

Football and nation-building in Gulf monarchies: Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar

David Hernández Martínez

Introduction

Football is one of the remarkable mass phenomena of the globalisation era—a game followed by millions worldwide. No country remains alien to the enormous collective impact of football, where pure entertainment is mixed with political and power elements. In this sense, the populations of the Gulf monarchies have a long-standing connection with this sport, which leads them to combine their passion for national competitions and teams with the following of international tournaments, clubs, and stars.

Football expansion as a social phenomenon in the Gulf monarchies coincides with the construction and consolidation of nation-states throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. The most direct result is that this sport becomes an intrinsic part of the local identity and maintains a particular relationship with the established power.

The chapter analyses the socio-political dimension of football in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. The research is structured in four sections. First, a brief historical overview of the development of football in the countries analysed. Second, the main objectives for which football can be used as a political tool. Third, how the case studies exhibit a close link between football and the construction of nation-states. Finally, the central dilemmas surrounding the future evolution of this sport within the Gulf monarchies.

The expansion of football in the Gulf monarchies

Football was introduced in the Gulf monarchies at the beginning of the 20th century through three sources of influence. First, the British presence in the area led military personnel, diplomats, and merchants from the United Kingdom to organise the first sports matches and societies. Second, thanks to the migration of Arab workers from other parts of the Middle East, due to the growing demand for labour to exploit oil and gas fields. Finally, partly due to the action of an exclusive local elite, who began to travel abroad, work and study in England

and other Western countries and developed a passion for football, gradually making it one of their favourite pastimes.

Football has a unique journey in the case of Saudi Arabia in comparison with the UAE and Qatar. There are records of the first Saudi matches and clubs from the beginning of the 20th century, several years before the constitution of the modern Saudi state itself (Alkhunaizi, 2024). The Saudi Federation was established in 1956, and since then, the national team has participated in international competitions. The Saudi team has established itself as a football power within the Middle East and Asia. In the 1970s, national tournaments began to be held, and the country's first women's football league was created in 2020.

The institutionalisation of football in the UAE and Qatar is later than in Saudi Arabia, which partly explains the uneven performance of their national teams in international competitions. In the case of the UAE, the first football clubs began to be created in the 1940s and 1950s in different emirates, still under British protectorate (Thani, 2022: 65-66). The decolonisation process and the constitution of the new state were immediately accompanied by the creation of the football federation in 1971, the organisation of the first competitions at the domestic level, and the participation of the national team in regional and international tournaments. The case of football in Qatar is very similar to that of the UAE since its proper development and institutionalisation were only achieved at the end of the British colonial presence. In Qatar, the first official matches were recorded at the end of the 1940s, along with an increase in the local population's interest in this sport (Bishop, 2022). The new state's constitution brought a greater degree of football promotion, which has become a central element of Qatari politics in the 21st century as it seeks to turn the country into a linchpin in the sports industry. Such efforts culminated with the organisation of the 2022 World Cup.

The realpolitik behind football

The relationship between football and political power is a long-standing phenomenon. However, its origins lie as a simple pastime and entertainment for the wealthiest classes and, later, all layers of society. The undeniable popularity of football has caused countless leaders and governments to seek to make partisan use of this sport. In this sense, football has become a spectacle of global reach (Fruh, 2023: 103), capable of mobilizing the masses and awakening a conglomerate of emotions in them. Therefore, the control of football becomes a veiled objective of those who hold power since it is recognised as a space to promote alignment

with an established order. However, it can also become a meeting point for criticism, dissent and organised opposition (Raab, 2014: 801-802).

The instrumentalization of football pursues several objectives. Firstly, these sporting events serve as legitimisation tools for political leaders who seek to associate their figures with the sport's popularity. Furthermore, the promotion of national clubs and teams, together with the professional career of the country's footballers, seeks to promote internal cohesion and national identity (Levermore, 2004: 21). This political function is vital in states that do not have a long history as an independent nation. However, in domestic contexts that suffer from high instability and polarization, this dynamic can become counterproductive since it generates mixed feelings and opinions among fans who associate specific teams and players with their proximity to the established power compared to others perceived as opposition figures.

Political power and football also become entangled in the pursuit of more direct and pragmatic objectives. In this sense, the organisation of sporting events and the concentration of large masses of citizens in closed venues allows the security forces to establish more effective control measures (Spaaij, 2013: 170.171), which help them to identify opposition centres and restrict meeting points more quickly. In addition, all the news and controversies surrounding football help to divert public attention from other types of problems, often relegating social concerns and political disaffection to the background. The instrumentalization of football equally links to foreign action. Sportswashing is broadly understood as the use of sport to promote a country's image internationally but also to whitewash those leaders or regimes of an authoritarian and repressive nature which try to silence criticism, both domestic and external (Grix et al., 2023: 5). Along the same lines, the organisation of sporting events sends a powerful message to global public opinion, since it is a show of strength and the resources that a country must host different competitions in majestic and new infrastructures.

Football can also have a very relevant socio-economic impact. On the one hand, the development of the sports industry is usually linked to the intentions of governments to diversify their economies and encourage new sectors, which allow, among other things, to attract foreign investments and generate more sources of wealth (Satish et al., 2024: 35-36). On the other hand, promoting sports is linked to public health since it seeks to encourage

healthy habits among citizens, involve them in grassroots sports and reduce the incidence of diseases.

Nation-building, Gulf monarchies and football

The expansion of football among the Gulf monarchies throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries coincide with a series of geopolitical dynamics in the region. Firstly, the origins of football in these countries are inevitably due to the colonial presence of the British, as well as the influence of workers and migrants from third countries in the region. However, football consolidated later in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar after their independence. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has developed mainly since the nation-state's constitution in 1932. These circumstances strongly link the social diffusion of sport and the constitution of independent national identities. Football is no longer seen as an alien and strange element. Indeed, it is incorporated as another element of the culture, collective unity, and daily life of nationals, as well as the numerous foreign workers and stateless persons who live in these countries.

The constitution of new states amidst the expansion of football coincides with a second dynamic: the consolidation of political regimes. Power at the national level has been monopolised since its origins by dynastic clans, which are capable of patrimonialising the most essential socio-political spheres of each country (Gray, 2018: 38-39) in the three analysed cases: The House of Al Saud in Saudi Arabia, the Al Thani family in Qatar or the Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi. In this sense, football popularity is a factor that does not escape the attention of the different governments, which seek to associate it not only with the identity and culture of their territories but also with their legitimacy and authority.

The relevance of football in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar coincides with a crucial period in the nation-building projects of these countries. The authorities are implementing different political and social measures and promoting discourses and narratives that help reinforce the idea of political nationalism, in contrast to the still-existing primacy of tribal and religious identities: a factor that is sometimes perceived as a destabilizing and disruptive element by the authorities. These dynamics can create internal tensions (Sinani, 2024), so the development of popular social events such as football helps to rewrite the citizen's relationship with the national power and enhance the awareness of belonging to a collective that includes its annexation to the crown.

The expansion of football, the constitution of states and the consolidation of regimes are also linked to a more recent geopolitical dynamic. The Gulf monarchies are carrying out ambitious foreign policies, which allow them to place themselves in a privileged position within the world order, thanks to their economic and political relevance (Bianco and Sons, 2023: 94-95). The influence by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in the global football sector and the sports industry reflects the emergence of these new powers, which host important competitions and actively participate in the main sports organisations.

The political management of football in Saudi Arabia has taken on a new dimension in recent years. The coming to power of King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2015 marked a turning point in the country. The Saudi kingdom has major reform plans to boost the national sports industry (Chadwick, 2019: 185). At the same time, the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman sought to associate the popularity of football with the legitimacy of their authority, just at a crucial moment for the kingdom, both due to the succession process after King Salman, as well as the numerous transformations taking place in the region such as the conflict in the Gaza Strip, the tensions between Israel and Iran, or the transition in Syria following the overthrow of Bashar Al Assad.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are also consolidating their position as important venues for organising major international tournaments. The reasons for holding these events are inexorably linked to strengthening nation-building. On the one hand, it serves political regimes to gain the support and affection of younger generations, who feel more represented by a model of society that is more open and connected to the world. On the other hand, the international promotion offered by these sporting events represents a show of strength for the authorities abroad while promoting national pride, as it demonstrates the capabilities and resources of the country and its society.

The political management of football in the UAE is inexorably linked to the domestic and international needs of the federal government. The sporting successes of the Emirati clubs and national teams are used as a social element to promote national identity and cohesion among the populations of the seven emirates since the formation as a single country is very recent. But the drive of the Emirati authorities towards the sports industry reflects the intentions of projecting a very calculated image abroad (Carosella, 2022: 22), which shows the development and strengths of the country and its society, as well as linking it to the new generation of leaders.

Meanwhile, Qatar meets two clear objectives linked to Doha's domestic and international needs through football. Firstly, holding the 2022 World Cup was presented as a diplomatic achievement, which joins other government efforts to gain a significant role in the region's dynamics (Dubinsky, 2024: 223). Secondly, the holding of major sporting events and the successes of Qatari athletes are used to encourage national identity and adherence to the regime, precisely at a turbulent period in the region and for national security, as occurred during the blockade of the peninsula between 2017-2021.

The efforts of the authorities in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar to link football with nation-building and international projection are also reflected in the acquisition of important European clubs such as PSG (Qatari-owned) in France, Manchester City (Emirati-owned) and Newcastle (Saudi-owned) in the English league, among others. The interest in taking control of historic teams is to enter a market as profitable as football, in addition to strengthening the country's international image. In addition, this type of strategy consolidates the reputation of its foreign policy and reinforces an unquestionable image of power and development. This political dynamic seeks to imbue national societies with the logic of participating in a successful collective project.

The European teams acquired by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar will inevitably become a symbol of their international aspirations, as well as further elements of the promotion of the nation-building project among the citizens of their countries. The great stars of the football teams they own visit the Arab monarchies annually as a kind of exhibition of the new national emblems of which they can feel proud. However, the leaders of the clubs still face the problem of achieving a genuine interest among the national population in supporting these teams (Baniya, 2025), and identifying them as another part of their national identity of which they can feel represented.

Conclusion

Football has an undeniable social impact on the populations of the Gulf monarchies, making it one of the great spaces for meeting and having fun for the citizens of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. In this sense, the authorities of each of these countries are implementing ambitious plans to link the popularity of football with particular political objectives: national identity, internal cohesion and international projection. In addition, this

sport has other uses for governments, such as promoting health and boosting economic diversification.

The political management of football in the Gulf monarchies has presented numerous successes in the short term. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have managed to establish themselves as important spaces to host major sporting events at the international level. Along the same lines, diplomatic efforts are allowing them to position themselves in privileged positions within the world football and sports organisations. Finally, the development of the sports industry is allowing these countries to expand their global reach and strengthen the development of their actions abroad.

However, such endeavour by the Gulf monarchies presents several challenges in the medium and long term. First, the sustainability of a model based on ingenious resources for the organisation of major sporting events and the attraction of foreign talent. Second, the capacity of educational and health programmes to incorporate sport into the daily routine of their citizens. Third, the growing regional and international rivalry between different countries to gain control of the main competitions.

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