



Football and the future of West Asia

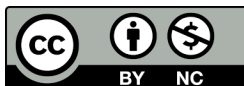
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2. Department of Human Sciences, Technical and Vocational University, Tehran, Iran. (*Corresponding author: [✉mahdishariatifeiz@gmail.com](mailto:mahdishariatifeiz@gmail.com), [ID https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1260-5253](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1260-5253))

Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article</p> <p>Article history: Received: 02 March 2023 Revised: 17 April 2023 Accepted: 30 April 2023 Published online: 01 January 2024</p> <p>Keywords: Arab States, Club, FIFA, Football Events, Persian Gulf.</p>	<p>Background: In recent years, a wealth of literature has increased our understanding of the West Asia sports. While the Saudi Arabia government experienced the new era of sports under Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS) leader, it was accused to sport washing. Qatar and UAE are the two micro nations of region that supported the sport events in recent years.</p> <p>Aim: The main target of this research is that how sport and exclusively football can impress West Asia and what are the achievements of Gulf states (UAE, Saudi and Qatar) in football.</p> <p>Materials and Methods: The present study used qualitative content analysis to infer the achievements of Gulf states (UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) in football. The content analysis scrutinized articles and reports published between 2000 and 2024 from the following scientific databases: <i>Google Scholar, Science Direct, DOAJ and Web of Sciences</i>.</p> <p>Results: While the sport has a critical role on empowering the international prestige of Gulf states, football is the critical part to fill the power vacuum in region. Football has two minor (media, airlines and tourism) and micro (Geopolitics, geo economy, competition and political economy) impression on region.</p> <p>Conclusion: In contrast to Saudi Arabia which tried to dominate the region by using soft power tools (especially football), Qatar has adopted a different approach and has decided to project itself as a peacemaker and friendly country in West Asia.</p>

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1. Introduction

West Asia is considered the “heart of the earth”, due to supporting 63% of the world energy [1]. The region accounts for global oil production, and oil revenues drive government revenues in the region [1]. The idea of using sport as a tool to achieve socio-political and economic objectives in the Arab states is not new: individual countries from the region have adopted and invested in modern codified sport since gaining independence as sovereign states in the 1970s [2].

Sport is a critical player to enhance the regional power of Arab states; While many believes that West Asia is the future of sport [2, 3, 4], the others investigated, it is a part of sport washing projects; Sport washing is the deployment of sport by a state entity for the purposes of washing a country’s image and reputation [5, 6]. Countries like Saudi Arabia make attempts to distract people’s attentions away from their crimes, political ideology, and misdemeanors by staging a global sport mega-event, buying a high-profile sport team, or engaging in a high-profile sponsorship deal [5].

Sport and art are the main sources of soft power; Sports diplomacy represents the official and unofficial activities of states, governments and special foreign policy agencies, aimed at implementing the foreign policy objectives of a state by organizing, conducting and participating in international sporting events [4]. Nations have sought to secure the hosting rights of mega-sporting events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup for geopolitical means, seeking to alter both internal and external audiences’ impressions and perspectives of the nation by aligning with global sporting bodies and thus growing the nation’s reputation internationally [7].

Whilst Saudi Arabia’s sporting investments have been strategic as a mechanism for exploiting soft power and achieving geopolitical objectives [6], Qatar and UAE as micro economies of region are trying to develop their international sport competition to play as pioneer sport nation in region. The main question of this paper is that how sport is a developmental tool for Arab states, and is that a real peaceful phenomenon for these states?

2. Discussion

2. 1. *The emergence of sport events in gulf region*

The golden age of Kuwaiti excellence in sports drew to a close with the Iraqi invasion in the 1990s. After the invasion, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries shifted their tools to reposition themselves in the international arena. As a unique strategy, this projected image functioned as an alternative identity marker, distinguishing these countries from unstable states in the broader region.

Hosting Sport Mega-events (SMEs) represents the first instrument to achieving this purpose. The starting point for achieving this aim was launched by Bahrain, followed by the UAE. In 2004 Bahrain started hosting Formula 1 races in Manama. In 2009, UAE’s Abu Dhabi began competing with Manama in hosting Formula 1 races, followed in 2021 by KSA and Qatar which signed partnership with Formula 1 to hosting, respectively, Jeddah and Doha Grand Prix [6].

The emergence of sport cities and zones in Arab states, such as the UAE’s Zaid Sport City and Qatar’s Aspire Zone, to name just two Arab states promoting themselves as recuperative zones for sport medicine and injuries helps attract foreign investments and well-known sports stars

investing in sport abroad demonstrates the third strategy pursued by GCC countries [8].

Over the last two decades, countries in the Gulf region have spent considerable sums of money investing in sport—domestically, regionally, and globally. Indeed, the Qatari government has spent US\$240 billion on preparing to stage the 2022 FIFA men’s World Cup; Saudi Arabia’s Public National Fund (PNF) has instigated the highly controversial LIV golf series, which pays total prize money of US\$25 million per event; Abu Dhabi owns the football club Manchester City, of the English Premier League, which has spent US\$1.7 billion on acquiring talent; It is a crucial aspect when it comes to sport participation and development of elite football sport in particular. Moreover, the variable of economy and different source of revenues of countries in the region are to be taken into account in shaping countries’ national and international strategy in sport [9].

West Asia is the future of football; this region’s football triangle (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) has sought to present a different image of West Asia in the new millennium as a football hub rather than the cradle of energy [10].

Football is viewed as a competitive advantage among the Persian Gulf states in the new millennium; the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, as Arab states of the Persian Gulf, have invested heavily in football [11]. Football in this region is a political tool for them to strengthen their image in the minds of the world’s people.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have invested in sports to pursue the following objectives: 1) to use sports as a suitable tool to strengthen their soft power, 2) to consider investing in sports as a good lever to make

themselves independent of oil revenues, and 3) to reduce the health costs and public health issues they are fighting [12]. Adoption of a development-centered approach and use of public diplomacy tools including sports in West Asia during the present century have shifted the world’s perception of this region as an economically and politically turbulent region to a tourist destination for sporting events, particularly football matches [6]. Prosperous states like the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have distanced themselves from the other West Asia countries by developing advanced infrastructures and using football as a tool to attract tourists in their post- gas/ oil future.

2. 2. Saudi Arabia

Amongst the most prominent recent examples of soft power exertion through sport, Saudi Arabia’s approach has been multifaceted, comprising a diverse array of property partnerships and event hosting, strategic investment in foreign sport, and new property creation. Nation branding is an important factor of international reputation management which has gained increasing importance for nations worldwide. Since 2018, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a journey to enhance its global recognition and reputation by strategically investing in football [13].

Aramco, the world’s second-largest energy company, has not only been driving Saudi Arabia’s development since World War I, but its USD 700 billion investment in the Saudi Arabia Pro League, and efforts to rank it among the leading ten football leagues in the world, have encouraged some of the greatest football players like *Cristiano Ronaldo*, *Karim Benzema*, *Roberto Firmino*, *Kalidou Koulibaly*, *N’Golo Kanté*, *Edouard Mendy*, and *Riyad Mahrez* to participate in the 2023 season of

this league [14]. High-ranking members of the royal court have further extended Saudi state funded involvement in sport through various club ownership agreements, including Spanish football club UD Almería (owned by royal advisor Turki Al-Sheikh), and English club Sheffield United, French club FC Girondins de Bordeaux, Belgian team KFCO Beerschot Wilrijk, Kerala United of India, and Al-Hilal United in the UAE (all owned by Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud) [3].

In addition, Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) new policies in developing sports infrastructures (including development of NEOM as an entertainment and sports city at an estimated cost of 500 billion dollars) [15] and the ever increasing Aramco's support of Saudi Arabia's football clubs (e.g., its financial support of football clubs like Al-Ittihad, Al-Ahli, Al-Nasr, and Al-Hilal, and the purchase of Al-Qadsiah Football Club) indicate the daily increase in the attention Saudi Arabia pays to its political policies on football. Along with Konami and Molten, NEOM has recently been recognized as one of the three main financial sponsors of the AFC Champions League, demonstrating a share of Saudi Arabia's soft power in advancing the country's goals in football, especially in relation to this league. Al-Hilal Saudi Arabia FC, boasting five championships in the AFC League, is Asia's most decorated football club. Indeed, bin Salman's focus on expanding the infrastructure for sports tourism is expected to boost the Saudi Arabia Pro League's profits to USD 480 million in 2030 [1] and change the international image of Saudi Arabia from a conservative oil-producing country to one that is open, modern, and free of ethno-religious prejudices.

2. 3. Qatar

While Qatar became a fully sovereign state only in 1971, since the 1990s its leadership (under the hereditary rule of the Al Thani family) has developed the country's enormous reserves of natural gas to become a global gas giant that in 2006 surpassed Indonesia as the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG) [16]. Qatar is a gas and oil rich state that is going through a period of economic, political, and social transformation, driven by its long-planned staging of the World Cup. What some have seen as nation building on an epic scale, others have dismissed as ostentation driven by vanity. Qatar is now a prominent and legitimate member of the global sport community, having staged many of sport's biggest international events and gained decision making influence within sport's governing institutions [6].

Sport emerged alongside diplomacy, mediation, Al Jazeera, and educational initiatives as a key pillar of Qatari efforts to present and narrate itself to the world [17]. Winning the bid to host the 2022 World Cup placed Qatar firmly "on the map" of global consciousness in ways that went far beyond the state's early attempts at branding itself as a mediator in regional conflict zones. Qatar is the first West Asian country to distinguish itself from the other Muslim and Arabic speaking countries in the world by hosting the biggest and most prestigious football tournament in the world, the FIFA World Cup in 2022. In fact, despite having a population of only 2.8 million (mostly consisting of migrant workers mainly from South Asia and also from other countries such as Egypt and the Philippines), Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup literally put it on global map. As a result of investing some of its natural gas and oil revenues in football, not only did it win the 2019 AFC

Asian Cup, but it also bought some of the most prestigious football clubs in the world [18].

Since Aspire Academy, which is a globally recognized national sports academy, was established in Doha in 2004, many major international football clubs have held their training camps in Qatar and used the cutting-edge facilities at this academy. The country is hosting prestigious sporting events such as the Asian Games, the handball and the football World Cup, promotes elite sport success by local and naturalized athletes and invests in famous sport clubs abroad [19].

In 2013, the "Qatar Foundation," later renamed Qatar Airways, became the first commercial sponsor of Barcelona, Spain's most popular club. Following that, this airline became an official FIFA partner and organized horse racing, tennis, and squash tournaments in Qatar. Furthermore, after Al Jazeera Sports, which broadcast sports events in the region from 2003 to 2013, the Qataris established BeIN Sports as the first sports TV channel with exclusive broadcast rights in the Arab world for the first time; in addition to the FIFA World Cup, this channel has exclusive rights to broadcast the Olympics and five European championships in West Asia and North Africa [11].

To confront Qatar's sports achievements, Saudi Arabia attempted to hack the Qatari BeIN Sports channel using its hacking group called BOutQ. Qatar organized the Gulf Cup of Nations (1976, 1992, and 2004), the Asian Football Championships in 1988, before moving onto the global stage with the FIFA U-20 World Cup (1995), the Handball World Junior Championships in 1999, the World Weightlifting Championships in 2005, and the Asian Games – the world's second-

largest multi-sport event after the Olympic Games in 2006. Beside, acquisition of Paris Saint German by Qatar Sports Investment (QSI) and the Qatar Foundation became shirt sponsor of FC Barcelona [6].

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are spending lavishly on sport is fuelled by the oil and gas deposits that sit beneath their countries. Though people rail against sport and politics mixing, during the first quarter of the 21st century, the two appear to be synonymous or in symbiosis rather than being remote from one another. Different ideologies increasingly underpin the organization and governance of sport, whilst countries compete with each other to successfully formulate strategy and policy in sport. Following this event, the Qataris dubbed Saudi Arabia the "home of hackers," which strained relations between the two Arab states of the Persian Gulf. In fact, Al-Arabiya's failure to compete with Al-Jazeera has resulted in Qatar's BeIN Sports leading the television broadcast of sports events among Arab-speaking states [6]. Qatar Airways is one of the most internationally visible Qatari entities and it was the FIFA's official partner airline for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups [20].

2. 4. UAE

In 1977 the United Arab Emirates (UAE) recruited the former Leeds United and England manager, Don Revie, to manage the national football team [20]. After the discovery of oil in 1970s, the United Arab Emirates experienced explosive growth and was able to establish a strong economy in 30 years. Since then, the country has attracted foreign direct investment, and it has maintained its growth strategy by relying on foreign skilled laborers from around the world.

In 1977 the United Arab Emirates (UAE) recruited the former Leeds United

and England manager, Don Revie, to manage the national football team. Revie’s recruitment heralded the Gulf States’ entry into football’s international sphere, which has reshaped the game’s political economy. Confronted by the need to diversify oil monies housed in sovereign wealth funds, Gulf States, most notably the UAE and Qatar, have invested broadly in football. This investment has reshaped football boundaries globally, though not without controversy [19].

The UAE national team’s first-ever official football match dates back to 1972 when they played against Qatar. The UAE has won fewer trophies in football compared to Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, contrary to these two countries, it receives 79% of its GDP from non-petroleum revenues due to its negligible dependence on the export of petroleum products (the figure is raised to 98% for Dubai) [18].

Emirates is involved in over 50 sporting sponsorships globally, including many major football clubs like Real Madrid,

Paris-St German, Arsenal, and AC Milan. These investments assist in branding the UAE, and particularly Dubai, as a global destination and transport hub connecting Asia, Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, Abu Dhabi’s Etihad Airline is a partner with Manchester City, while the Qatar Foundation features on the Barcelona FC jersey. Dubai-owned airline Emirates’ vast sponsorship portfolio across European football, rugby, and tennis; Russian state oil corporation Gazprom’s extensive investments in German and European football, including partnerships with UEFA and FC Schalke 04; and Azerbaijan’s former sponsorship of Atlético Madrid [20].

While the UAE is the pioneer of professional football, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are investing to develop the infrastructures of football and clearly it is a mandatory part of their big map for next years (Figure 1); the main question of this research is that how these states focus on football as political economy phenomenon in new millennium?

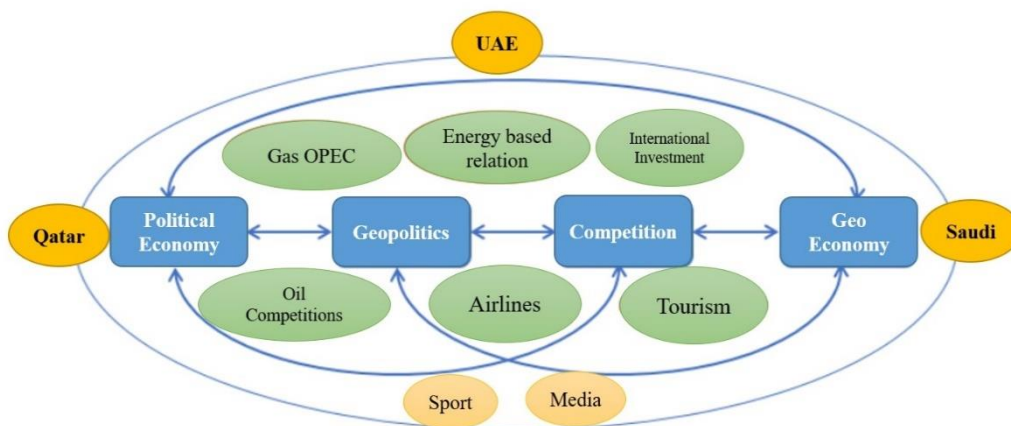


Figure 1. Sport as a source of Geo Economy in Arab States

3. Materials and Methods

One of the widely used research methods is content analysis. For this reason, this method is superior to other methods in

which there is no need to research and collect information, but the information exists and must be analyzed and concluded. The same method has been used in the

present research. The current research is applied and qualitative research. Content analysis for quantification and quantification through symbols that are known, and this method is often used in the analysis of printed and online passages and resources, with this method articles or texts can be analyzed and classified. The research community of this study was database articles in the years (2000-2024) with the subject of sports and Middle East. The data extracted from *Google Scholar*, *Science Direct*, *Taylor and Francis Journals* and *Rutledge books*.

4. Results

While the sport has a critical role on empowering the international prestige, football is the main player of this field. Under Joao Havelange's presidency, FIFA increased the number of available World Cup places for African and Asian nations. The findings indicated football in Middle

East has two micro and minor effect on regional states (Figure 2).

Table 1 indicated the hosting of international football events since 2000; Although UAE is the first nation to host the football events in region, Qatar and Saudi are following the UAE hardly. Don Revie the former head coach of Leeds united was the first European football coach to manage the UAE national team in 1977; this was the first hybrid of European Arabic football contract.

Table 2 indicated that the Arab states have huge investing on football club in EU region; this is the main part of their vision to attract the European citizen and put these states on global map.

Empowering the soccer clubs is a key part of football diplomacy in Arab states. While the Saudi organizing the super cup of Italy and Spain in its territory, its club are growing fast to compete the international brand in the UEFA championship (Table 3).

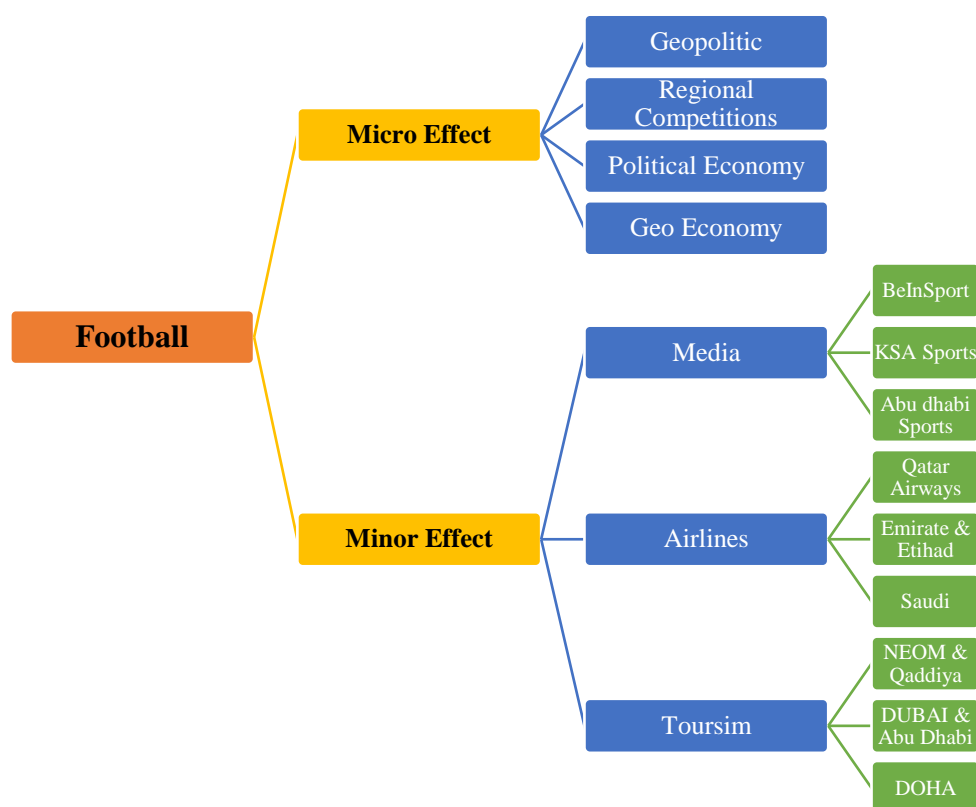


Figure 2. The effect of football on Middle East

Table 1. Hosting the international football events in new millennium in UAE, Saudi and Qatar

Saudi		Qatar		UAE	
Year	Event	Year	Event	Year	Event
2006	AFC beach football	2004	Arabian Gulf Cup	2002	Arabian Gulf Cup
2007	Arabian Gulf Cup	2006	Asian Games	2014	Arabian Gulf Cup
2007	AFC beach football	2011	AFC Asian Cup	2023	FIFA Club World Cup
2008	AFC beach football	2013	AFC beach football	2027	AFC Asian Cup
2009	AFC beach football	2019	Arabian Gulf Cup	2034	Asian Games
2009	FIFA Club World Cup	2019	FIFA World Club Cup		
2009	FIFA beach football World Cup	2020	FIFA World Club Cup		
2010	FIFA Club World Cup	2022	FIFA Club World Cup		
2012	AFC Futsal Asian Cup	2023	AFC Asian Cup		
2017	FIFA Club World Cup	2030	Asian Games		
2018	FIFA Club World Cup				
2019	AFC Asian Cup				
2023	Beach football World Cup				

Table 2. The UAE, Saudi and Qatar owners of European Football Clubs (Adopted from Transfer Markets)

Club	Chairman	Investor Country	Value
Manchester City	Sheikh Mansour	UAE	\$ 746 Million
Paris Saint German	Naser Al Khelaifi	Qatar	\$ 3.2 Billion
Malaga	Abdullah Bin Nasser	Qatar	\$ 3.6 Million
New Castle	Khaldoon Almobarak	Saudi	\$ 415 Million
Aston Villa	Nassef Sawiris	Egypt	\$ 221 Million
Sheffield United	Abdullah Bin Mossad	Saudi	\$ 108 Million

Table 3. UAE, Saudi and Qatar achievements in football

Country/ Football achievement	Asia Club Championship (Since 2000)	FIFA World Cup	Result	FIFA Ranking
Saudi	Al Hilal 2000	1994 US	Round of 16 th	53
	Al Ittihad 2004	1998 France	Group stage	
	Al Ittihad 2005	2002 Japan/Korea	Group stage	
	Al Ahli 2012	2006 Germany	Group stage	
	Alhilal 2019	2018 Russia	Group stage	
	Alhilal 2021	2022 Qatar	Group stage	
Qatar	Al Sadd 2011	2022 Qatar	Group stage	58
UAE	Al Ain 2002	1990 Italy	Group stage	72

5. Discussion

Before the arrival of British and US soldiers in 1920, inhabitants of the Gulf States were engaged in traditional sports such as camel racing, falconry and horse-riding. By the emergence of football, this sport marginalized with local activities. The popularity of football in the region today reveals the states' connections with their British past. With recent developments in global football, it is useful to understand how West Asia has responded to the

challenges and/or concerns of their legitimacy. This discussion is scant in the literature and this study draws attention to this trend considering the millions of dollars that have been spent by Arab governments to improve their world ranking. Whether these investments confer on West Asia, the title of “future football destination” is a matter open to debate.

In West Asia, major sport events are hosted for economic gain and international prestige. Sporting initiatives are typically

more focused on the welfare of national society. The versatility of the sports industry allows for it to be used in many ways by each government, but it is too early to tell if these strategies will have successful long term outcomes. As Figure 2 indicated, football has direct effect on micro and macro matters in West Asia. While it is a critical part to determine the geopolitics, political economy of region, football has inclusive effect on the new geo economy of region. This part of research is similar to Thani & Heenan (2017) [20], Taylor, Burdsey and Jarvis (2023) [2]. They investigated football is a socio-political actor in the future of West Asia. On the other hand, football has direct impression on airlines, tourism destination and media in region. The giant airlines like Etihad, Qatari and Emirate are the three top airlines which has Arabian root. Bein sport is the leader of sport channels in region and this has Qatari Al Jazeera background.

6. Conclusions

The rapid rise of Gulf financing in foreign sports markets has led the media and scholars to reflect extensively on the meaning, motives, and boarder significance of these sponsorship agendas. What is the political significance of these new flows? How does it impact teams, players, fans, cities, local and national governments? Is there a risk of ‘corrupting’ the traditional values of sporting ethics, when receiving funds from autocratic states or state-owned companies? Do they help bolster the Gulf countries’ alleged ‘soft power’ campaigns, whereby royal families and otherwise autocratic leaders seek to whitewash their image on the international stage, or otherwise buy political allies by creeping into sporting pastimes?

Although West Asian football triangle

has successfully hosted many male football tournaments, none of its states has hosted the FIFA Women’s World Cup, making Jordan the only Arab country that hosted it in Amman in 2018. However, Saudi Arabia appears to have somewhat paved the way for the development of women's sports by holding the 2023 SAFF (Saudi Arabian Football Federation)- Women's Friendly Tournament in this country in 2023 [18]. Football has turned into a symbol of change in Saudi Arabia over the last two years, an instance of which is the removal of gender discrimination in sports, as evidenced by the presence of women in sports halls and stadiums. Reema bint Bandar Al Saud, a Saudi woman, has been recently elected to the International Olympic Committee [21].

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, which endeavors to dominate the region by using soft power tools (especially football) [22], Qatar has adopted a different approach and has decided to project itself as a peacemaker and friendly country in West Asia. After a decade of rivalry between the two prominent sports channels, Alryadia of Saudi Arabia and BeIN SPORTS of Qatar BeIN SPORTS emerged as the dominant sports channel in the region. This TV channel broadcasts many major football events in the world, such as the UEFA Champions League, Ligue 1, La Liga, and Copa Libertadores, for Middle Eastern audiences [23]. Indeed, Qatar has appeared more successful by hiring various professionals and consultants in its university and sports centers and via following a sustainable and long-term strategy to achieve post-oil/ natural gas economy goals, as evidenced by winning the last AFC Asian Cup in 2019. Saudi Arabia, unlike Qatar, does not need to resort to sports as a substitute for its defense and military powers due to its military

equipment and population of 35 million. We can see that Qatar seeks to influence the region through sports, while Saudi Arabia seeks to use sports to dominate the Middle East," stated Dorsey, a famous sports journalist

Because of ideological issues and sectarian tendencies, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the world's two Muslim bases, try to form rival groups and strengthen them outside their borders against each other. This not only counteracts any efforts to eliminate the difficult discourse conditions, but also adds to the region's political challenges day by day. Along with the recent achievements of the Arab football triangle, the presence of Iran as a long-time football power in West Asia, and Iran's hostile regional policies toward Saudi Arabia such as the proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, the confrontation between Shia and Sunni Muslims has caused football in these two countries to be a victim of their policies during more than four decades of conflicts and confrontations. It seems reopening the embassies of Saudi and Iran at 2023 will be resolved the football predicaments in next years.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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