
Daxiyanguo

Portuguese Journal of Asian Studies | Revista Portuguesa de Estudos Asiáticos

ISSN: 1645-4677 | ISSN-e: 2184-9129 | 2023, 2.º semestre, Número 31, páginas 67-88

DOI: 10.33167/1645-4677.DAXIYANGGUO2023.31/pp.67-88

The Power of Sports Diplomacy: The World Cup in Qatar

O Poder da Diplomacia do Desporto: O Mundial do Qatar

Hugo Coutinho Gonçalves*

* Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, Portugal; Email: hugocoutinhogoncalves@gmail.com

RESUMO

A partir do momento em que o Qatar foi anunciado como candidatura vencedora, no ano de 2010, o Mundial de 2022 prometia revolucionar a história dos grandes eventos desportivos e a forma como o Qatar era visto internacionalmente, e assim foi, o evento revelou-se transformador para o país e para toda a região do Médio Oriente. O investimento do Qatar na diplomacia do desporto posicionou o país como um dos principais intervenientes no panorama desportivo mundial. De facto, a diplomacia do desporto tem sido um tópico cada vez mais abordado, pela sua capacidade demonstrada de unir povos e nações. Assim, este artigo analisa a contribuição do Qatar para a diplomacia do desporto, através da perspectiva do Campeonato do Mundo de Futebol de 2022, explorando as implicações que a organização desta competição trouxe para o Qatar e o seu contributo para o *soft power* do emirado. O foco assenta no potencial da diploma-

cia do desporto para promover a paz, o desenvolvimento e as relações entre as nações. Neste caso, o Qatar exibiu a sua cultura, valores e tradição, bem como do mundo árabe, através de uma organização com altos e baixos, que se revelou um êxito.

Palavras-chave: Diplomacia; Diplomacia do Desporto; *Soft Power*; Mundial 2022; Qatar

ABSTRACT

From the moment Qatar was announced as the winning bid in 2010, the 2022 World Cup promised to change the history of major sporting events and the way Qatar was perceived internationally, and it did just that. The event proved to be a game-changer for the country and the entire Middle East region. Qatar's investment in sports diplomacy has positioned the country as one of the major players in the global sports scene. Indeed, sports diplomacy has been an ever-rising topic due to its proven ability to unite people and nations. Thus, this article analyses Qatar's contribution to sports diplomacy through the perspective of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, exploring the implications of hosting this competition and its contribution to the emirate's soft power. The focus is on the potential of sports diplomacy to promote peace, development and good relations between nations. In this event, Qatar showcased its culture, values and tradition, as well as those of the Arab world, through an organisation that had its highs and lows but ultimately proved to be a success.

Keywords: Diplomacy; Sports Diplomacy; Soft Power; 2022 World Cup; Qatar

1. Introduction

The FIFA World Cup, also known as the World Cup, had its last edition held for the first time in a Middle East country, Qatar, in 2022.

This article will focus precisely on the study of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and how the competition marked sports diplomacy, analysing its contribution. The truth is that, until 2010, the year in which Qatar was chosen to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the country was practically unknown regarding international affairs.

One of the most important moments in Qatar's recent history was the establishment, in 2008, of a plan to reform the country's economy by the year of 2030 – *Qatar's National Vision 2030* – which contains several primary objectives, such as developing Qatar's human and social capital, modernising the economy, reducing dependence on oil revenues and implementing measures against climate change and global warming. To achieve these goals, it is imperative to continue making significant investments in infrastructure, green energy, and high technology (Al Jaber, 2021).

For the Qatari government, the opportunity to organise an event with such dimension as the World Cup, proved to be the ideal occasion to boost its inter-

national affirmation strategy, with the help of diplomacy and sport, aiming at specific international objectives that are lucrative for the country (McManus & Amara, 2021), analysed during the article.

In terms of geography, Qatar is a relatively small country with low population density. Its inability to use hard power to defend itself against external threats motivated Qatar to adopt soft power with the aim of being a reference on the international scene (Naier, 2021). Investment in sports is an example of this position because it allows the country to showcase its capabilities, differentiation and hospitable culture.

For Qatar, it is important to be seen as an emerging sports centre, through the organisation of international sporting events of great visibility and the creation of facilities for training and rehabilitation of high-performance athletes. Domestically, Qatar sees sports as a builder of cultural identity and a source of national pride, using it as a diplomatic tool to establish new relationships and define its reputation and status on the international stage (McManus & Amara, 2021).

In fact, the way Qatar uses sports, intertwining it with diplomacy, reveals a special intention and several specific and well-defined purposes, that focus mainly on the internal desire to achieve international power and recognition, showing the world its strength and capabilities and using soft power for this purpose (Antwi-Boateng, 2013). The organisation of the 2022 FIFA World Cup fulfils this elaborate plan, which will be the main object of study since it was a unique competition, not only for Qatar but for the entire international panorama.

The definition of a relevant position and the country's soft power are some of the main references for this research, which combines the organisation of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, associated with human rights violations and allegations of corruption, with a brief framework of the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) and the future of sports diplomacy.

The objective of this article is to analyse Qatar's contribution to sports diplomacy through the 2022 World Cup, as well as its performance as the organiser of the event, understanding the implications of the competition for the country and the region, investigating how the World Cup promoted Qatar's image on the international stage.

Thus, it will be possible to interconnect the study of the World Cup and its influence, through the location, controversies involved and the singularity of its last realisation in Qatar, the first Middle East country to be in charge of a competition with such relevance.

2. Sports diplomacy and soft power: the role of diplomacy in International Relations

Diplomacy, as the art of the power of containment, is a new world order while the modern diplomacy is the balance of power between the forces of war and peace. The decisions made as a result of diplomacy affect the future internal and external policies of countries (Kissinger, 1994).

The substantial function of diplomacy is the representation and protection of the state's interests in the external panorama. In turn, the development of a set of practices, habits, rules and perceptions support the safeguarding and consequent consolidation of these interests at the international stage (Mongiardim, 2007).

According to Mongiardim (2007), public diplomacy emerged in the United States of America (US), from 1965 onwards, referring to the efforts developed by the Administration to promote contact between peoples, foster mutual understanding and conceive a beneficial external perception of a country, people, culture and policy, thus promoting an image that can favour their overall interests. In addition, this public character of diplomacy contrasts with the confidentiality and secrecy of classic diplomacy.

Public diplomacy is closely linked to soft power, in that, instead of communicating and attracting countries governments, it goes further and seeks to influence and interact with the public of other nations, following a good plan of action and attractive policies. Public diplomacy is the tool that governments use to demonstrate their values, culture and foreign policy to the rest of the world and, in this way, obtain soft power (Nye, 2008).

The concept of soft power is essential to understand the contribution of the Qatar World Cup to sports diplomacy, since it refers to a country's ability to influence the behaviour of other countries through cultural, political and economic means. This ability was put into practice through the organisation of major sports events and Qatar's overall investment in sports, through the *Qatar National Vision 2030*.

The use of sports as a diplomatic tool is an example of soft power and with the organisation of the World Cup, we witnessed an opportunity for Qatar to showcase its culture, tradition and hospitality by welcoming fans from all around the world and influencing its international perception, thereby reinforcing its image and reputation. This event allowed for the improvement of its relations with other countries and although it is too early to fully evaluate the long-term impact of the tournament, we can highlight some examples of positive development regarding the consequences of the event and Qatar's diplomatic relations.

Defined by Murray (2012), sports diplomacy is the use of athletes and sports events to engage, inform and create a favourable image among foreign audiences and organisations, in order to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to achieving the main foreign policy objectives of governments. This fact exposes the importance of sports diplomacy, which proves to be one of the multiple ways a state can achieve its foreign policy objectives.

International exposure, focus on culture and the well-known values rooted in sport make countries use it as a useful tool of soft power, aiming to improve public diplomacy and achieve international goals.

According to Murray (2018), sports diplomacy promotes soft power and plurality, instead of hard power, statism and division. In this way, countries seek to maximise their potential in the international system. The use of sports diplomacy, for this purpose, offers valid options for shaping the country's image, repositioning itself and assuming a role of relevance and consideration in the international community.

Sports diplomacy is also an instrument of foreign policy, capable of promoting causes, interests and objectives, being a significant and growing source of soft power. We take, as an example, Nelson Mandela's speech that united South Africa in the post-apartheid period, stating that "Sport has the power to change the world." (Mandela, 2000, as cited in Murray, 2018:257).

In recent decades, there has been a policy shift in sports, with a transition from hard power to soft power. The competition to secure the organisation of mega sports events such as the FIFA World Cup and the Olympics has been intense. This happens because it offers the nation, or nations organising the event, unique opportunities to steer public diplomacy, as well as projection and implementation of soft power, showing their attractiveness by hosting a successful event for millions of viewers (Grix & Lee, 2013). The extraordinary vision of states and the aforementioned shift is due to the growing importance of sports diplomacy in the relational panorama of states.

According to Anholt (2007), who focuses more on competitive identity and nation branding, countries' reputations are like the images of companies' brands and their products. Therefore, exercising soft power in modern international relations is fundamental. The author recognises the potential of sport to strengthen a country's soft power and build relationships between nations, always with the intention of improving its global image.

There is a strong connection between sports diplomacy and soft power, as the use of sports can help reinforce a country's soft power by creating a positive image and perception of that country abroad. Essentially, through the promotion of sports events and support given to athletes, countries can pro-

ject their values, culture and identity, bringing people together and building trust relationships that assist in establishing a stable position and recognition in the international panorama (Nye, 2004). Thus, there may also be greater political and economic influence that helps in achieving a country's foreign policy objectives.

3. The Historical Evolution of Qatar: A Geopolitical Perspective

Qatar is one of the smallest countries in the Middle East, with a geographic area of 11586km and about 2.5 million inhabitants, of which only approximately three hundred thousand are Qatari nationals. Approximately 80% of the country's population lives in the capital city of Doha.

Located on the Persian Gulf, with 563km of coastline, Qatar's only land border is with Saudi Arabia to the south, with 87km of length (CIA World Factbook, 2023).

Since emerging as an independent State in 1971, Qatar has faced a challenging regional atmosphere. The history of the Persian Gulf regional politics provides a broad insight into Qatar's political foundation and development (Zweiri & Al Qawasmi, 2021).

In terms of the characteristics that define hard power, Qatar is a weak country, because of its geography, population and military power, especially in comparison to its Gulf neighbours. Therefore, being vulnerable in these terms is a constant concern for the Qatari government. Since the early 90s, Qatar has sought ways to establish and protect itself by relying on its foreign policy and soft power instruments. Over the years, the emirate has used its financial resources to diversify its partnerships and build strong trade agreements with the US, Japan, China and, more recently, some European countries (Eddin & Rahma, 2021).

One of the main pillars of Qatar's foreign policy has been the projection of an elaborate image of the emirate itself as a nation rich in Islamic culture and heritage, modern and progressive. Investment in a variety of international conferences, mega-events, projects, and a world-class museum, the Museum of Islamic Art, have catapulted its culture and heritage (Kamrava, 2015).

In 2008, it was elaborated a plan to reform the economy and establish a progressive and sustainable society by 2030, called *Qatar's National Vision 2030*. This plan contains several primary objectives, such as developing Qatar's human and social capital, modernising the economy, reducing dependence on oil and gas revenues and implementing measures against climate change and global warming (Al-Jaber, 2021).

Despite its unenviable geographic location, Qatar has managed to combine its nation branding with State autonomy, allied with a comparative economic advantage to achieve a position of prominence and influence. In this way, in addition to ensuring its ability to survive through resilience, it had the ability to emerge as a regional power (Kamrava, 2015).

In 2010, after eighteen months of work developing proposals and applying to host the FIFA World Cup, FIFA awarded one of the world's biggest sporting events to a Middle East country, Qatar, an announcement that was well received by other Gulf States. The responsibility for this organisation entailed the implementation of several standards and the expansion of investment plans, especially in terms of infrastructure, as the execution of this event became part of the country's long-term international affirmation project (Al-Jaber, 2021).

Between 2010 and 2012, a series of pro-democracy protests, uprisings and civil wars erupted, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, events known as the Arab Spring, including the Egyptian Revolution, the Tunisian Revolution, the Libyan Civil War and the Syrian Civil War.

Political repression and widespread dissatisfaction with the social and economic situation in these countries were the main reasons for these events, in which the protesters called for an end to corruption and poverty, for more political representation and freedom.

Due to the receptiveness to change and consideration for the people by the Emir of Qatar, what could have been a negative period ended up becoming an affirmation of the emirate's reputation. In this way, the Arab Spring highlighted the position of a country that was never pressured to become a western-style democracy (Al-Jaber, 2021).

Regarding foreign policy, the Arab Spring also solidified Qatar's position as a major actor in the region, using its vast wealth and resources to support various groups and movements and shaping the outcomes of these protests to its advantage. This support was seen as a direct challenge to the traditional power structures in the region, creating regional tensions and contributing to the Gulf Crisis in 2017 (Ulrichsen, 2020).

Mediation of regional conflicts, government initiatives in the energy and education sectors, as well as the brands that represent the Qatari government, such as *Al Jazeera* or *Qatar Airways*, constitute good examples of the country's soft power. This demonstrates the ability of a small country to assert itself on the international stage (Antwi-Boateng, 2013).

In 2013, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani decided to voluntarily cede his emir position to Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, after 38 years of governance. Before

succeeding his father, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani held high political and defence positions, becoming increasingly involved in the formulation of Qatar's domestic and foreign policy. This political reform in Qatar contrasted with the monarchies of the GCC member States, which traditionally keep heads of State in power for life (Shaik, 2013).

Meanwhile, the Gulf Crisis, in 2017, occurred following increased strategic tension between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), due to the events of the Arab Spring and Qatar's expansive role in supporting activists, protesters and revolutionaries (Krieg, 2021).

Qatar found itself in a complex and uncertain situation, where it needed to search for new supply chains (Al-Jaber, 2021). However, its problem-solving capabilities and exemplary use of resources allowed Qatar to withstand this crisis. The country adopted a rule of law approach that contrasted with the attempt of the four countries to change Qatar's regional and international perception, through pressure and force. This dispute ended in January 2021 at the GCC summit, following diplomatic efforts and mediation by Kuwait, supported by the US (Ulrichsen, 2020).

Qatar's approach to this blockade, which aimed to isolate the country and force it to submit to the future hegemony of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, allowed the emirate to triumph in the court of international political opinion (Ulrichsen, 2020), making the country more stable and united, the ideal scenario to host the 2022 World Cup.

Regional and international initiatives led by Qatar to empower society and maintain national identity, especially in a society that is a mix of local and expatriates citizens, have been the key to development, improving the citizens' livelihoods and enabling the emirate to have a modern nation that is quite diverse, but also cultured and prosperous politically, socially and economically (Zweiri & Al Qawasmi, 2021).

4. Sports in Qatar: An Overview

The creation of the Qatar Olympic Committee (QOC) is part of the nation-building process following its independence in 1971. Established in 1979 and recognised by the International Olympic Committee in 1980, the Qatar Olympic Committee aims to ensure sporting success, encourage people into sports and bring world-class sporting events to the country (Silva, 2014).

Since the late 90s, Qatar has emerged as a brand of excellence and a capable State, focusing on politics, economics, culture and sports. In this way, it began building a popular, modern and smart brand, oriented towards business and the benefit of the emirate (Roberts, 2012).

To promote its nation branding, Qatar has assigned central importance to sports, which has been crucial for its positioning and international recognition. In fact, over the last two decades, Qatar has made significant strides in global sports through the organisation of international sporting events, sponsorship of Qatari companies to sports brands or clubs and the development of high-performance athlete training and rehabilitation facilities in Doha (McManus & Amara, 2021).

In order to operationalise the QNV 2030, it was established a strategic plan for the sports sector, included in the National Development Strategy 2011-2016 (NDS1), revealing six priorities, including sports and leisure facilities, promotion and advertising, sports education and awareness, athletes' development, sports management and hosting international events (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2011).

The most important aspect of Qatar's sports strategy is directly associated with the hosting of highly recognised international sports events. This international sports program, which culminated with the recent hosting of the 2022 World Cup, began with the hosting of the 2006 Asian Games, the second-largest multi-sports event in the world after the Olympic Games (McManus & Amara, 2021). About \$2.8 billion was spent on infrastructure, such as stadiums, sports complexes and hotels, with evident and significant urban changes being made (Al Jazeera, 2008).

The focus of Qatar on sports rests on four key pillars, direct investment in the sports industry, elite sports development, hosting major sporting events and sports diplomacy. In this way, sports events and athletes contribute to raising Qatar's regional and global profile. International sports are therefore used as a powerful tool for international engagement and diplomacy (Amara, 2013).

Since 2006, the number of international events held in Qatar has increased considerably. In recent years, Qatar has hosted the 2014 FINA World Swimming Championships, the 2015 IHF Handball World Championships, the 2016 UCI Road Cycling World Championships, the 2018 FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Championships, the Moto GP Qatar Grand Prix, a stage of the world circuit that has been the season opener race since 2007, the 2019 World Beach Games, the 2019 World Athletics Championships, the 2019 and 2020 FIFA Club World Cup, the 2021 Formula 1 Qatar Grand Prix, that will return this year, in 2023, under a 10-year contract, and many other events that have contributed to establishing the country as one of the leading hosts of international sports events, as well as in the promotion of a healthy and active lifestyle.

The 2022 World Cup was indeed the most internationally recognised event to take place in Qatar, in which 32 national teams participated and the national team of Argentina emerged as the winner.

Qatar's involvement in global sports and in the organisation of the 2022 World Cup have raised some questions related to soft disempowerment and criticism has arisen in these areas due to its controversial approach, especially at the political, infrastructure and human rights areas. Such events would be expected, as the international audience questions, contests and often resists a State's efforts to be credibly attractive, especially given Qatar's exponential growth and the awarding of such a prestigious event. Allegations of corruption and FIFA scandals fuelled this premise, allowing everything to be scrutinised by other states, international organisations, the media and also football fans.

The Qatar national football team recently won the 2019 Asian Cup, however, they did not have the best performance as hosts of the World Cup, scoring only one goal and losing all three group stage matches, finishing last in their group (FIFA, 2023). These events demonstrate the sporting improvement of the emirate and some evolution of the Qatari team, but there is still a lot of work to be done.

Qatar has demonstrated its ability to influence international sports in various ways, through investments, sponsorships and even television broadcasts. The emirate invests directly in sports through its sovereign wealth fund, *Qatar Investment Authority* (QIA), which was created in 2005 to protect and increase the emirate's financial assets, strengthening and diversifying the country's economy. The most relevant investment in this sense was made through the *Qatar Sports Investment* (QSI), the specific fund for sports investment, with the purchase, in 2011, of the French club *Paris Saint Germain*. Recently, the fund acquired about 21% of the share capital of the Portuguese club, *Sporting Clube de Braga*, and also diversified investment within sports, creating, together with the *International Padel Federation* (FIP), the professional world circuit of padel, *Premier Padel* (Qatar Sports Investment, 2023).

The sports profile of Qatar acts as a key element in the construction and consolidation of the country's nation branding, which has been solidly established, using public diplomacy to showcase its brand to the world. Diplomacy, through its channels and nation branding, through its elements, unite strategic tools to achieve a solid international presence and create a system of protection and defence (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023). Therefore, we can link the construction of national image, nation branding, with the use of sports diplo-

macy for this purpose, culminating in Qatar's purpose of asserting itself on the international stage as a preeminent actor.

Qatar's growing presence in the sports industry has been the result of a careful planning by the government in conjunction with other influential stakeholders. Surely, the country has the necessary infrastructure to host major international events and the potential to host a booming sports market.

4.1 FIFA and Qatar: The challenges and opportunities to host the World Cup

FIFA is the international body responsible for the futsal, beach football and football associations, the most practiced team sport in the world. It was founded on May 21, 1904, and its main competition is the FIFA Football World Cup, a competition held every four years. The World Cup is the most prestigious and widely watched sporting event in the world and it aims to honour the best national football team.

The role of institutions in the diplomatic arena is quite relevant for the international system. FIFA is a sports organisation related to football and uses its main competition to break political and social barriers. Consequently, it helps states improving their relationships with each other and introduce themselves to the world, in order to achieve their foreign policy objectives and increasing their relevance on the international scene.

One of FIFA's movements is called "Football Unites the World," something that few organisations, events, or personalities are able to conceive, hence the uniqueness of the sport and its connection to diplomacy, making it of high importance to international relations.

FIFA holds the responsibility of choosing which country will host this mega sporting event. On December 2, 2010, in Zurich, Switzerland, the organisation of the World Cup was awarded to Qatar. It would be the first World Cup in the Middle East and the Arab world and only the fourth to be held outside of Europe or the Americas. The social differences in comparison to Western cultures, being a non-democratic country and having Islam as the main religion, instantly triggered various questions regarding the viability of holding this competition.

Qatar would have nearly 12 years to meet all FIFA's requirements, which included the construction of roads, railways, metro lines, airports, stadiums, sports complexes and an entire tourist support structure, with restaurants, hotels and other attractions. The organisation of this event proved to be the ideal occasion for the consolidation of Qatar's international image, also taking the opportunity to develop the country and become an attractive tourist destination. Qatar could thereby cause unprecedented changes in its society,

having the possibility, through the 2022 World Cup, of building a legacy that could eventually become cultural heritage (Griffin, 2019).

Throughout the entire process, there was much controversy associated with the event organisation, which began immediately after the moment Qatar's bid was declared the winner, beating the bids of Japan, Australia, South Korea and the US. The choice of Qatar led to allegations of corruption and bribery of FIFA officials with voting power in the selection of the host country. Similar allegations were made regarding the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and the 2018 World Cup in Russia, which, combined with other adverse events, led to the FIFA scandal in 2015 and the consequent resignation of President Joseph Blatter (New York Times, 2020).

Perhaps, the most controversial problem faced by Qatar is related to workers' rights. The World Cup and other major sporting events, inspire humanity and can serve as a platform to promote human rights, for example, by fighting discrimination, supporting social development, or creating and improving job opportunities. However, in this case, the opposite happened, as the system used to regulate the employment of migrant workers was heavily censored.

The *kafala system*, as it is known, had already been practised for several decades in some Middle East countries. Nevertheless, with the organisation of the World Cup, international opinion, as well as several international organisations and workers' unions, came to highlight and completely disapprove this system, that facilitates the exploitation and mistreatment of migrant workers (Al Thani, 2021). In short, this system requires workers to have someone sponsoring them, usually their employer, who is responsible for their legal and immigration status in the country. The employer therefore has total control over the worker, being able to decide on their life and naturally restrict their freedom, resulting in long working hours, poor living conditions and low salaries. These workers are mostly low-skilled expatriates from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, India and the Philippines, whom Qatar has failed to support in their basic rights, such as their freedom, participation in labour strikes, joining an independent union, or the possibility to engage in collective bargaining, resulting only in exploitation, abuse and forced labour (Al-Jaber, 2021).

Several lives were lost during the whole process of stadium construction, far exceeding the numbers of the competitions in South Africa, Brazil and Russia, which forced the Qatar government to act. At the end of 2016, the government implemented a law that allows workers to change employers once their contracts expire, instead of being forced to leave the country as was often the case, and from then on, several reforms were implemented (Al-Jaber,

2021). In addition, legal actions against employers suspected of breaching labour laws increased significantly, with progress made by the government in this area and it was established *The Labour Disputes Settlement Committee* (Gulf Times, 2018).

Regarding the events related to the workers' issue, FIFA could have been more cautious, developing strategies and plans to ensure that human rights prevail and that this kind of events do not take place.

It is factual that the events referred to must be condemned, but we must be able to compare Qatar with its neighbours and similar regimes. From that perspective, we can understand the evolution of the State in these matters, which, after all the criticism regarding the way foreign workers were treated, initiated reforms to amend the system. The freedom of speech, religion, press and academic, distinguishes Qatar in a positive way, as well as how women are treated and perceived by society, occupying respected positions with economic and social equality (Al-Jaber, 2021).

Hereby, the Qatari government, even after some unfortunate events, has demonstrated that it is aware of the country's weaknesses, which have been being addressed through the authorities' consciousness and system reforms. These events have negatively affected the country's credibility on the international stage, hence the need for the government to act in order to mitigate the consequences of the misfortunes, sending a message to the world of a progressive, liberal and modern country.

The government's engagement with international criticism, allowed Qatar to host a successful event and differentiate itself from the other GCC member States by being the first Gulf country to substantially address human rights issues. Under the current leadership, Qatar has made significant progress and has emerged as a modern autocratic State, but there is still a long way to go, when it comes, for example, to the LGBTQ+ community rights.

It becomes mandatory to address the issue of the 2017 blockade, when discussing the reforms made by the State of Qatar. The blockade imposed by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt affected the competition's preparation, disrupting supply chains for construction projects and tarnishing the country's international image, which was accused of terrorism.

Since the application of foreign policy, the position in regional conflicts and the role of the media were important factors that caused some troubles in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which started more actively in 2014 at the GCC countries' meetings and later peaked in the outbreak of the blockade in June 2017 (Al-Jaber, 2021).

Despite this crisis, Qatar managed to impose itself and find supply alternatives, standing out for its reforms, such as a new law for refugees and several advances regarding permanent residence status for certain categories of immigrants, distancing itself from the problems that the blockade could cause and attempting to use it for its own benefit. However, an unsustainable impact was created in the involved countries, and through a combination of diplomatic, economic and political factors, the blockade was lifted in January 2021. Therefore, Qatar's search for greater liberalisation of internal policies and distancing from the rest of the Gulf countries should be highlighted, with a growing independence from Saudi Arabia's geopolitical orbit of influence, in particular, as a consequence of the blockade (Al-Jaber, 2021).

Notwithstanding all the difficulties and associated issues, Qatar was able to create a positive legacy, to host a successful World Cup and to achieve socio-economic development for the country and the region, building a solid national image and an attractive tourist destination, similar to its neighbour, the UAE.

4.2 Qatar's 2022 World Cup: The First Middle Eastern World Cup

Having Qatar as the host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup meant a great deal for the Arab world. The emirate had the opportunity to demonstrate its wealth, safety and political values and project them onto the international stage through this mega sporting event.

In 2010, when Qatar was chosen as the host, Sheikh Mohammed bin Hamad Al Thani, the chairman of Qatar's bid committee to host the World Cup, thanked the audience, in his speech, for believing in change and expanding football to the Middle East, especially to Qatar. In 2018, during the handover ceremony in Russia, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani emphasized that the 2022 World Cup is for all Arabs and, on behalf of all Arabs, welcomed football and the 2022 World Cup to Qatar. Furthermore, in the opening ceremony speech of the World Cup on 20 November 2022, the Emir reinforced the significance of this event for Qatar and the Arab world. (CBS, 2010; Al Jazeera, 2018; Al Arabiya, 2022).

Hassan Al-Thawadi, the Secretary General of the *Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy*, the body responsible for planning the operations, coordination and organisation of the projects required for Qatar to host the World Cup, took on the responsibility of representing the Arab world and the Middle East in an exemplary role at the seventy-second FIFA Congress in 2022, in Doha. Al-Thawadi referred to how the region and Arab culture have too often been associated with conflict and war, which is also due to stereotypes

and inferences resulting from a lack of understanding and familiarity with the region, as well as the division between East and West. So the World Cup would serve as an antidote to these assumptions, in which Qatar would truly demonstrate who the Arabs and the Arab world are, serving as a platform for a united world and leaving a transformative legacy for the region (Doha News, 2022). The overall idea of unity and understanding of Arab culture was fulfilled with the realisation of this tournament, which comes to fruition as a historic milestone for the region and the whole Arab world.

From these speeches, we can infer that Qatar has revealed itself as a regional actor capable of assuming a leading role in the Arab world, differentiating itself from other Arab countries and acting as a mediator. Thereby, we have witnessed the first real example of using sports diplomacy as a political argument for an Arab country, to position itself on the international stage, making exemplary use of its foreign policy. The Qatar World Cup has become an unequalled example for sports diplomacy, which is evidently marked by the organisation of this event.

More than 1.4 million fans travelled from several countries around the world to Qatar, in order to attend the event in person, and about 2.1 million room reservations for overnight stays were registered during the entire tournament (FIFA, 2023). It is significant to highlight that, in a period of one month, welcoming such a large number of fans requires exceptional organisation, as well as the necessary conditions to accommodate all these supporters of different nationalities.

This edition of the World Cup ended up being historic for several reasons, one of them was the fact that the French referee Stéphanie Frappart was the first woman to referee a game in the men's World Cup, the match between Costa Rica and Germany on December 1, 2022. Another example is linked to Argentine star Lionel Messi winning the World Cup, who, in this way managed to win everything there was to win throughout his career, turning the edition even more special, in football terms.

According to FIFA (2023), about 5 billion people interacted and followed the tournament events through a series of platforms and devices, in the media universe. In this sense, the twenty-second edition of the tournament had an average of 3.4 million viewers, more than the 3 million of the 2018 edition in Russia, totalling about 53 thousand people per match.

The tournament's opening game had approximately 550 million viewers, while the final between Argentina and France reached the record number of 1.5 billion viewers, surpassing the 1.12 billion of the Russia World Cup final between France and Croatia. A total of 242 million people were watching the

match, through *beIN Sports*, in the Middle East and North Africa region. These numbers are notable examples of the high television audiences achieved in the Qatar World Cup (FIFA, 2023).

Through the sale of 257,000 hospitality packages, which include match tickets, accommodation and other extra experiences, the official hospitality program of the Qatar 2022 World Cup generated the tournament's highest revenue, surpassing the record of the 2014 Brazil World Cup package (FIFA, 2023). In this way, FIFA and Qatar leveraged the country's economy and the fans sporting and cultural experience.

The realisation of the Qatar World Cup was recorded as the most geographically compact, which allowed fans, for the first time in history, to attend more than one game per day. Moreover, it also proved to be the most sustainable World Cup event ever, certified by the international standard norm for sustainable event management systems, *ISO 20121*, supporting FIFA's vision and the development goals that Qatar has set, serving as a catalyst to achieve the long-term development goals, established in the *Qatar National Vision 2030* and the *National Development Strategy 2018-2022*.

Hassan Al Thawadi stated that, as Qatar promised in 2010, the World Cup edition was outstanding, providing an exemplary platform for cultural exchange and raising Arab culture. The event will serve act as a benchmark for future hosts of major events and leave a massive legacy for the country and the region, both socially, economically and environmentally (Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, 2022).

Despite a period of vicissitudes from the year 2010 to the event's realisation, it is noticeable that there was a positive contribution to the Qatar State and to the achievement of its objectives referenced in QNV 2030, essentially through its soft power projection and appropriate use of sports for this purpose.

4.3 Regional Influence of the Qatar World Cup: The future of Sports Diplomacy

Qatar is a model for other countries in the region to aspire to host the World Cup in the future, as it has understood the valuable tool that sports diplomacy represents and has used it in an exemplary and pioneering way in the region.

The 2022 edition was the last to feature 32 national teams, as the competition will be held with 48 teams from 2026 onwards.

The winning bid for the 2030 World Cup will be announced at the 74th FIFA Congress in 2024 (the date and location have not been determined yet). At the moment, it is possible to see that Saudi Arabia's bid is part of its ambitious project to become a relevant player on the international sports stage, surpass-

ing Qatar's sporting success and establishing itself as the dominant and most respected country in the Gulf and the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia has also understood that sports diplomacy is the way forward to achieve international recognition and acceptance, a reflection of the contribution that Qatar has made to sports diplomacy. For this reason, Saudi Arabia has acted by signing the Portuguese football legend Cristiano Ronaldo to defend the colours of *Al-Nassr*, a club owned that is government-owned but independently managed. Interestingly, Lionel Messi had also been appointed as the country's tourism ambassador in May 2022. These measures are part of the country's sports plan and an attempt by the Saudi Arabian government to associate strong brand images with its campaign as a possible host of the world's most important competition between national teams, in 2030.

These days, Qatar is an example of how to use sport as a soft power tool, promoting Arab culture and its values, projecting a positive image to the world, which will lead other countries to adopt similar strategies in order to boost their global image through sport, as is the case of Saudi Arabia.

The promotion of sustainable development and social inclusion through sports has been a priority for Qatar, which demonstrates a good use of sports diplomacy to achieve social and developmental objectives. The most important issues of the 2022 World Cup are based on ethical considerations associated with organising major sporting events, the risks and challenges faced by the country, including human rights issues, working conditions and environmental sustainability. It is expected to serve as an example for future organisers and to proactively address these issues in their implementation of sports diplomacy.

It is difficult to predict how sports diplomacy will be applied in the future, but it is very likely that countries will continue to invest heavily in major sporting events organisation, using them as opportunities to showcase their culture and values to the world, strengthening their image on the international stage.

Associating sports diplomacy with broader social and environmental goals, as well as the use of innovative techniques for engaging with fans, is something we may see in the future due to the emergence of new technologies and platforms, such as artificial intelligence tools, that will be used to reach larger audiences and promote countries and their sporting events more efficiently.

Overall, the Qatar World Cup has had a significant contribution in the way countries can and should use sports diplomacy to their advantage, not only in terms of opportunity but also regarding the challenges associated with organ-

ising a major sporting event, so Qatar's contribution is likely to have a lasting impact on what we call sports diplomacy and its use.

The 2026 World Cup will be held in the US, Canada and Mexico, with matches taking place in 16 different cities. So from 50 km radius from the event venue in Doha, Qatar, we will move to a maximum distance of 4570 km between Vancouver, Canada, and Guadalajara, Mexico. The event will not take place in November in December, but between June and July again, the usual date of the competition.

5. Conclusion

Despite the difficulties associated with organising the World Cup, Qatar was able to successfully host an exemplary event, which proved to be highly beneficial. Even with the controversy and international criticism, the emirate reacted positively, striving to correct the mistakes made in the preparation of the event, which should serve as an example so that, in future editions, there is extra caution in the organisations of an event of this magnitude.

The ethical implications arising from the use of sports as an instrument of diplomacy, particularly the controversy surrounding migrant workers and human rights violations, highlighted the need for improved transparency and responsibility from the entities involved, making it mandatory the development of a monitoring campaign that promotes good practices in defence of fundamental rights.

Therefore, the 2022 World Cup highlighted the increasing importance of sports in diplomacy by demonstrating the enormous potential of sporting events as a diplomatic tool, as well as the need for further commitment in this domain, contributing, in this way, to the development of sports diplomacy. As countries compete to host the upcoming competitions, it is expected that they will positively and ethically use football to promote national interests, project their image and influence, and make progress in terms of relations between nations.

Before 2010, Qatar was a country that went unnoticed on the international scene, with a barely noticeable sporting representation, a situation that changed dramatically after hosting the world's major football event and subsequent unprecedented investment. The emirate highlighted the culture and notoriety of a nation that has been building a strong presence in various sectors, establishing its position on the international stage, even though it is a small country with a lot of competition around it.

The event had several implications for the country, such as the lasting legacy created, including improved infrastructure, increased tourism and a

reinforced international profile in sports, demonstrating the ability to host major international events. Furthermore, the collaboration between different nations and institutions stimulated a phenomenon of international cooperation and cultural exchange, providing a platform for communication and encouragement of international peace, particularly at the diplomatic level. The World Cup has also contributed to the improvement of relations between Qatar and the GCC countries, promoting regional stability.

Through the World Cup, Qatar was able to take advantage of other income sources besides oil, one of the major goals of the QNV 2030, which is being delivered and continues to be developed. The economic boost resulting from the event is one of the reasons for several countries bidding to host the event, using sports diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy. Apart from this short-term economic boost, it is very difficult to calculate the long-term return, but it is expected that, given the foreign investment and promotion of the country, there will be a willingness for companies and people to become associated with Qatar, whether through sports, trade or tourist trips to the country.

Saudi Arabia, witnessing this set of events, found in this event the ideal opportunity to return to the top of the hierarchy by bidding to host the 2030 World Cup, an event that will mark the centenary of this men's international football tournament.

Finally, it is possible to attest the strong influence of this historic event, not only for the Qatari society but also for the Middle East and sports diplomacy, by the fact that it has influenced the emirate's reputation and allowed regional and international cooperation. The unique situations that took place on this stage will certainly shape the future of international sports and Middle East diplomacy in the years to come.

Data de receção: 04/05/2023

Data de aprovação: 22/09/2023

References

- Al Arabiya. (2022). Qatar's emir says World Cup gathers people of all beliefs [Video]. Youtube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYVRxxzL-Woo&ab_channel=AlArabiyaEnglish
- Al Jaber, K. (2021). Governance and the State in Qatar. In Zweiri, M., & Al Qawasmi, F. (Eds.). (2021). *Contemporary Qatar: Examining State and Society* (Vol. 4). Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1391-3>
- Al Jazeera. (2008). Qatar to unite the world with bid. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2008/5/7/qatar-to-unite-the-world-with-bid>

- Al Jazeera. (2018). Emir of Qatar: On behalf of all Arabs, we welcome the whole world to the World Cup [Video]. Youtube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpCl-3L8EUI&ab_channel=AlJazeeraMubasher%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B1.
- Al-Tamimi, N., Amin, A., & Zarrinabadi, N. (2023). *Qatar's Nation Branding and Soft Power: Exploring the Effects on National Identity and International Stance*. Springer Nature Switzerland. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-24651-7>
- Al Thani, M. (2021). Channelling Soft Power: The Qatar 2022 World Cup, Migrant Workers, and International Image. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 38(17), 1729–1752. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2021.1988932>
- Amara, M. (2013). The Pillars of Qatar's International Sport Strategy. *E-International Relations*.
- Anholt, S. (2007). Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions. *Journal of Brand Management*, 14(6). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2550086>
- Antwi-Boateng, O. (2013). The rise of Qatar as a soft power and the challenges. *European Scientific Journal, ESJ*. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2013.v9n10p%p>
- CBS. (2010). 2022 World Cup goes to Qatar [Video]. Youtube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZLswHe3owE&ab_channel=CBS
- CIA The World Factbook. (2023). Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/qatar>
- Doha News. (2022). Hassan Al Thawadi on Qatar as the host for the FIFA World Cup [Video]. Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=504345214576557>
- Eddin, L. N. & Rahma, E. A. (2021). On Qatar's Pragmatic Foreign Policy: The Palestinian Case. In Zweiri, M., & Al Qawasmi, F. (Eds.). (2021). *Contemporary Qatar: Examining State and Society* (Vol. 4). Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1391-3>
- FIFA. (2023). Knockout and Groups. Available at: <https://www.fifa.com/fifaplus/en/tournaments/mens/worldcup/qatar2022/knockout-and-groups>
- FIFA. (2023). The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 by the numbers. Available at: <https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/588f70e99a18a29f/original/FIFA-World-Cup-2022-Group-Stage-by-the-numbers.pdf>
- Gulf Times. (2018). Available at: <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/597400/qatars-new-labour-disputes-settlement-process>
- Griffin, T. R. (2019). National identity, social legacy and Qatar 2022: The cultural ramifications of FIFA's first Arab World Cup. *Soccer & Society*, 20(7–8), 1000–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2019.1680499>
- Grix, J., & Lee, D. (2013). Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction. *Global Society*, 27(4), 521–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2013.827632>
- Kamrava, M. (2015). *Qatar: Small state, big politics: with a new preface* (Paperback edition). Cornell University Press.

- Kissinger, H. (1994). *Diplomacy*. Simon and Schuster.
- Krieg, A. (2021). The Gulf Crisis and Qatar's Pursuit of Self-Sufficiency in the Military Domain. In Zweiri, M., & Al Qawasmi, F. (Eds.). (2021). *Contemporary Qatar: Examining State and Society* (Vol. 4). Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1391-3>
- McManus, J. & Amara, M. (2021). Sport at Home, Sport in the World: Evaluating Qatar's Sports Strategy from Above and Below. In Zweiri, M., & Al Qawasmi, F. (Eds.). (2021). *Contemporary Qatar: Examining State and Society* (Vol. 4). Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1391-3>
- Mongiardim, M. R. (2007). *Diplomacia*. Almedina.
- Murray, S. (2012). The Two Halves of Sports-Diplomacy. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 23(3), 576–592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2012.706544>
- Murray, S. (2018). *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*. Routledge.
- Qatar Sports Investment. (2023). Available at: <https://www.qsi.com.qa/portfolio/investments/>
- Naier, T. (2021). Qatar Soft Power: From Rising to the Crisis. *International Journal of Business and Applied Social Science*, 43–52. <https://doi.org/10.33642/ijbass.v7n8p6>
- New York Times. 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/sports/soccer/qatar-and-russia-bribery-world-cup-fifa.html>
- Nye, J. S. (2008). Public Diplomacy and Soft Power. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>
- Planning and Statistics Authority. (2011). About National Development Strategy. Available at: <https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/nds1/Pages/default.aspx>
- Roberts, D. B. (2012). Understanding Qatar's Foreign Policy Objectives. *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(2), 233–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2012.695123>
- Shaikh, S. (2013). *A leadership succession in Qatar*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/06/24/a-leadership-succession-in-qatar/>
- Silva, L. H. R. (2014). The Establishment of the Qatar National Olympic Committee: Building the National Sport Identity. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31(3), 306–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2013.878136>
- Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy, (2022). Qatar hosts more than 1.4 million visitors during FIFA World Cup. Available at: <https://www.qatar2022.qa/en/news/qatar-hosts-more-than-one-million-visitors-during-fifa-world-cup>
- Ulrichsen, K. C. (2020). *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*. Oxford University Press.
- Zweiri, M., & Al Qawasmi, F. (Eds.). (2021). *Contemporary Qatar: Examining State and Society* (Vol. 4). Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1391-3>

Sobre o autor

HUGO COUTINHO GONÇALVES é Mestrando em Relações Internacionais pelo Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas (ISCSIP) da Universidade de Lisboa e Licenciado em Gestão de Recursos Humanos e Organização Estratégica pela Universidade

Europeia. Tem como principais interesses de investigação a Diplomacia e a Diplomacia do Desporto.

[ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1154-6545>]

About the author

HUGO COUTINHO GONÇALVES is a Master's student in International Relations of the Institute of Social and Political Sciences (ISCSP), University of Lisbon and have a Bachelor's Degree in Human Resources Management and Strategic Organisation from Universidade Europeia. His main research interests are Diplomacy and Sports Diplomacy.

[ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1154-6545>]