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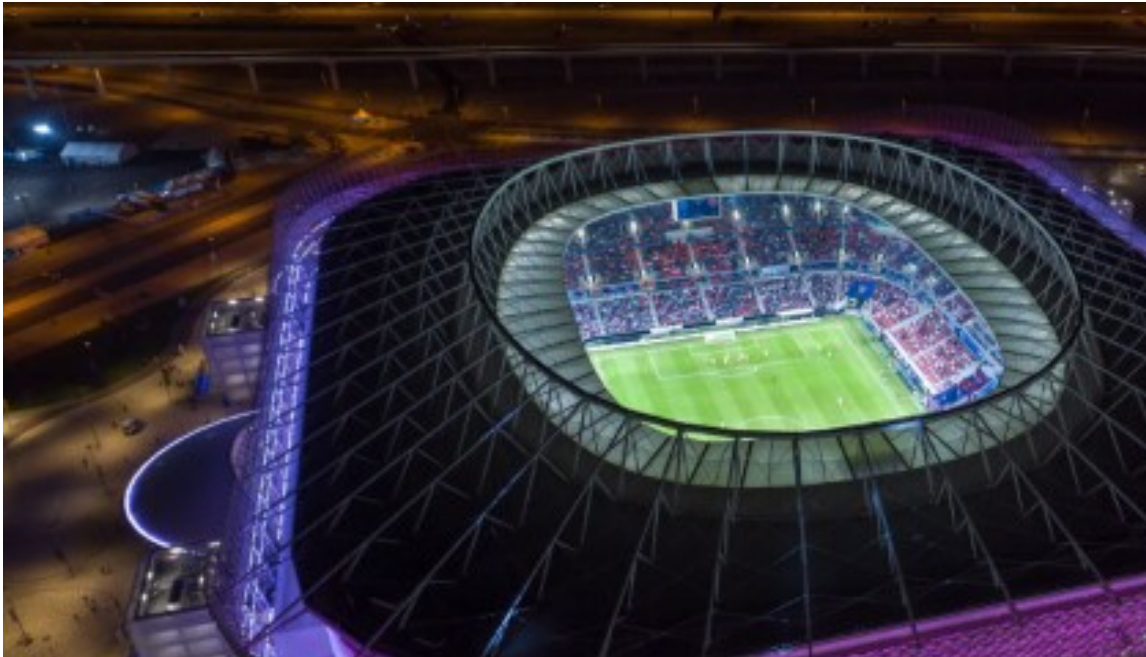
زبانهای اروپایی

Ronny Blaschke

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## *The World Cup arrives stained*

In the Gulf, football reflects struggles for economic power, territorial claims and religious tensions. During and after the Arab Spring, Qatar sided with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Islamic forces in Tunisia, anti-Gaddafi rebels in Libya and rebels opposed to Assad in Syria.



Since the designation of Qatar as the venue of the next World Cup, not only sports are being talked about. Qatar is known worldwide for social exploitation, the violation of human rights, the persecution of homosexuals and the banning of political parties. The football festival will take place in a country where reality is far from festive.

It is a sign of rejection. During the semi-finals of the 2019 Asian Cup, there are spectators from the host country in Abu Dhabi throwing bottles and shoes at the Qatar team. Abu

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[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

Dhabi is the capital of the United Arab Emirates, a rich oil monarchy of the Persian Gulf. The United Arab Emirates is an important partner of Saudi Arabia. Both countries resist Qatar's growing influence.

Three days after the semi-finals, Qatar beats Japan in the final and is proclaimed Asian champion for the first time. UAE politicians and sports officials boycott the awards ceremony. "Football is a mirror of tensions in the Gulf," says Jassim Matar Kunji, a former goalkeeper for Qatar's professional league and currently a journalist for Al Jazeera TV channel. "Sponsorship contracts between countries were terminated and player transfers were cancelled."

In 2017, an old Gulf conflict came to a head. At that time, Saudi Arabia imposed an economic blockade on Qatar. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt followed suit, and also suspended diplomatic relations with Doha. They accused Qatar of supporting terrorist groups and of being too close to the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. Qatar stopped receiving food imported from Saudi Arabia. State-owned airline Qatar Airways was no longer allowed to use Saudi airspace.

"Many Qataris considered an invasion by Saudi Arabia possible," says Jassim Matar Kunji. Saudi Arabia's military has around 200,000 soldiers, while Qatar's has 12,000. To compensate for military inferiority, Qatar is pursuing an elaborate soft power strategy: with billions in investments in culture, science and football, with major events, shareholdings in clubs or partnering as a sponsor with Paris Saint-Germain or FC Bayern Munich. The organization of the World Cup at the end of 2022 is the most important part of this strategy.



Poster by [Sébastien Marchal](#)

Until just over 50 years ago, Arab power centers were in Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus. The small emirates of the Arabian Peninsula, such as Kuwait, Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates, were still irrelevant. Qatar, the last under British control, had a population of just 100,000 when it gained independence in 1971, and was under Saudi Arabia's military protection. In 1990, much more powerful Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the United States had to intervene to liberate it. Smaller States in the region realized that they would be clearly inferior to a comparable attack.

Traditionally, the most important decisions were made in Qatar by a handful of people, writes political scientist Mehran Kamrava in his book *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. For decades, power has been held by the Al Thani dynasty, originally from Saudi Arabia. In 1995, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani overthrew his own father in a bloodless coup. In Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, rulers feared that power would also be taken from them.

#### *For a future without oil and gas*

The new emir wanted to free Qatar from the clutches of Saudi Arabia and initiated modernization. In the mid-1990s, he created the Al Jazeera news channel and opened the economy to foreign investors. In Doha, branches of renowned universities in the United States, Great Britain and France, three of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, were established.

With these measures, Qatar secured contacts in Europe and North America, but the soft power did not yet have global visibility. "The Gulf states want to develop new branches of the economy. It's that their traditional sources of revenue, oil and gas, are finite," says Mahfoud Amara, a professor of sports science at Qatar University in Doha. "Sport serves as a strategy to raise awareness of other sectors such as tourism, trade or transport."

The Qatari dynasty had one of the largest sports academies in the world built, the Aspire Academy, inaugurated in 2005. Dozens of international competitions are now held annually in Doha. In December 2010, the award of the 2022 World Cup made headlines across the globe. Soon after, Qatar acquired the majority of Paris Saint-Germain. In addition, Qatar Airways became the first sponsor of the FC Barcelona shirt. More and more elite clubs have training camps in Doha.



Aspire Academy

Qatar has invested more than €1.5 billion in European football. In Germany, England or France, financial management is criticized; after all, the owner and the sponsor are difficult to separate. But in the Arab world, Qatari influence is growing. That upsets Saudi Arabia, a long-time hegemon, says sports economics expert Simon Chadwick: "An agency wanted to show how inadequate Qatar was for the World Cup. Then it turned out that the campaign was funded by Saudi Arabia."

#### *Shift of power to the East*

In the Gulf region, Qatar competes for investors, tourists and skilled labor, especially with Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the UAE's most influential small states. Dubai, larger, bets on shopping malls, entertainment for families and big events such as the Dubai World Expo. Dubai Airport is a nerve centre in the region, also thanks to football: state-owned airline Emirates has been a sponsor of major European leagues since the turn of the millennium.



Abu Dhabi and Dubai

The smaller Emirate of Abu Dhabi did the same in 2008 and bought Manchester City. National carrier Etihad, which competes with Emirates and Qatar Airways, sponsors the jersey. The respective "City Football Group" deployed a global network and acquired shares of clubs in New York, Melbourne and Mumbai, as well as in Chengdu, in southwest China. Etihad wants Chengdu to become a pole of attraction for East Asia. And in Qatar, in turn, the stadium for the 2022 World Cup final was built by Chinese companies. "In the football industry we are seeing a huge shift of power to the East," says Simon Chadwick.

In the Gulf, football reflects struggles for economic power, territorial claims and religious tensions. During and after the Arab Spring, Qatar sided with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Islamic forces in Tunisia, anti-Gaddafi rebels in Libya and rebels opposed to Assad in Syria. He also rejected unconditional support for the Saudi military alliance in the Yemen war.

Saudi Arabia and its allies first withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014. Among other things, Riyadh demanded the closure of Al Jazeera and the Qatar Foundation, two of the most important institutions for Doha. Qatar fought back. In August 2017 it was announced the transfer of Brazilian player Neymar from FC Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain for the record sum of 222 million euros. "A masterpiece of strategy," says political scientist Danyel Reiche, editor of the book *Sport, Politics and Society in the Middle East*: "Shortly after the start of the blockade, Qatar changed the discourse in the

media. The transfer was incredibly expensive. But the whole world was talking only about football and no longer about isolated Qatar."



#### [Neymar's transfer impacts the Fair Play financier](#)

The spiral of hostilities would probably have continued, but then came the coronavirus. The price of oil, which was already low, plummeted, foreign investment retreated, and the fledgling tourism sector lost tens of thousands of jobs. In early January 2021, Saudi Arabia ended the blockade against Qatar after three and a half years. "It's a fragile peace," says Middle East expert Kristian Ulrichsen, who wrote a book on the Gulf crisis. "The Gulf countries have realized that they need to work together in these difficult times." Riyadh and Dubai also want to cash in on the 2022 World Cup. If it is not with tournaments, then with training centers, sponsored events or hosting fans. It also discusses the possibility of joint technology platforms and a strategy against the high rates of diabetes in the region to alleviate the health system in the long term.

None of the Persian Gulf countries has democratic government and there is also no separation of powers. Reporters Without Borders' 2021 Press Freedom Index ranks Qatar 128th out of 180 countries. Homosexuals are persecuted. Political parties are prohibited. There are no independent media that call into question the hereditary monarchy. Wenzel Michalski of Human Rights Watch criticizes the fact that clubs from democratically governed countries like FC Bayern are helping, with their associations, Qatar's foreign policy: "If European clubs don't want to give up profits, they could at least show more

interest in the few critical local activists. Football should be regularly advised by human rights organisations."

In Qatar, protests like those in Algeria or Lebanon are unlikely to occur in 2019. The emir has concocted a large network of relatives and friends in the state, many of whom hold various positions, something quite common in the Gulf. The ruling family allows the population, just over 250,000 citizens, to get its share of prosperity. They enjoy privileges in education, health care and jobs, and their per capita income is one of the highest in the world.

### *Concessions to conservative circles*

During the development phase of the Qatari state in the 1970s, the dynasty suffered even greater resistance. At that time, migrant workers came mainly from Egypt, Palestine and Yemen. They spoke the same language as the locals, but many of them had anti-monarchical stances. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Qatari government tried to attract migrant workers from South Asia, whom it was easier to isolate culturally. Workers in India, Bangladesh or Pakistan had a *kafala*, a guarantor who could hold their passports, make it difficult for them to leave and prevent them from changing jobs. These workers enabled the rapid development of Doha. Many of them fell ill or died from the high temperatures.



Kafala, the controversial sponsorship employment system that "enslaves" workers



Of the approximately 2.8 million inhabitants, only 10% have a Qatari passport. In no other country is the proportion of immigrants so high. "Some entrepreneurs are concerned that Qatar may open up too much as a result of the World Cup," says political scientist Mehran Kamrava of Georgetown University in Doha. They fear that in 2022 football fans will drink alcohol in public and homosexuals will not hide their sexuality. In 2018, the emir raised the price of alcoholic beverages by taxing them, and at Qatar University English was replaced by Arabic as the main language. Concessions to conservative circles, because soft power in foreign policy can only be exercised with stability in domestic politics. Says Kamrava: "The World Cup allows politicians to push for reforms more quickly than some sectors of the economy don't really want." These are reforms that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sometimes perceive as a provocation.

Since Qatar was awarded the world cup hosting in 2010, the emirate has come under intense criticism, especially in Western Europe. That discourse only weakened slightly in 2021, when Doha helped evacuate tens of thousands of people from Afghanistan after the Taliban seized power there. And Qatar could also intervene in case of possible bottlenecks for gas in Europe. This is another reason why German Economy Minister Robert Habeck founded an energy association to replace Russian gas. One way or another, the World Cup will definitely put Doha on the world map.

*Ronny Blaschke*

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*Translated by Carlos Diaz Rocca*

*Edited by María Piedad Ossaba*

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