' "soft power" strategies through sports mega-events', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 27: 2, 2016, pp. 251–72.
[25] Jonathan Grix and Barrie Houlihan, 'Sports mega-events as part of a nation's soft power strategy: the cases of Germany (2006) and the UK (2012)', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 16: 4, 2014, pp. 572–96.
[26] Peng Lam, 'Japan's quest for "soft power": attraction and limitation', *East Asia* 24: 4, 2007, pp. 349–63.



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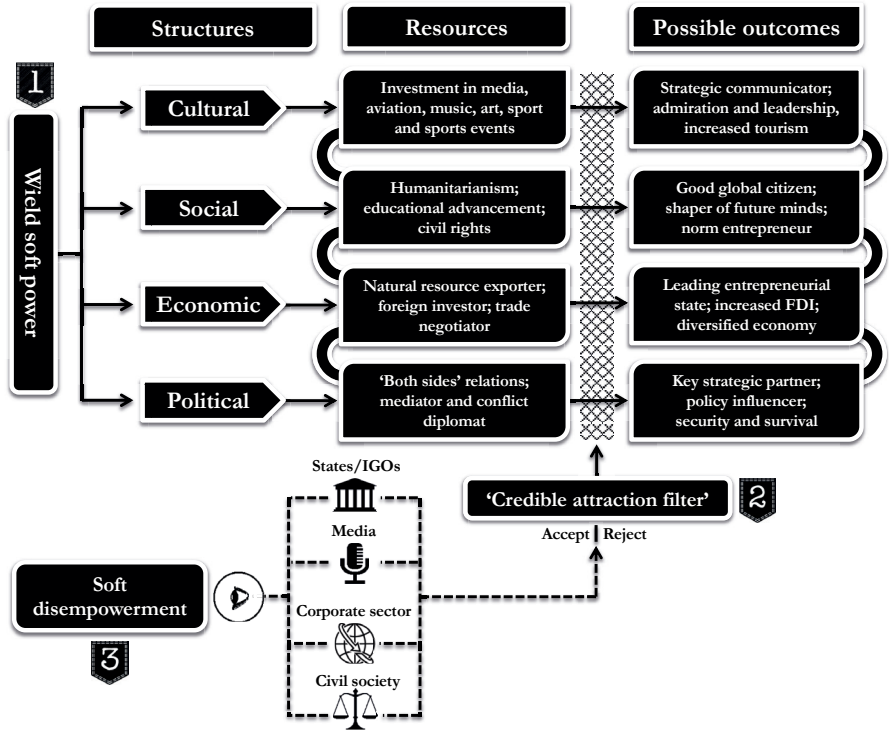
**Figure 1: The soft power–soft disempowerment nexus and Qatar's soft power strategy**




In what follows we focus on the three stages that are crucial to the process of soft power acquisition by a state: the ways in which states' soft power resources lead to possible power outcomes (stage 1); the ways in which conversion of these resources into successful outcomes depend on the (inter)subjectivities of soft power audiences (stage 2); and the impact of soft disempowerment (stage 3) on audience evaluations of foreign and domestic policies. The genesis of this schema lies in our view of soft power as a type of competitive game that, in the contemporary context of highly advanced global communication technologies, needs to be played by states seeking influence in international affairs. At stage 1, what we call 'positioning' occurs: at this point, as in any competitive environment, participants maximize their resources, position themselves *vis-à-vis* other competitors, and identify how best to use these means to gain advantages over others. In soft power terms, successful positioning depends on being considered 'attractive' by others in various ways. 'Attraction' is, of course, dependent on intersubjective and cultural factors; thus states need to make strategic choices in identifying whom they are seeking to attract, and what will be deemed attractive by these audiences. At this point, the 'credible attraction filter' (stage 2) comes into play. Crucially, this filter pinpoints the need to see soft power as an intersubjective and relational process that requires a shared understanding of the constitution of both 'attraction' and 'credibility'. Finally, in all competitive environments, participants will seek to gain from any potential weaknesses that opponents may have. At this point,



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soft disempowerment (stage 3) enters the fray, as other competitors (states, the media, corporate entities and non-governmental organizations) publicly shame opponents for any perceived immoral, unethical and/or illegitimate (in)actions; in doing so, these actors force audiences—who ultimately determine success—to re-evaluate and potentially to criticize states within the game. This is not to suggest that the global pursuit of soft power is a neo-mercantilist, zero-sum game. States may act collectively in ways that mutually increase their soft power before global audiences. Moreover, states also wield certain shades and degrees of soft power, while the materialization of soft disempowerment depends, of course, on the perceptions of specific audiences. Nonetheless, our key observation is that, for soft power to take shape, states must generate greater public attention and interest, which, in turn, afford competing players increased opportunities to locate and highlight any perceived 'failings'.

In using Qatar as our case-study through which to demonstrate the above nexus, we begin with stage 1 (figure 1), identifying the state's cultural, social, economic and political structures, its substantive resources and possible outcomes. 'Structures' refer to interrelated parts of something which come together to make up a whole; in our model, they are the cultural, social, economic and political elements that combine to form a state's overall soft power portfolio. 'Resources' are the tangible and intangible vehicles through which power is conveyed; in soft power terms, they are the core ingredients which form the identity of a given state, such as its amenities, ideals, values, institutions and accomplishments, and its relationships with others. 'Outcomes' are the (positive or negative) cognitive, emotive and/or behavioural responses to these resources. Importantly, state soft power resources and outcomes do not operate in mutual isolation: a strong domestic financial sector (economic) can, for example, help to facilitate sports events and tourism (cultural), to support humanitarian international policies (social) and to enhance involvement in conflict resolution (political).[27]

We differentiate 'resources' from 'outcomes' in stage 1 to clarify the concept of soft power and better understand how states exercise influence. We agree with those who suggest that, through his predominant focus on state soft power resources, Nye offers an agent-centred account of power, and, in doing so, pays too little attention to how resources actually convert into intended structural outcomes.[28] Reducing power to *either* its resource(s) *or* its outcome(s) has been commonly labelled as the 'vehicle fallacy' and the 'exercise fallacy' respectively. These fallacies fail to recognize that power is a 'potentiality, not an actuality—indeed a potentiality that may never be actualised'; that is, that the quintessential crux of power 'is being able to make or to receive any change, or to resist it'.[29]

[27] Grix and Brannagan, 'Of mechanisms and myths'.

[28] Alexander Vuving, 'How soft power works', paper presented at American Political Science Association annual meeting, Toronto, 2009, http://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/PDFs/Vuving%20How%20soft%20power%20works%20APSA%202009.pdf; Edward Lock, 'Soft power and strategy: developing a "strategic" conception of power', in Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox, eds, *Soft power and US foreign policy: theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 32–50.

[29] See Steven Lukes, 'Power and the battle for hearts and minds', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33: 3, 2005, pp. 477–93 at p. 478.



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Power is, therefore, the *capacity* to cause effects, to have an impact on or to modify circumstances in the physical or social world.[30] Thus, states with great resources do not always direct others to follow set courses of action; and state actions, inactions or resources, depending on circumstances, can produce unintended outcomes.[31] In developing this point, to appreciate and locate a state's 'power capacity' to actualize change, we must first trace the resources that are available, and then identify how these resources are converted into actual or potential power outcomes.

To this end, we now turn to the cultural, social, economic and political structures that form Qatar's soft power attempts. To begin, Qatar's soft power lies in the development of specific cultural resources, in particular media, aviation (for tourism), music, art and sport. Al Jazeera, for example, is the Middle East's first 24-hour news channel, broadcasting to more than 300 million households in over 100 countries as the only pan-Arab rival to global news corporations such as the BBC and CNN.[32] In aviation, Qatar Airways has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing airlines, with over 200 aircraft flying to 150 destinations across five continents, and it is also the first Middle Eastern airline to join the Oneworld aviation alliance.[33] In the sphere of high culture, the Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra, founded in 2007, regularly undertakes world tours with both Western- and Arabic-themed programmes; and the Museum of Islamic Art, designed by the Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei, opened in Doha in 2008, housing one of the world's leading collections of Islamic artefacts.[34] In sport, Qatar has become a global hub for staging major events—such as the 2011 Arab Games, the 2019 International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) World Championships, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup—while the Doha-based Aspire Academy of Sports Excellence provides world-class athletic training, development and medical facilities.[35]

In examining how soft power cultural resources convert into possible outcomes, we argue that Al Jazeera, and the staging of international sports events, act as sources of what Nye calls 'strategic communication';[36] that is, they enable state leaders to cut through the noise of the global information society to disseminate a series of widely heard, reputation-promoting messages over a sustained period.[37]

[30] John Turner, 'Explaining the nature of power: a three-process theory', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 35: 1, 2005, pp. 1–22.

[31] Clarissa Hayward and Steven Lukes, 'Nobody to shoot? Power, structure and agency: a dialogue', *Journal of Power* 1: 1, 2008, pp. 5–20.

[32] Lina Khatib, 'Qatar's foreign policy: the limits of pragmatism', *International Affairs* 89: 2, March 2013, pp. 417–31; Al Jazeera, 'Who we are', n.d., http://www.aljazeera.com/aboutus/.

[33] Qatar Airways, 'Qatar Airways fact sheet', Oct. 2017, https://www.qatarairways.com/iwov-resources/tempdocs/press-kit/Qatar%20Airways%20Factsheet%20-%20English.pdf.

[34] Daniel Wakin, 'A new orchestra, built from scratch', *New York Times*, 27 Feb. 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/28/arts/music/28phil.html; 'In Qatar, Arab modern art gets its first museum', *Independent*, 20 Feb. 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/in-qatar-arab-modern-art-gets-its-first-museum-2220228.html.

[35] Paul Michael Brannagan and Joel Rookwood, 'Sports mega-events, soft power and soft disempowerment: international supporters' perspectives on Qatar's acquisition of 2022 FIFA World Cup finals', *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 8: 2, 2016, pp. 173–88.

[36] Joseph Nye, 'Power and foreign policy', *Journal of Political Power* 4: 1, 2011, pp. 9–24.

[37] See also Jonathan Grix and Donna Lee, 'Soft power, sports mega-events and emerging states: the lure of the politics of attraction', *Global Society* 27: 4, 2013, pp. 521–36.



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Al Jazeera, for instance, has sought to portray a commitment to breaking media norms across the Arab world by offering a modern, critical and pluralistic approach to global news and current affairs that is also distinct from western media perspectives. Some commentators view Al Jazeera as central to Qatar's global soft power strategy, and as tending to interpret global affairs through a 'clash of civilizations' optic that highlights cultural and religious differences within and across different international regions.[38] Part of Al Jazeera's success has been founded on offering global audiences an unconventional media experience, enabling Qatar to align the ideals, values and interests of others with its own. Also, the success of national organizations—in this case Al Jazeera, Qatar Airways and the Aspire Academy—can attract admiration and praise, which, in turn, may encourage emulation and draw others to the state for guidance, assistance and, ultimately, leadership. Finally, through investments in music, art and sport, states seek to develop and display specific 'service industries' to potential visitors, which, if appealing, help cultivate a competitive advantage in tourism.[39] For Qatar, attracting more holiday-makers to Doha assists the state's strategy of diversifying the economy to encompass cultural industries such as tourism; an example of efforts in this area is the annual Qatar Summer Festival—a month-long event of live music performances and sports-related entertainment—which generated an estimated £130 million in tourism revenues in 2016.[40]

Socially, Qatar has sought to be visibly active in a range of humanitarian efforts. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005 Qatar donated US$100 million to help rebuild key infrastructure across New Orleans, while in 2015 the Qatar Red Crescent sent staff to Nepal to treat more than 300 patients after the Kathmandu earthquake, which killed more than 7,000 people.[41] A further social resource lies in Qatar's educational work, particularly its creation in 1997 of 'Education City', a campus of 14 square kilometres hosting overseas branches of some leading universities, including Georgetown, Northwestern, Texas A&M and University College London.[42] In Qatar, too, the civil and human rights positions of women are somewhat better than in other GCC states: Qatar was the first Gulf state to enfranchise its female populace, and in 2013 the current emir appointed the state's third female cabinet minister.[43] Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, the emir's mother, is chair of the Qatar Foundation—the state education and community development organization—and has been a prominent advocate of increased educational

[38] Tal Samuel-Azran, *Intercultural communication as a clash of civilizations: Al Jazeera and Qatar's soft power* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

[39] Ozay Mehmet, 'Globalization and sustainability of small states', *Humanomics* 19: 1, 2003, pp. 45–9.

[40] Qatar Tourism Authority, *Annual Report 2016*, https://www.visitqatar.qa/binaries/content/assets/media/documents-and-reports/en/qta-2016-annual-report-en.compressed.pdf.

[41] Adam Nossiter, 'Emir of Qatar tours New Orleans to see fruit of his $100 million donation', *New York Times*, 30 April 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/30/us/nationalspecial/30emir.html; Peter Kovessy, 'Qatar relief workers arrive in Nepal, extend mission to three months', *Doha News*, 7 May 2015, https://dohanews.co/qatar-relief-workers-arrive-in-nepal-extend-mission-to-three-months/.

[42] Susan Svrluga, 'US universities in Qatar wary of diplomatic upheaval isolating the country', *Washington Post*, 12 June 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/06/12/u-s-universities-in-qatar-wary-of-diplomatic-upheaval-isolating-the-country/?utm_term=.08dd86d00107.

[43] 'New emir appoints female cabinet member in Qatar government shake-up', *Doha News*, 26 June 2013, https://dohanews.co/new-emir-appoints-female-cabinet-member-in-qatar/.



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opportunities for women and girls, to the point where female university students outnumber their male counterparts by a ratio of 6:1.[44]

As possible outcomes, involvement in what Nye terms 'attractive causes' (charitable aid, disaster relief, etc.)[45] can position states with those they help as good global citizens, as well as garnering praise from international humanitarian organizations, both of which in turn can lead to reciprocal cooperation and provision. In September 2017, for example, after Qatar donated US$30 million to help rebuild communities across Texas after Hurricane Harvey, Greg Abbott, Governor of Texas, thanked the Qatari leaders 'for their generosity and support' and emphasized the mutually supportive and 'long-standing "partnership"' between Texas and the Gulf state.[46] Furthermore, research suggests that students who study abroad tend to develop positive images of the host country and its policies. Thus, through Education City, Qatar has the potential opportunity to shape the views of many Arab students—and future regional leaders—who are hesitant about studying in the West and who see the campus as a suitable alternative.[47] Finally, the legal, political and civil roles of Qatar's female population position the state as a regional 'norm entrepreneur' for, and champion of, relatively liberal gender relations in Islamic societies.[48]

Economically, Qatar's resources lie in its export of liquefied natural gas, which in 2017 generated £23 billion per year.[49] To maximize profits from its North Dome field, the largest known body of gas in the world, Qatar has used existing technologies on an unprecedented scale to convert its natural gas into liquid form, for global export via cargo ships, without being restricted by pipeline transport. In 2011, this technology enabled the opening of the Pearl Gas to Liquids Plant, the largest such facility in the world.[50] A further economic resource centres on the state's heavy investment in overseas assets, primarily through its sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA). Since its establishment in 2005, notable QIA acquisitions have included Harrods, J. Sainsbury, Porsche, International Airlines Group and Heathrow Airport;[51] Qatari Diar, the real estate subsidiary of QIA, has invested heavily in London property, acquiring shares in Chelsea Barracks, the 2012 Olympic Village, the American Embassy and the newly-built

[44] Sarah Morrison, 'Revealed: the best and worst places to be a woman', *Independent*, 4 March 2012, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/revealed-the-best-and-worst-places-to-be-a-woman-7534794.html.

[45] Joseph Nye, *Soft power: the means to success in world politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004) .

[46] 'Qatar donates $30m to help Harvey victims in Texas', *Al Jazeera*, 8 September 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/qatar-donates-30m-harvey-victims-texas-170908042945728.html.

[47] Hiba Khodr, 'The dynamics of international education in Qatar: exploring the policy drivers behind the development of Education City', *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 2: 6, 2011, pp. 514–25.

[48] Christine Ingebritsen, *Scandinavia in world politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

[49] Henning Gloystein and Mark Tay, 'Qatar signals LNG price war for market share in Asia', Reuters, 5 July 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-lng/qatar-signals-lng-price-war-for-market-share-in-asia-idUSKBN19Q0YX.

[50] 'Shell plans March maintenance shutdown at Pearl GTL plant in Qatar', Reuters, 13 Dec. 2015, http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-qatar-shell-maintenance/shell-plans-march-maintenance-shutdown-at-pearl-gtl-plant-in-qatar-idUKKBN0TW0GW20151213.

[51] Chris Wright, 'Has the Qatar Investment Authority really lost $12 billion?', *Forbes*, 29 Sept. 2015, https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswright/2015/09/29/has-the-qatar-investment-authority-really-lost-12-billion/#42d9a8027806.



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Shard;[52] and in 2011 the Qatar Sports Investment group purchased the French Ligue 1 professional football club Paris Saint-Germain. Finally, Qatar has hosted various high-profile economic events such as the 2001 World Trade Organization's ministerial conference, which produced the 'Doha Development Agenda' signed by 155 member states, and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development quadrennial conference in 2012.[53]

These resources may position Qatar as an 'entrepreneurial state', which seeks to harness 'the best of the private sector for the national good'.[54] Through high-profile international exports and investments, entrepreneurial states endeavour to influence overseas markets, thus enticing reciprocal interest from others who seek to boost their own domestic economies. In the case of Qatar, prominent British individuals such as Prince Charles and Sir Hugh Robertson (a former government minister and current chair of the British Olympic Association), for example, have regularly travelled to Doha to pursue further investment in the UK, while the former Mayor of London and former UK Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, has opined that 'we can't afford to ignore our dynamic friends in the East'.[55] Latterly, Qatar has pledged to invest £5 billion over the next three years in the UK amid major political concerns over the domestic economic impacts of the Brexit vote in 2016.[56] Furthermore, Qatar's resources arguably assist the state to promote its domestic commercial expertise and reputation abroad. Research suggests that encouraging foreign direct investment depends to a great extent upon how successful states—particularly small states—are in showcasing, and thus educating international audiences about, their domestic economic capabilities and attractiveness.[57] This imperative is especially pressing for Qatar, as enticing a greater level of inward investment may be one avenue through which to create a dynamic and more diversified economy which will support its citizens when fossil fuel reserves dwindle.

Politically, Qatar's soft power resources lie in its matrix of foreign relationships. Since 2003, Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base has acted as the United States Central Command headquarters for over 18 nations across the Middle East and central Asia (including Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria), housing up to 11,000 American military personnel and 120 aircraft at any one time.[58] Furthermore, in 2017 the

[52] Sean Farrell, 'Qatar wins approval to turn US embassy in London into hotel', *Guardian*, 16 Nov. 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/nov/16/qatar-wins-approval-to-turn-american-embassy-into-luxury-hotel.

[53] 'Doha delivers', *The Economist*, 9 Dec. 2013, https://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2013/12/world-trade-organisation.

[54] Mariana Mazzucato, 'The entrepreneurial state', *Soundings* 49: 12, 2011, pp. 131–42, at p. 19.

[55] Nicholas McGeehan, 'London Mayor should get his facts straight on Qatar', *Huffington Post*, 26 April 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nicholas-mcgeehan/london-mayor-should-get-h_b_3163127.html.

[56] Alan Tovey, 'Backing for post-Brexit Britain from Qatari investments and Siemens', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 March 2017, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2017/03/27/backing-post-brexit-britain-qatari-investment-fund-siemens/.

[57] Alan Chong, 'Small state soft power strategies: virtual enlargement in the cases of the Vatican City State and Singapore', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23: 3, 2010, pp. 383–405.

[58] Brad Lendon, 'Qatar hosts largest US military base in Mideast', CNN, 6 June 2017, http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/05/middleeast/qatar-us-largest-base-in-mideast/index.html.



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Pentagon announced a US$6 billion contract to sell 36 F-15 fighter jets to Qatar.[59] At the same time, Qatar has retained close ties to countries and organizations such as Iran, the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, which have either strained or conflict-rooted relations with the West.[60] These multifarious ties have enabled Qatar to position itself visibly as a 'non-stop mediator' and conflict negotiator.[61] In 2008, for example, Qatar persuaded the rival Lebanese Sunni-led government and Shi'a Hezbollah group to sign the 2008 Doha Agreement, ending an 18-month political deadlock;[62] in 2011, Qatar initiated another Doha Agreement, signed by the Sudanese government and the rebel Liberation and Justice Movement, to establish a compensation fund for victims of the Darfur conflict;[63] and in 2014, Qatar negotiated the release and return of the US writer and journalist Peter Curtis, held hostage for two years in Syria by the Salafist Al-Nusra Front.[64]

Turning to possible outcomes, others may come to view Qatar as a useful and supportive 'strategic partner' and as a 'go-to government' in what Keohane and Nye call special 'issue areas', such as defence, security and trade.[65] In 2014, for example, US officials—including former Secretary of State John Kerry—implored the Qatari authorities 'to use their influence' to secure the release of kidnapped Israeli soldiers.[66] Through such mediation and conflict negotiation, Qatar seeks to join those states that hold what Keohane and Nye term 'issue-specific power' and, in doing so, demonstrate their enthusiasm to assist the international system in supporting and promoting its shared values and causes. This, in turn, can create favour among the international organizations which, in large part, oversee global policy-making, and thus hold the power to grant Qatar a seat at the table and the concomitant influence. Finally, Qatar's political resources are leveraged in pursuit of national security. Its abundant natural resources might conceivably draw hostile action from other regional forces—as occurred with Kuwait in the early 1990s—and thus the state's diverse diplomatic activities may also function to establish the state as a distinctive contributor to the international community worthy of protection.[67]

[59] Ryan Browne, 'US announces sale of F-15 fighter jets to Qatar', CNN, 22 Dec. 2017, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/22/politics/us-qatar-f-15-fighter-jets-sale/index.html.

[60] David Kirkpatrick, 'Qatar's support of Islamists alienates allies near and far', *New York Times*, 7 Sept. 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/world/middleeast/qatars-support-of-extremists-alienates-allies-near-and-far.html; Roberts, *Qatar: securing the global ambitions of a city-state*.

[61] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[62] Nada Bakri and Alan Cowell, 'Lebanese reach agreement to resolve 18-month political crisis', *New York Times*, 21 May 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/21/world/africa/21iht-lebanon.4.13105564.html.

[63] Nagmeldin Karamalla-Gaiballa, 'The Qatari efforts to resolve the armed conflict in Darfur—the challenges and obstacles', *International Journal of Sudan Research* 7: 1, 2017, pp. 1–9.

[64] Martin Pengelly, 'US journalist Peter Theo Curtis released from captivity in Syria', *Guardian*, 25 Aug. 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/24/us-journalist-freed-syria-peter-curtis.

[65] Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and interdependence: world politics in transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).

[66] Amena Bakr, 'Qatar seeks role as Gaza mediator, Israel wary', Reuters, 17 July 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-israel-qatar/qatar-seeks-role-as-gaza-mediator-israel-wary-idUSKBN0FM2GD20140717.

[67] Roberts, 'Understanding Qatar's foreign policy objectives'.



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## The 'credible attraction filter'

The successful conversion of any state's soft power resources into outcomes is dependent, we argue, on the effective negotiation of stage 2 (figure 1), which we term the 'credible attraction filter'. The filter's title registers two crucial points. First, an understanding of what constitutes attractiveness needs to be shared by the soft power senders (state ministers, diplomats, officials and emissaries) and receivers (those national/international audiences that the state is seeking to attract). As soft power rests on the ability to entice others through 'attractive' culture, policies and/or achievements, we need to remember that sender and receiver may work to different rules of attraction. Beauty is, at the end of the day, in the eye of the beholder, and is not always recognized or appreciated by those whom one seeks to beguile. This point draws our attention to the need to understand soft power as a *relational* and *intersubjective* (or, in this context, 'interstate') process that crucially requires a shared understanding of the cultural norms, beliefs and values that establish the very meaning of attraction.[68] Returning to the suggestion that Nye offers an American-centric understanding of attraction, we need to note that, owing to its intersubjective nature, soft power can never be one-sided in such a way that state 'A' (say, the United States) would have all the power over state 'B'; rather, power is spread through the matrix of international relations of which A and B are parts.[69] Accordingly, we view soft power as expressed in the relationships between the actions, ideas and policy orientations of actors, on the one hand, and the responses to these actions, ideas and orientations by audiences, on the other.[70] No actor has a monopoly on soft power—in theory, any actor can develop soft power; the question is to whom one's soft power resources and endeavours are considered to be 'attractive', leading to particular soft power outcomes.[71]

Second, the successful conversion of state resources into outcomes rests not on attractiveness alone, but rather on resources that are both attractive *and* credible in the minds of international audiences. For example, if a state successfully wins the right to stage a prestigious event such as an Olympic Games, this may be considered by some as an attractive achievement, but by others more critically as a waste of state resources. If it subsequently emerged that the award was gained through corrupt or unlawful means, then the critics would be likely to increase in number, as notions of attractiveness were replaced by those of illegitimacy and foul play.

Consequently, the crux of soft power conversion rests on a shared evaluation of what constitutes 'credible attraction'. Given this, our 'credible attraction filter' (stage 2 in figure 1) represents the intersubjective mesh through which state soft power resources must pass in order to convert into outcomes. If we envisage the

[68] See Michel Foucault, 'The subject and power', *Critical Inquiry* 8: 4, 1982, pp. 777–95.
[69] Risto Heiskala, 'Theorizing power: Weber, Parsons, Foucault and neostructuralism', *Social Science Information* 40: 2, 2001, pp. 241–64.
[70] Giulio Gallarotti, 'Soft power: what it is, why it's important, and the conditions for its effective use', *Journal of Political Power* 4: 1, 2011, pp. 25–47; Li Ji, 'Measuring soft power', in Naren Chitty, Li Ji, Gary Rawnsley and Craig Hayden, eds, *The Routledge handbook of soft power* (London: Routledge, 2017).
[71] Lock, 'Soft power and strategy'.



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process of soft power much like that of a water filter jug, with state resources entering the top of the jug, the goal is to pass through the filter to reach the bottom. In much the same way that a water filter absorbs impurities, so too do soft power receivers—other states, international organizations, the global media, foreign audiences—by evaluating and pinpointing what they perceive to be illegitimate or dubious accomplishments, actions or policies. Only when resources are considered attractive and credible do they successfully pass through the filter to become outcomes. At that point, we are able to assess whether, on balance, these outcomes, from the state's point of view, are empowering or disempowering.

## Soft disempowerment

A major influence on the credible attraction filter is the existence of what we have previously called 'soft disempowerment' (stage 3 in figure 1), referring to actions, inactions and/or policies of states that ultimately upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a loss of credibility and attractiveness. If soft power resources resemble tap water entering the top of our water filter jug, then in the same analogy soft disempowerment takes the role of accompanying water impurities (bacteria, toxins, viruses, pesticides, sulphates). In the same way that a water filter can become clogged up with impurities and curtail the flow of water from the top to the bottom of a jug, the more illegitimate and/or repellent behaviour a state is associated with in the mind of the receiver, the harder it is for its soft power resources to pass through the credible attraction filter on their way to becoming positive outcomes. This is because knowledge of a state's soft disempowerment prompts audiences to interrogate, challenge and/or resist the state's efforts to be credibly attractive even more vigorously.

As shown in figure 1, soft disempowerment occurs when diverse state and non-state actors—intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), the media, the corporate sector and civil society groups (trade unions, non-governmental/non-profit organizations, online activists and so on)—disseminate information which challenges or discredits the state's soft power strategies and messages. Of course, just as soft power rests on shared notions of 'attraction' and 'credibility', so too soft disempowerment depends on collective understandings of 'unattractiveness' or 'illegitimacy'. Again, in relational terms, actions or inactions that are considered distasteful to some may not be perceived as such by others.

Notwithstanding such perceptual variations, we may identify three common ways through which soft disempowerment processes occur. First, states may be accused of *contravening international laws and rules*. These episodes tend to be uncovered by the international mass media, often in conjunction with insider whistleblowers. One recent example involved the revelations—initially from a combination of insider informants and international media organizations including the German broadcaster ARD, the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*—of Russia's state-sponsored elite sport doping programme, resulting in a World Anti-Doping Agency investigation and the subsequent banning of hundreds of



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Russian athletes and then the entire Russian team from the 2016 and 2018 Olympic Games respectively.[72]

In the case of Qatar, we may point to accusations of bribery and corruption surrounding the successful bid to host the 2022 World Cup, defeating submissions from Australia, Japan, South Korea and the United States. Amid substantial discussion in the global media and political and sporting spheres on the reasons for the bid's success, the British *Sunday Times* received copious streams of email and other communications from inside the Qatari sporting system, which purported to reveal that Qatar had breached FIFA rules by systematically bribing key political and sporting officials in order to win favour.[73] At the fulcrum of these allegations was the Qatari Mohammed bin Hammam, at that time president of the Asian Football Confederation and a member of FIFA's executive committee, who, it was claimed, had employed multiple slush funds to pay FIFA officials in order to influence the vote. Although FIFA's own ethics investigation cleared Qatar on the grounds that there was 'very limited scope' that its rules had been breached, allegations of corruption continued, partly owing to the resignation of FIFA's ethics committee chairman, Michael Garcia, in 2014, after he had accused the governing body of publishing a summary of his report into the bidding for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup finals which contained 'numerous materially incomplete and erroneous representations of facts'.[74]

The second way in which soft disempowerment occurs is when states are accused of *failing to uphold international conventions or standards on global development*, for example in relation to the environment, humanitarianism or safeguarding human well-being. Key international actors here include IGOs and international NGOs which adopt globalist stances on human development, and which criticize national governments perceived to be failing on global development issues and standards. Examples here include the UN accusation of 'backtracking' and 'betrayal' when the UK and Germany introduced new national tax breaks and financial incentives for coal, oil and gas companies in 2016, only one year after both governments had signed up to the Paris climate deal pledging to phase out fossil fuels and reduce greenhouse gas and carbon emissions.[75] Then there is Oxfam International's recent criticism of the 'slow and inadequate response' by the US government to the destruction in Puerto Rico caused by Hurricane Maria in September 2017.[76] The governments of states that have undergone rapid economic growth, and thereby have acquired a stronger political presence at regional or

[72] Rebecca Ruiz and Michael Schwirtz, 'Russian insider says state-run doping fuelled Olympic gold', *New York Times*, 12 May 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/sports/russia-doping-sochi-olympics-2014.html.

[73] Jonathan Calvert and Heidi Blake, 'Plot to buy the World Cup', *Sunday Times*, 1 June 2014, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/plot-to-buy-the-world-cup-lvxdg2v7l7w.

[74] Holly Watt and Ben Rumsby, 'Michael Garcia quits as Fifa ethics investigator', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 Dec. 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/world-cup/11299503/Michael-Garcia-quits-as-Fifa-ethics-investigator.html.

[75] Adam Vaughan, 'UN criticises UK and Germany for betraying Paris climate deal', *Guardian*, 18 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jul/18/un-criticises-uk-and-german-for-betraying-the-spirit-of-the-paris-climate-deal.

[76] Caroline Kenny, 'Oxfam criticizes US government response in Puerto Rico', CNN, 3 Oct. 2017, http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/02/politics/oxfam-criticizes-us-government-response/index.html.



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global levels, are particularly prone to such critical scrutiny. Emerging and rapidly developing economies in Asia and the Gulf region—for example, Malaysia, Singapore and the UAE—are regularly criticized by NGOs such as Amnesty International for a lack of democracy, transparency and fair justice systems, and for the maltreatment of minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.[77] In some cases, the economic development of these states has not been matched in foreign policy terms, and they fail to respond quickly and effectively to critical scrutiny by the international community.

For audiences in the liberal capitalist global North, Qatar's soft disempowerment has centred partly on human development issues relating, for example, to limitations in civil and political rights. Since being awarded the 2022 World Cup in 2010, Qatar has come under intense global scrutiny for inhumane treatment of migrant workers, particularly in the construction sector. Global North media such as the BBC, CNN, *Le Monde*, the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, along with NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have criticized Qatar for its reluctance to end *kafala*, a sponsorship system that binds migrant employees from poor regions to their Qatari employers in legal and social terms.[78] It has been argued that this system abuses the human rights of workers by curtailing basic freedoms (including the banning of labour unions or civil protests), repeatedly failing to pay wages, and consigning them to substandard living and working conditions, leading to the deaths of 'thousands' of workers on Qatari building sites in recent years.[79] Along similar lines, and contrary to 'universal' human rights standards, Qatar has also been condemned by various international organizations for being one of the few countries in the world where homosexuality remains illegal.[80]

Third, soft disempowerment also occurs when the state is perceived to be acting in ways that have *direct and negative impacts on other individual nations or communities of nations*. One example here is the recent criticism directed at US President Donald Trump by many UN member states in response to his decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, on the grounds that this move will 'seriously undermine current peace efforts'.[81]

In Qatar's case, some forms of soft disempowerment may have followed from the state's foreign policy of 'both sides' relations. Regional neighbours and other states have argued that, behind this policy, Qatar has been a major financer of

[77] Human Rights Watch, *World Report*, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2017-web.pdf; Amnesty International, *Annual Report*, 2016/17, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2017/02/amnesty-international-annual-report-201617/.

[78] Peter Millward, 'World Cup 2022 and Qatar's construction projects: relational power in networks and relational responsibilities to migrant workers', *Current Sociology* 65: 5, 2017, pp. 756–76.

[79] Jack Sommers, 'Qatar's World Cup death toll claim leaves migrant worker rights campaigners unimpressed', *Huffington Post*, 3 June 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/06/03/qatar-world-cup-deaths_n_7500920.html; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014: Qatar*, 2014, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/qatar.

[80] 'FIFA boss Sepp Blatter sparks Qatar gay controversy', BBC, 14 Dec. 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/9284186.stm.

[81] 'Trump's Jerusalem move roundly condemned at UN', Al Jazeera, 8 Dec. 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/convenes-emergency-meeting-jerusalem-decision-171208162736190.html.



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various 'terrorist' groups. For example, in 2014 Gerd Müller, the German minister for international development, stated: 'You have to ask who is arming, who is financing Isil troops. The keyword there is Qatar.'[82] Since the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, Qatar has offered support to the Sunni Islamist group the Muslim Brotherhood. After the overthrow in 2013 of President Mohammed Morsi—which led to the arrest of thousands of Brotherhood members—Qatar acted as the group's foremost safe haven, openly granting refuge to senior Brotherhood leaders. In 2014, the coalition of Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in protest, claiming the Brotherhood's aim to create a transnational movement constituted a serious threat to the GCC's security, sovereign rule and order.[83] Regional anxieties over Qatar's support for such groups culminated in June 2017 when the same coalition of states blockaded Qatar, cutting all diplomatic and trade links, as well as suspending all shipping and air routes to their Gulf neighbour. The coalition governments claimed such actions were in response to Qatar's continued support of the Brotherhood and other 'extreme Islamist' groups such as the Hamas movement, as well as the state's growing ties with their regional rival, Iran. To end the blockade, the four coalition states demanded Qatar sever all ties to terrorist organizations, including all support and funding, and refrain from interfering in other countries' internal affairs. Qatar denied all of these accusations, claiming they were politically motivated by others' attempts to secure hegemony across the region.[84] Crucially, some reports indicated that the Gulf crisis had been engineered by neighbouring nations which had felt weakened by Qatar, and were provoked more by its successful 2022 World Cup bid than by its acting as a safe haven for terrorist groups. On this reading, the Gulf crisis would end if Qatar gave up its soft power prize asset—the World Cup finals—so that regional and international soft power balances could be restored.[85]

The extent to which such instances of 'disempowerment' influence audiences' credible attraction filters depends on intersubjective and relational perceptions of 'unattractiveness'. For those whose values resonate with the liberal capitalist global North, international criticism of Qatar's domestic human rights record has perhaps damaged the state's soft power strategy, most notably its self-portrayal as a good, benevolent international actor. This may, in turn, lead audiences to view Qatar as an unattractive place to work or do business, thus limiting the state's capacity to acquire foreign expertise and inward investment. For example, in 2016 the *Guardian* criticized the UK trade minister Greg Hands for failing to

[82] 'German minister accuses Qatar of funding Islamic State fighters', Reuters, 20 Aug. 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-germany-qatar/german-minister-accuses-qatar-of-funding-islamic-state-fighters-idUSKBN0GK1I720140820.

[83] 'Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain end rift with Qatar, return ambassadors', Reuters, 16 Nov. 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-summit-ambassadors/saudi-arabia-uae-and-bahrain-end-rift-with-qatar-return-ambassadors-idUSKCN0J00Y420141116.

[84] Yara Bayoumy, 'Qatar foreign minister decries "reckless leadership" in region', Reuters, 17 Nov. 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-usa/qatar-foreign-minister-decries-reckless-leadership-in-region-idUSKBN1DH2NA?il=0.

[85] See e.g. Anthony Harwood, 'How football created the biggest crisis in the Middle East for decades', *Independent*, 12 Oct. 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/middle-east-football-crisis-qatar-world-cup-saudi-arabia-uae-blockade-al-jazeera-football-united-a7996276.html.



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call for greater protection of human rights in Qatar during his visit to Doha to seek contracts for British companies; the newspaper also warned of 'legal and reputational risks' to UK firms that were considering working with or in Qatar.[86]

Furthermore, accusations of bribery and corruption surrounding Qatar's successful World Cup bid have limited the state's capacity to use the tournament as a strategic tool of communication. To date, the dominant points of discussion surrounding the 2022 World Cup have centred on the *kafala* sponsorship system and claims of foul play, overshadowing the state's ability to widely promote its own key messages; in this sense, Qatar's soft power attempts have been largely drowned out by unwanted information, leading audiences to question the state's integrity and adding further to its perceived lack of credibility.[87] Finally, Qatar's 'both sides' approach to regional and international affairs has been interpreted critically by many states, and hindered Qatari efforts to portray the nation as a strategic actor in compliance with international norms of conduct. Potentially of even greater significance is the consideration that, while Qatar's soft power strategies have sought, in part, to assist national security, its ambitious and fast-moving foreign policy has also had negative consequences for the state and its citizens: in hard power terms, the recent Gulf crisis has had adverse impacts on the national economy, for example in reducing annual tourism revenues, and both inbound and outbound trade and finance, forcing the Qatari government in 2017 to inject £28 billion of national reserves into the economy.[88] However, the crisis has also added to Qatari soft power in various ways, demonstrating the state's resilience in the face of adversity: for example, in 2017 Ryan Gliha, chargé d'affaires at the US Embassy in Doha, discussing the continuing 'important' Qatar–US relationship, described the Qatari response to the GCC blockade as one of 'poise' and 'grace', and something 'of which all Qataris should be proud'.[89]

## Conclusion

Soft power has been a highly influential concept for academics in their analyses of international affairs at the level of states. As we have shown, the concept has come under critical scrutiny, highlighting a need for its analytical and substantive refinement. Through our case-study of Qatar, we have endeavoured to address these criticisms, primarily by introducing our analytical model of the soft power–soft disempowerment nexus.

[86] Peter Walker, 'Qatar World Cup 2022: Amnesty hits out at UK silence on human rights', *Guardian*, 9 Nov. 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/qatar-world-cup-2022-amnesty-hits-out-at-uk-silence-on-human-rights-during-visit-greg-hands.

[87] Indeed, as one commentator correctly summarized: 'Part of the reason for its [Qatar's] World Cup bid was to raise its profile in the eyes of international audiences. So far, it has done so for all the wrong reasons.' See Owen Gibson, 'World Cup raising Qatar's profile for all the wrong reasons', *Guardian*, 1 June 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/jun/01/2022-world-cup-qatar-fifa.

[88] 'The boycott of Qatar is hurting its enforcers', *The Economist*, 19 Oct. 2017, https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21730426-if-saudis-and-emiratis-will-not-trade-doha-iranians-will-boycott.

[89] Khalid Al-Shafi, 'US praises Qatar; commits to finding solution to Gulf crisis', *The Peninsula*, 15 Dec. 2017, https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/15/12/2017/US-praises-Qatar-commits-to-finding-solution-to-Gulf-crisis.



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The model extends understanding and application of the concept of soft power in four key ways. First, it is premised on the analytical position that power is a capacity, not an actuality. This approach allows us to recognize that states with great resources do not always direct others to do what they want; conversely, the exercise of resources may lead to unintended outcomes. Second, analysis of Qatar shows how small states seek to acquire and exercise soft power through cultural, social, political and economic structures and resources. As we have seen, despite its small size, Qatar has sought to exercise significant influence on the global stage, as reflected, in part, by its involvement and investment in sport, media, education, humanitarianism, overseas acquisitions and the staging of major global events, such as the 2022 World Cup. Third, we have introduced what we term the 'credible attraction filter' to demonstrate how state soft power resources convert into outcomes. Specifically, we have highlighted the need to view soft power as a relational process, which crucially requires an intersubjective and culturally sensitive understanding of 'attraction'. Finally, for any state pursuing soft power, there is always the possibility that soft disempowerment may occur when, for example, its efforts draw unwanted attention to potentially discrediting (in)actions. National leaders must contend with such international scrutiny, as audiences come to query, contest or resist state efforts to be credibly attractive. And, specifically on soft disempowerment, we have also put forward the argument that there are three ways in which this tends to occur: when states are viewed as contravening international laws and rules; failing to uphold international conventions or standards on global development; and/or having direct and negative impacts on other individual nations or communities of nations. Through our case-study of Qatar, we have shown how criticism in these areas has emerged via the state's engagement with global sport and acquisition of the 2022 World Cup.

Overall, we have developed these concepts and arguments to allow for them to be further tested, applied, refined and criticized. To that end, we posit that the soft power–soft disempowerment nexus is an analytical framework which may be used to examine and to understand soft power strategies, processes and consequences within any part of the world, and in a wide array of fields, including education, media, the arts, sport, urban design, heritage, tourism and international development.

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