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Soft Power and Public Diplomacy In Qatar After the World Cup ^[1]

Nothing confirms better the proposition that hard power is getting softer, and soft power harder than the grand spectacle of Qatar's World Cup final. The standard Joe Nye definition of soft power has always put culture — in whatever form — as point number one in his conception. So assuming soccer is a form of culture, then Qatar scores as high as possible on that criterion, even without having a team of its own of any distinction. But then come Nye's two more challenging, highly moralistic qualifications: a nation's "political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)."

Leaving aside the question of whether any contemporary nation-state can ever meet these standards over any length of time, there can be little doubt that Qatar is not among them. There were — and still are — too many issues and ambiguities: the treatment of migrant workers, anti-LGBTQ+ laws, women's rights and restrictions on the freedom of speech, and

then, after the World Cup, the discovery that the Emirate has been using bribes (tiny by their standards) to sway voters in the European Parliament on questions of interest to Qatar.

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As is well-known, Qatar’s hard power consists entirely of the cash it derives from the global sale of its vast reserves of natural gas. Its sovereign wealth fund is calculated to amount to \$461 bn., and that comes after reputedly spending more than \$200bn in preparing for the World Cup, an effort which included investing in the highest quality of new stadiums, hospitality resources and infrastructure. One result was that the vast publicity surrounding the event seemed to crown Qatar as uniquely successful in turning hard power into influence in the world of football in particular and sport in general. But the political and cultural dynamics underlying the great display spoke of concerns that went far beyond that moment. They revolve around enduring questions of *sovereignty, identity and modernity*. As we shall see, Qatar’s version of public diplomacy is one of the tools the government uses to manage its distinctive interpretation of these key criteria of nationhood.

On the front of sovereignty, Qatar is engaged in a permanent open competition with all the Gulf states for eminence, recognition, credibility and respect. In the years 2017–2021, this rivalry turned into an open diplomatic confrontation, with Qatar isolated and facing a hostile front led by Saudi Arabia but also consisting of Bahrein, Egypt and the UAE. At issue were the alleged ties of Qatar to Islamic fundamentalists and in particular Iran. As I demonstrated in a previous [blog](#) short of war, football, and broadcasting rights to transmit European matches on TV, turned into one of the key areas of confrontation. Thanks to an unrelenting effort of diplomacy by Kuwait in particular, and nudges from the Trump White House, the two sides managed a reconciliation in time for the [World Cup](#) (Jan 5, 2021). Saudi Arabia’s de facto ruler, Mohammed Bin Salman, was seen in Doha wearing a [Qatari scarf](#).

But the stakes in this competition are constantly increasing, and the Saudis have now allegedly launched a vast effort to capture the 2030 World Cup, involving the construction of a front involving Greece and Egypt, with Saudi Arabia fully underlying the costs of its partners, as long as 75 percent of the huge 48-team tournament itself would be held in the [Gulf state](#). This comes after Saudi Arabia’s successful effort to take over the 2029 Winter Olympics as part of its \$500bn. new desert city project called Neom, and its \$2bn. investment in a private, elite golf tournament.

These colossal initiatives express one version of the two other fronts on which the Gulf states are all intensively engaged, the struggle to reconcile their own ideas of modernity and of identity with what the rest of the world has come to expect of them. Qatar’s public diplomacy website — [Katara Public Diplomacy](#) — says that its vision is meant to invoke “a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable future for peoples of the world,” all linked up through its [PD efforts](#). The institution is a spin-off from the grand “[Qatar National Vision](#)” project, which “aims that – by 2030 – Qatar becomes an advanced society capable of sustaining its development and

providing a high standard of living for its people.” The Vision lists major 5 major challenges facing the nation-state. Number one is “modernisation and preservation of traditions.”

So at the heart of Katara Public Diplomacy is the “Katara Cultural Village,” and at the heart of the village is a unique mosque, the “Jewellery Box” or “Masjid of Katara”. The website says:

“The interior and exterior architectural designs, together with the minaret, the dome, and the prayer niche (mihrab) are all inspired by several famous mosques found in various cities and capitals of the Muslim world. In addition to these notable aspects, the masjid abounds with artistic handicrafts, such as ornaments, inscriptions, and rich mosaic tiles.”

The complex is decorated with the most lavish styles of Ottoman, Greek and Arabic architecture, including their tiles, jewels and minarets. Included are an amphitheater, a drama theatre, an opera house, an art gallery and “Al Gannas” ...

“Al Gannas (Hunting Association Headquarter) houses the cultural association for hunters, founded in 2008. This building is dedicated to promoting traditional Arabic hunting, and to providing support for organizing hunting events and festivals. The association makes use of the best facilities and equipment required for hunting and encourages research and studies in the field.”

Football is nowhere to be seen, nor is it ever mentioned in the grand 2030 Vision design.

In 2014, the distinguished Cambridge Professor, Christopher Hill, reflecting for the British Academy on *Soft Power and the UK's Role in the World*, wrote that “the assets that really matter are the deeper, slow-moving qualities of a society and not the surface glitter of a successful Olympics or royal wedding ... Soft power begins at home, as reputation and trust are both intimately linked to the nature of domestic achievements.” The Qataris are painfully aware that theirs is a young and vulnerable society, which must rely on the nation's wealth far into the future for the means to reconcile their ideas of sovereignty, modernity and identity. The surface glitter of their football extravaganza dazzled the world, but too many shadows hang over their practice of civil society for the Qatari versions of soft power to go unchallenged from the outside.
