



Football, Feuding and Games in the Gulf

Simon Chadwick

Doha's Diversification Drive Post-Blockade

Since the public embrace between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad at the Al-Ula Summit of January 2021 — which effectively ended the Arab blockade of Qatar — a key question that has come to mind is how fences will be mended between these Arab states beyond mere cosmetics. A related question revolves around the relevance and future of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

To circumvent the pressures of the blockade, Qatar hastened its strategic diversification efforts, from seeking new sources of food supply to increase its food security to deepening its bilateral ties with Turkey and Iran. Doha also has stepped up its efforts to carve out a bigger role in the rules-based international order. It has offered to mediate between different sets of parties: Tehran and Washington on the one hand and Washington and the Taliban on the other.

This series of *Insights* aims to uncover the various pathways to diversification that Qatar has undertaken since the blockade and following its rehabilitation by the blockading parties.

Cover photo: Qatar's football players cheer a goal scored during the 2019 AFC Asian Cup semi-final match between Qatar and the UAE at the Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi on 29 January 2019. Giuseppe Cacace/AFP.

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Over the past 20 years, football has been important for Qatar. Most notably, the FIFA World Cup has enabled it to engage in nation and brand building while embedding itself within the global football ecosystem. However, football also played a significant role in addressing some of the challenges created during the diplomatic blockade of Qatar. For example, player signings and club ownership enabled Qatar to deploy football as a means through which to project soft power, countering threats posed by rival nations. Consequently, football has seemingly now become a focus for competition between Gulf countries.

In August 2017, French football club Paris Saint Germain (PSG) signed Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior (commonly known as Neymar) from Spanish club FC Barcelona for a world-record transfer fee of €222 million.¹ The sum paid did not just break the record; it more than doubled the existing record, massively surpassing the €100 million that the English Premier League (EPL) club Manchester United had paid a year earlier for French international player Paul Pogba.

Fans and observers alike were left breathless both by the deal's magnitude and its potential ramifications. Almost immediately, Barcelona, apparently awash with cash from the Neymar deal, began

spending heavily on new players. Among them was the Brazilian national Philippe Coutinho, signed for around €105 million from the English club Liverpool. In turn, Liverpool spent €45 million on Egyptian international player Mohammed Salah. The chain reaction prompted by Neymar's transfer reverberated across football; indeed, some might argue that the ramifications are still being felt.

The Game of Soft Power

PSG's owner — Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) — inevitably framed the signing as an important step in building the club's commercial activities, which has some resonance as QSI has helped its club boost annual revenues six-fold to more than €600 in the 10 years following its acquisition. At another level, some have observed an alignment of PSG's transfer market strategy and that of the emirate's national vision — that the country “deserves the best” (a slogan often seen on banners displayed on the streets of Doha). Back in 2017, there was a valid argument that Neymar was the best, or at least one of the three best male players in the world.

However, much like a beautifully scored goal or a bad tackle, timing was everything when the Brazilian left Spain for Paris' Parc des Princes. Strong rumours had begun to circulate about the impending acquisition of Neymar in July 2017, only a matter of weeks after the Saudi Arabian-led diplomatic boycott of Qatar had started. Set in this context, his signing seemed less about good football, commercial success, or even ownership whimsy. Instead, it appeared more as a geopolitical power play, possibly consisting of various dimensions.

Neymar was certainly a statement signing, although not just in football terms. His arrival in France effectively signalled that the

government in Doha had the resources, the will and the fortitude to address the potential challenges posed by the boycott. While some in Saudi Arabia talked about digging border trenches and filling them with radioactive waste, Qatar engaged itself in a game of soft power.¹ What better way to enhance one's attractiveness and demonstrate common interests with other nations than by signing an expensive footballer — although some observers would have preferred to frame the Brazilian's signing as a case in which sports had become weaponised.

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This game of soft power is one whose template was partly established by Abu Dhabi's purchase of Premier League club Manchester City (which has nowadays morphed into a global geopolitical instrument and commercial behemoth, via the City Football Group). In deploying Neymar, Qatar was effectively mimicking its near neighbour.

Soft power in football terms consists not merely in being seen to be a prominent member of a global community; there is also socio-cultural and economic capital to be made via its deployment. Indeed, there appears to be a consensus across the Gulf that football can facilitate improvements in international diplomacy, enhance a nation's

¹ Simon Chadwick, “Qatar, PSG and the real reason Neymar could sell for a record 198m”, *The Conversation*, 1 August 2017, <https://theconversation.com/qatar-psg-and-the-real-reason-neymar-could-sell-for-a-record-198m-81859>.

brand and generate positive economic impacts (for instance, through event hosting).

For a time, it seemed as though European football acquisitions were set to form part of a proxy war between Qatar and its rivals. One rumour was that Qatar was about to buy English club Leeds United, a direct local rival to Abu Dhabi's Manchester City.² In France, the Bahraini state bought Paris FC, a direct competitor to Qatar's PSG. Despite its small size, in the isomorphic world of Gulf sports, Bahrain appears keen to maintain parity with its neighbours following news that an investment fund domiciled in the country is trying to purchase Italian football club AC Milan.

The Weaponisation of Sports

While the Gulf feud intensified, Saudi Arabia, which had started making noises about the importance of football back in 2015, found itself coveting the status and profile that football has delivered to Qatar and Abu Dhabi. In being seduced, the kingdom was drawn into an episode that exposed the country to a level of scrutiny, and indeed derision, that its officials probably did not anticipate.

For years, there had been rumours that Saudi Arabia, through its Public Investment Fund (PIF), was interested in buying a football club. Stories often suggested the target was Manchester United, although reports at the start of 2020 indicated Saudi interest in acquiring a rival EPL club, Newcastle United. It was only in April 2020 that matters seemed to have moved on, with PIF apparently on the cusp of buying a

² Simon Chadwick, "English football: A proxy battleground for feuding Gulf states?", *The Conversation*, 29 May 2019, <https://theconversation.com/english-football-a-proxy-battleground-for-feuding-gulf-states-117812>.

90% stake in Newcastle. Observers characterised the planned purchase as “sports washing”, intended to draw attention away from the reputational damage arising from the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, the war in Yemen and issues of gender discrimination in the kingdom.³

By mid-year 2020, it had become apparent that there was an obstacle to successful completion of the acquisition. In the midst of the Gulf stand-off, evidence emerged that a pirate television channel inside Saudi Arabia — beoutQ — was stealing content that legally belonged to Qatar, more specifically to the state-owned channel beIN Sport. The stolen content included EPL matches, for which beIN Sport had paid a rights acquisition fee and which the league was anxious to protect.

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Qatar referred the matter to the World Trade Organisation, which in its subsequent ruling stopped short of accusing the government in Riyadh of being involved in the piracy. However, the ruling included an assessment that the Saudi authorities had not done enough to tackle

³ Hüseyin Bahri Kurt, “Saudi takeover of Newcastle United is sportswashing”, *Politics Today*, 2 November 2021, <https://politicstoday.org/saudi-takeover-of-newcastle-united-is-sportswashing/>.

the piracy, which was officially identified as having been perpetrated inside the kingdom.⁴ This left the EPL with no choice other than to reject the proposed takeover of Newcastle United under the terms of its Owners and Directors rules.

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This rejection served to further inflame already heightened tensions, especially on social media.⁵ The Saudi hand soon became evident behind the deployment of bots, trolls and influencers attacking the EPL, beIN Sport and other Qatari interests, and even the British government.⁶ Furthermore, the Newcastle fan base appeared in some quarters to have become weaponised, given their venomous targeting of anyone supporting the EPL's decision.

⁴ Sean Ingle, “Saudi TV piracy ruling puts Newcastle takeover under renewed scrutiny”, *The Guardian*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/jun/16/newcastle-takeover-latest-saudi-arabia-tv-piracy-ruling-released-by-wto-premier-league-pressure>.

⁵ Rayhan Uddin, “Newcastle fans share MBS memes and joke about Saudi rights abuses”, *Middle East Eye*, 22 April 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/newcastle-united-saudi-arabia-mbs-memes-joke-abuses>.

⁶ Middle East Eye, “Saudi official linked to Khashoggi murder accused of trolling Newcastle critics”, *Middle East Eye*, 14 November 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-official-linked-khashoggi-murder-accused-trolling-newcastle-critics-0>.

January 2021 brought a swift change of mood between the neighbouring adversaries, resulting in the Newcastle United deal being resurrected. By October 2021, the deal had been completed and, during the first home game post-acquisition, Yasir Al Rumayyan, PIF's governor, could be seen beaming wide smiles to the adoring fans of his country's recently acquired asset. Yet the entire episode had been a fractious one, the effects of which, much like Neymar's signing by PSG, had ramifications beyond the field of play.

Behind the scenes briefings by both Saudi Arabian and Qatari officials had been strident and provocative, eventually drawing the British government into the dispute. Indeed, in its post-Brexit pursuit of business and trade, it seems that the Boris Johnson government was rather more influential in helping guide the deal to its successful conclusion than many people imagine.⁷ Faced with additional pressure from Riyadh, some evidence suggests that Downing Street heavily leaned on the EPL to expedite matters in a way that would help sustain good relations between Britain and Saudi Arabia.

Skirmishes on the Field

With Newcastle United's performances currently improving, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar having rediscovered their affections for one another, it would be easy to forget the skirmishes across football that were also played out alongside the star players and big teams.

⁷ David Conn, "Revealed: Government did encourage Premier League to approve Newcastle takeover", *The Guardian*, 24 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/may/24/government-did-encourage-premier-league-to-approve-saudi-newcastle-takeover>.

One flashpoint was the 2018 AFC Asian Cup, staged in the United Arab Emirates. The host nation, Qatar and Saudi Arabia all qualified for the games. Given the absence of direct air links between Qatar and the UAE, and difficulties in gaining entry, attending the event was always going to be a mammoth challenge for Qatari fans. In the end, little more than a handful were present at the games, one of whom was a South Korean super fan (who some suspected had been paid to present herself as an avid Qatar fan).

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The early stages of the tournament saw Qatar beat Saudi Arabia in a match staged in Abu Dhabi, something of a shock (and a portent of things to come) as the latter's national team has a long history of tournament qualifications, compared with their minnow Qatari neighbours. In the football arms race that marked the Gulf feud period, this victory was a massive boost to the Qatari cause.

Later on, Qatar triumphed in a semi-final game against the UAE. The score of 4–0 was a crushing defeat for the hosts, which resulted in home fans throwing their shoes at the Qatari players. Qatar made it to the final, where the national team beat Asian football giants Japan.

Whether viewed symbolically, in soft power terms or as simple victory in a football game, Qatar had proved a point and had once again transcended the confrontational stance of its more adversarial neighbours. The rivals were further antagonised as the tournament's top scorer — Almoez Ali, a naturalised Qatari born in Sudan — struck goals against both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Critics in both countries claimed he was ineligible to play for the Qatar national team.

The Future of Football Politicking

All of this was a far cry from the start of the last decade, when Qatar positioned its successful bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup as a regional one. During the early years of preparations for the games, other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) formed an integral part of the planning, participating in a series of legacy projects with the Qatari organisers. However, it was perhaps a barometer of deteriorating relations that by mid-decade the tournament looked less like a Gulf event and more like a Qatari one. Once the boycott hit, the potential for the World Cup to serve as a regionally integrated tournament seemed to have disappeared.

In reality, this would have been disastrous for all concerned; football in Saudi Arabia is immensely popular and one would have expected large numbers of fans to make their way to Qatar for the tournament. Saudi fans would have missed out on the spectacle, while Qatar's showcase event would have been greatly diminished by the likely reduction in fan numbers. Similarly, given limitations on both transport capacity and hotel accommodation in Qatar, the prospect of fans not being able to transit through or stay in Dubai would have been a major setback in Qatar's staging of the World Cup.

Following the events of 2021 and the relative ease with which PIF's acquisition of Newcastle United was ultimately confirmed, the football frenzy that had occupied a central position during the years of the blockade apparently began to dissipate. Long before Newcastle United will ever play PSG in the European Champions League, the World Cup will provide an opportunity for Gulf unity to be displayed. This will help dispel some of the preconceptions and stereotypes that have been perpetuated about the region (and its football) over the last five years.

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Even so, there remains some potential for long-standing differences to resurface in November and December this year. There is no doubt that Qatar will be in the limelight, hence the government in Doha would need to be deft in ensuring that its neighbours also form part of the event delivery experience. Equally, once the competition is over there is some pressure to ensure that the event's legacy is not Qatar's alone. Qatar is believed to have already begun formulating its post-World Cup strategy within this parameter. It seems inevitable that this will focus on sustaining the small nation's position as a global event destination, with rumours now circulating that the Qatar Olympic Association is keen to bid for the right to host the 2036 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The government in Riyadh will be closely monitoring developments, as it too harbours aspirations in this regard. Sports has

well and truly become a proxy weapon in the ongoing divisions and battles that pervade country relations across the Gulf region.

As for during the event, it seems increasingly likely that both Saudi Arabia and Iran will qualify for the World Cup. Although the prospect of these teams playing against each other seems to be a marginally less sensitive issue than it might have been some years ago, it will test the Qatari government's policy of diplomatic hedging while providing an opportunity for Doha to show that it remains committed to playing a prominent and largely conciliatory role across the Gulf region.

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Many fans will be looking forward to some great World Cup goals in the Ras Abu Aboud, al-Wakrah and al-Khor Stadiums, although the biggest scores may come off the field in Qatar. After several years during which Qatar's showcase sports mega-event looked threatened, Gulf rapprochement appears to have won and the football politicking has subsided. Whether this midfield consensus can be sustained remains to be seen, although football having once been divisive now looks set to deliver some winners in both Gulf sports and the region's politics. That said, with cash from Neymar's 2017 transfer to PSG still circulating in football's player transfer economy, the Gulf feud's effects on the world's favourite game run more broadly and deeply than the World Cup.

For the authorities in Doha, football is not just a vanity project nor a source of geopolitical or economic advantage. And, the World Cup will not mark the end of Qatar's focus on either sports or football. Rather, it is one milestone in a massive nation-building project, of which sports and football are a part. A legacy of stadiums and infrastructure will remain once the FIFA event leaves town, while the Qatari government will continue to invest in talent acquisition and development projects, as well as staging activities such as National Sports Day. That said, with much of Europe now beating a path to Qatar's door in search of gas (following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impact on gas supplies), revenues will consequently increase. With its public coffers enhanced, we should expect Qatar to continue its spending on football which, one imagines, will prompt similar behaviours from Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain and others. ♦

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