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**Access, security and diplomacy: Perceptions of soft power, nation branding and the organisational challenges facing Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup**

**Abstract:**

**Focus:** This paper focuses on perceptions of Qatar's suitability to act a successful sports event host and in doing so, looks ahead to some of the key organisational challenges facing Qatar leading up to the World Cup in 2022. This work is framed around perceptions of nation branding and soft power and draws on the experiences of various key demographics who offer valuable insight into Qatar's World Cup.

**Design:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with football journalists, experienced tournament staff and volunteers, football supporters and expatriates working in the Gulf region. The work is longitudinal in nature, with data collected between January 2010 and June 2018 including seven FIFA and FIFA-affiliated confederation events, namely: the 2011 Asia Cup in Qatar, the 2011 Gold Cup in USA, the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the 2015 Copa America in Chile, the 2016 European Championships in France, the 2017 African Cup of Nations in Gabon and the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

**Findings:** The work uncovers several concerns and considerations connected to hosting a first Middle Eastern World Cup in Qatar in 2022. The findings demonstrate some of the key organisational challenges facing the event which were found to include supporter access, security and the fan experience.

**Originality/Value:** This paper examines Qatar in the context of the 2022 World Cup and its connection to soft power and nation branding. This particular event is so significant, not simply because it is the showcase tournament of the globe's most popular sport from both a spectator and participation perspective, but because it represents such a notable divergence from previous editions. The majority of preceding World Cups have/will be hosted by highly populated countries with relatively developed football traditions and/or infrastructures. As a change to this pattern, the unique position of Qatar's World Cup renders it an important case study. This work which examines informed perspectives relating to access, security and diplomacy provides a number of issues for Qatar's World Cup organisers to consider.

**Key Words:** football, mega events; soft power, nation branding, organisational challenges

## **Introduction – Qatar and small state politics:**

The connections between individual nations is of significant importance to today's global networked society. Attempts to understand modern states have often involved imposing categorisations, relative to scale for instance. This has been subject to various approaches. Related definitions of 'small states' have in particular proven elusive, often lacking in consensus within the academic community, although landmass, population and per capita income typically feature in such classifications (Maass, 2009). The international significance of individual nation states has often been dominated by the perception, ability and use of military and economic power. Small states have typically been considered to lack international visibility, and have frequently been framed as vulnerable actors with minimal influence in the international arena (Panke, 2016). This has mainly been attributed to the respective lack of military, economic and political capabilities, leading to the adoption of a proportionately low profile and set of defensive foreign policy strategies (Braveboy-Wagner, 2010). Rather than engaging in disputes and demonstrating influence in their own right, small states have often been perceived to be restricted and motivated to avoid and mitigate conflicts, cooperate with others, and limit their behaviour and sphere of influence to their relatively immediate geographical and geopolitical context (Hey, 2003). Furthermore, scholars have long argued that small state economies rely primarily on the exportation of a sole or limited number of commodities or natural resources, such as crude oil or agricultural products (Peterson, 2006). This further proliferates the view of small states as politically vulnerable and economically susceptible to exogenous shocks from the international markets in which they trade (ibid). Due to these notable limitations, some have concluded that small states possess limited control over their position (Mohammadzadeh, 2017).

As a consequence of recent processes and relevant advancements such as globalisation and developments in communication technologies, small states today enjoy more international visibility and prestige than at any other time in history (Maass, 2009). A number of prominent examples of small states have developed in stature and now form a significant component of the political mosaic and economic landscape adopting active and growing positions in international institutions (Mohammadzadeh, 2017). In addition, it has been argued that the contemporary political and economic climate can present some small states with a greater

range of choices and outcomes (Cooper *et al.*, 2014). Whether by maximising economic niches in conjunction with considered strategies, leveraging existing capabilities, adopting active foreign policy approaches, and/or engaging in strategic nation branding activities, many small states can attempt to augment their position in the international arena, limit their vulnerability and enhance their visibility (*ibid*).

As a significant example of a small state connected to such foreign policy engagements, this paper focuses on Qatar, a sovereign Arab state situated on the Persian peninsula of the Arabian Gulf. In some respects Qatar can be seen as an unusual and even problematic example of a small state. As explored below, it is diminutive in scale (landmass and population) but disproportionality influential in economic and political terms, summarised by Kamrava's (2015) recent work entitled 'Qatar: small state, big politics'.

With a long history of existence under the domain of numerous different empires, including being subject to Persian, Portuguese and Ottoman control, the last century has seen significant change in Qatar. A British protectorate from 1916, the country gained full independence from the UK in 1971, and has since been ruled as an absolute monarchy. Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a union made up of six neighbouring countries (the others being Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E and Oman) which was established to help provide an economically and politically stable environment for national and regional development. Of Asia's 51 states, Qatar is 44<sup>th</sup> in terms of landmass, covering an area of 4,416 square miles. Similarly, it is only the 45<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the continent, with a population of 2.6 million, roughly 90% of which is made up of a blue-collar, expatriate labour force, who have recently been attracted to the high level of employment opportunities offered by the state (Kaplanidou *et al.*, 2016). Despite its relatively diminutive geographical and demographic scale Qatar is one of the world's wealthiest countries: its GDP per capita currently stands at £96,827, more than double that of USA (IMF, 2016). Such wealth emanates primarily from the international sale of liquefied natural gas and crude oil; Qatar is the world's the largest distributor of the former and third largest supplier of the latter (Wright, 2016).

In many respects therefore, Qatar is not the rule but the exception. The unique combination of scale, economic position and potential of the state has facilitated the development of a potent and at times problematic foreign policy strategy. Through its various engagements,

global sport has clearly been adopted as a tool to enhance Qatar's international connections and wield significant influence on the global stage (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014; 2015; Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016). For example, the Aspire Academy for Sports Excellence, based in Qatari capital, Doha, has positioned itself as one of the world's leading centres for athletic training, development, medicine and rehabilitation. In addition, the Qatar Sports Investments (QSI) group has become a major financier of global sport, signing a strategic deal with FC Barcelona in 2010 and acquiring Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in 2012 (for a critique of these investments, see Fieldsend, 2017).

Qatar's involvement in bidding for and subsequently staging sport mega events (SMEs) has however represented the state's most notable investment in global sport. Alongside hosting the 2005 West Asian Games, the 2006 Asian Games, the 2011 Asian Cup and the 2015 Men's Handball World Championships, each year the state stages the Qatar Open Golf Masters, the ATP and WTA Tennis Championships, and the Doha stage of the MotoGP World Championships. Future events include the 2019 IAAF World Championships in Athletics and football's 2022 FIFA World Cup.

This paper examines perceptions of Qatar in the context of the 2022 World Cup and its perceived connection to soft power and nation branding. This particular event is so significant, not simply because it is the showcase tournament of the globe's most popular sport from both a spectator and participation perspective (Rookwood and Hughson, 2017), but because in some contexts it represents such a notable divergence from previous editions, including the most recent edition, the 2018 World Cup. The majority of preceding World Cups have been hosted by highly populated countries with relatively developed football traditions and/or infrastructures. That said however, the strategy to move the World Cup beyond Western Europe and South America (demonstrated by recent editions hosted in USA, South Korea/Japan, South Africa and Russia), could see Qatar framed as part of a connected FIFA plan to take football to new frontiers, to globalise the game and expand its markets (Jerabek, 2017). Nevertheless, hosting a World Cup in a country with such a small population and landmass renders Qatar 2022 an important tournament and unique case study.

Qatar has experienced various political challenges connected to its international relations. A notable example concerns the ongoing Gulf crisis instigated by the severing of diplomatic ties between Qatar and various GCC countries in May 2017, and the subsequent embargo

imposed on Qatar. In sporting contexts, the scandals connected to accusations of voter bribery and the award of the World Cup to Qatar (examined by Blake and Calvert (2015)) also help render the tournament worthy of particular attention. Millward's (2017) work on Qatar's treatment of its blue collar and primarily South Asian workforce in the physical infrastructure projects constructed for the World Cup also draws attention to criticism of and challenges faced by the state. The role of FIFA in this context and in examples from other World Cups more broadly has been examined, notably in the work of Sugden and Tomlinson (2016) and Tomlinson (2018).

This work examines perspectives of some key demographics including research participants with experience of previous tournaments and those with an understanding across different national, regional and global sporting and political climates. It gives voice to a range of opinions on Qatar's World Cup and explores the meanings associated with this event, the organisational challenges the host nation are likely to face, and the tournament's perceived impact upon and manifestation of soft power and nation branding. Through its findings this work offers a contribution to the field and study of sports management by identifying some key organisational challenges framed in wider contexts that are relevant to host nations of sporting events, both those relevant for small states and others that relate to nations on a larger scale.

### **Soft power, nation branding and sport:**

Examinations of key motives for nation states to engage in transnational sport and host related events often references both internal and external motivations. The former may refer to attempts to construct a national narrative, and the latter are typically perceived to include that which influences and builds connections across political borders and economic divisions (Cornelissen, 2010) – and power is one of the most enduring determinants of international relations. In a world subject to fluid political and economic environments, accelerated developments and processes of globalisation have intensified the requirement for states to collaborate across borders (Maass, 2009). Traditional 'hard power' approaches to transnational relations remain a significant component of the global political landscape. This involves coercive approaches intended to influence the interests or behaviour of other

political bodies, typically via the use of military means and economic incentives. However, Mattern argues that 'the presumption that hard power is the only effective means for getting what one wants in world politics has been eroding' (2005: 587). In contrast to hard power, soft power is built on the notion of co-opting and attracting others to want what you want. The American political scientist Joseph Nye pioneered this theory, which has often been framed in connection with and popularised by U.S. Democratic Presidential Administrations, namely that of Bill Clinton and Barak Obama.

Nye (2009) argues that soft power can be acquired through the attractiveness of a nation's cultural components, its political ethos, and the perceived legitimacy and authority of its foreign policies. It is partly through cultural engagements relating for instance to art, literature and education, as well as mass entertainment such as films and music, that a country can disseminate information, ideologies and images to influence audiences beyond its national boundaries (Kim, 2011). Meanwhile, commonly adopted systems of government and political values such as democracy, human rights and political and economic liberty can serve as models for other countries to admire and adopt. Depending on the respective nation's foreign policy approach, other states may (or may not) adhere to such models, and possibly look to them for 'guidance, example, encouragement and inspiration' (Vuving, 2009: 12).

Relative to hard power resources therefore, soft power equivalents are often more likely to be at the disposal of a broader range of nations, including small states – for whom they may prove particularly significant (Kim, 2011). Importantly however, the mere potential and existence of such resources does not automatically translate into soft power; instead this is typically dependent on how they are valued, framed, utilised and received (Ham, 2010). The increasing relevance of soft power in international relations has certainly not led to a complete abandonment of hard power capabilities. Moreover, nations with ambitions of acquiring and benefiting from the former are increasingly attempting to do so in conjunction with the latter; a combination of methods known as 'smart power'. Failed attempts to acquire soft, hard and smart power can produce negative consequences for nation states, and in some cases can lead to disempowerment. Soft disempowerment for instance can be evident through contexts in which a country offends, upsets or alienates others, culminating in a loss



of influence or attractiveness, as Brannagan and Rookwood (2016) have argued in relation to Qatar and SMEs.

This theoretical framework for examining power is therefore not without critics and criticisms. Fan (2008) for instance notes that modern nation states contain a variety of actors, who may like a given attraction or not, to different degrees. The resultant impact on policy at the state level cannot be assumed, as it may also depend on the influence of particular groups who are exposed to a given attraction. In addition, the relationship between two nations is shaped by a variety of complex geopolitical and strategic factors and interests in which soft power may have limited influence (Wilson, 2015). The difficulty of measuring soft power also complicates the process of proving its impact.

Some argue that soft power is closely associated to the notion of nation branding, in that both are 'concerned with a nation's interest on the world stage' (Fan, 2008: 147). Public diplomacy has been framed as a subset of nation branding that is focused on a state's political brand, with nation branding relating to how a state constructs, measures and manages its reputation and (re)shapes international opinion (Anholt, 2006). In respect to the conceptual relationship between public diplomacy and nation branding, others however have suggested that the connection is more ambiguous, partly in reflection of the publication of differing conceptions, definitions and perspectives notably from scholars between and within fields such as international relations and marketing communications (Melissen, 2005). Laqueur depicts public diplomacy as a 'peculiarly American aberration' (1994: 20), whereas nation branding appears more in European and particularly British contexts (Dinnie, 2008).

Public diplomacy is often thought to rely in part on the mobilisation of soft power resources to communicate, attract and influence foreign audiences (Potter, 2009). Unlike traditional diplomacy which occurs at the state level, public diplomacy initiatives are typically aimed at foreign audiences and are intended to increase their familiarity with a given country, to shape external perceptions of a nation's image, to disseminate ideas and ideologies across borders, to foster positive perceptions and to encourage others to view it as an attractive destination for tourism and business, etc. (Leonard, 2002).

While the generic concept of branding emerged from and is often associated with the marketing realm of the business world, the contextualised notion of nation branding has

impacted upon wider political spheres, such as international relations. Published academic references appear from the mid-1990s. Anholt for instance argued that 'the reputations of countries function like the brand images of companies and they are equally critical to the progress and prosperity of those countries' (1998: 396). Despite the integrated and fluid networks that continue to develop in modern society, many countries engage in increasingly aggressive competitions with one another for inbound tourism, trade, foreign investments and resources including human capital (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016). These engagements are typically motivated by key national interests, strategies and aspirations: 'Nations are making increasingly conscious efforts to hone their country branding in recognition of the need to fulfil major objectives' (Dinnie, 2008: 18). Some of what we may conceive of as nation branding is state managed therefore, although this can be subject to perception and interpretation. Through its various policies and investments which help to build the image of the state as a unique and influential small nation, and via a conscious connected presentation of self, Qatar have attempted to brand themselves as: an influential state (Grix and Brannagan, 2016); a gateway for the people of the Arab world (Blanchard, 2010); a leader and representative of an imagined pan-Arab community (Kraidy and Khalil, 2009); and through its sports diplomacy and acquisitions, as a centre of culture and modernity (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016), challenging the notion that globalisation must mean Westernisation (Kinninmont, 2013).

Some practitioners and scholars focus on the visual and cosmetic aspects associated with branding. Others include the functional, cultural, emotional and socio-political values framed as representative of the essence of a country. This can involve (to varying degrees) a conscious differentiation from other nation states. Kotler and Gertner describe nation branding as 'the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places... it results from a nation's geography, history, proclamations, art and music, industrial products, famous citizens and other social features' (2002: 251). Emphasising the exclusivity and differential nature of the concept, Dinnie depicts it as 'the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences' (2008: 15). Furthermore, Florek (2005) identifies a nation's ideas, values, culture, images, and features as core components of a nation's brand identity. It can therefore be argued that nation branding can rely on utilising a variation of soft power resources such as

those identified by Nye, in order to define, promote, differentiate and brand a particular state. Its effectiveness may partly depend on how these are perceived and received.

In spite of the efforts of a particular state, both internal and external perceptions will not always be directed by activities explicitly connected to its nation branding strategy. Van Ham contends that a state's brand 'comprises the outside world's ideas about a particular country' (2001: 2) which may well develop largely independent of any conscious and deliberate branding efforts. Anholt (2007) argues that individuals inhabiting complex modern societies do not always have the resources or inclination to visit or learn about other countries. Instead, individuals may well seek to navigate through the complexity of the modern world armed with media representations, stereotypes and simple clichés, which can shape their perspective of other countries. Stereotypical associations linking particular countries with specific events, exports or perceived characteristics can at times prove problematic. Negative associations, stereotypes and commonly held perceptions influenced by connected global media representations can present countries with the challenge of redefining, rebranding and reshaping externally held views, perhaps moving towards that which emphasises a nation's positive characteristics and soft power characteristics or potential (Olins, 2003).

Aside from negative perceptions, some states simply lack visibility to international audiences. Despite enhanced interconnectivity and advancing technologies, certain nations remain in the shadow of their more prominent counterparts, and foreign audiences may not be aware of their existence or at least be ignorant to their unique or 'attractive' characteristics. Nations who proactively, creatively and effectively engage in specific branding strategies to shape their reputation are arguably more likely to successfully exert influence and attract attention, collaboration, support and investment from those across political divides (Dinnie, 2008). Engaging in such efforts does not mean such influence will prove or be perceived as entirely positive however (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016).

Crucially, some argue that such nation branding initiatives should represent credibility, legitimacy and integrity (Keller, 2008). Furthermore, it has been suggested that nation branding should extend beyond short-term advertising campaigns, and will only prove successful if a holistic, long-term approach is adopted (Bilchfeldt, 2003). According to Olins, merely promoting a slogan or logo rarely proves effective, but instead countries should attempt to connect with authentic representation: 'You don't change people's perceptions of

a country with advertising. You change people's perceptions by finding the truth, finding an idea that embraces that truth and putting it through everything they do' (2007: 60).

In summary, it can be argued that nation branding initiatives can serve as steps towards acquiring soft power by increasing the awareness of international audiences pertaining to the unique elements of a nation. Once this awareness has been fostered, recipients may be attracted to, reject, or adopt a more neutral position towards a country as a response. Due to the subjective nature of attraction, and the potential variance in how it is received, it is important for a country to learn from the perspectives of external audiences – particularly those a given state is looking to 'target' (Dinnie, 2008). This understanding can shape the creation, alteration or enhancement of a brand strategy developed to influence international actors, and contribute to the acquisition of soft power. This partly informed the decision to focus on international perspectives of Qatar within this research.

#### **Sports mega events, soft power and nation branding:**

SMEs have become increasingly significant for contemporary economies, cultures, states and sports personnel. Researchers from various fields have examined such events through numerous disciplinary lenses, including sociology, economics, politics and tourism. Roche's seminal work on mega events and modernity for instance offers an important contribution to our understanding of the origins and significance of these tournaments as forms of public culture (Roche, 2009). His early work on the subject helps position SMEs through different dimensions of tourism, namely economic, political and cultural (Roche, 1992). He also examines the enduring mass popularity of such events in modernity, continuing in a period of globalisation, and their extraordinary status owing to the large scale, dramatic character, periodicity and international significance of these readily identifiable and memorable public cultural events (Roche, 2000; 2003).

As a consequence of the significant global interest in tournaments such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games, which are typically evidenced by aspects such as lucrative commercial deals and broadcasting contracts, extensive viewer ratings and media exposure (Brannagan

and Rookwood, 2016), SMEs have been framed as important potential mechanisms for a host nation in the pursuit of the acquisition of soft power. Such acquisitions can relate to achieving objectives outlined by nation branding and public diplomacy practitioners (Dinnie, 2008). Mega events can provide useful public diplomacy platforms for nations to communicate with and influence foreign audiences. As with soft power and its relationship with soft disempowerment however, there is also the possibility for a range of negative consequences in this respect: diplomatic crises can develop in the context of international relations, which can negatively impact the branding of a state. This has occurred in the GCC, as explored earlier and later in this article.

SMEs can provide opportunities for a host nation or city to gain international visibility, providing means of 'placing them on the map' (see: Collins, 2009; Almeida *et al.*, 2013; Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006). Recurrent references across various media sources to a particular state in conjunction with a globally significant sporting event can raise the profile of the host nation. This often increases the understanding of international audiences pertaining to key demographic, geographic, political and sporting features of the state in question. In addition, through first hand exchanges and the images and messages communicated through an event, global audiences can gain a depth of insight into a host nation's culture, language, heritage, technological and economic capabilities (Cornelissen, 2010; Grix *et al.*, 2015). In retrospective terms, the collective memory of a SME can often be reduced to and framed within the context of particular occurrences. This can range from the exhibition of exciting, shared and globally significant sporting spectacles to political manipulations including boycotts and terrorist attacks. Such instances are typically memorialised in close connection to the host nation or city, and can shape the degree of acceptance, attraction and influence over international audiences on the world stage.

A nation state's capacity to manage its identity profile via the staging of SMEs can offer up significant opportunities. These might involve tackling previous associations with negative stereotypes and outdated (mis)conceptions that may have shaped public consciousness in light of historical events. Framed in a positive light, the 2006 World Cup for instance was considered by some to have provided valuable opportunities for Germany to develop progressive international relations, moving away from the image of the Nazi regime (Sutton and Rookwood, 2015). The 2010 World Cup presented South Africa with the chance to

showcase itself as a prosperous, stable and unified country after years of civil unrest under the Apartheid regime (Cornelissen, 2010). Having been awarded the 2022 World Cup, the event is perceived by many Qataris as an opportunity to demonstrate positive attributes, as a stable Arab country in the Middle East, a region which has often been connected to instability, conflict and terrorism (Knott, 2014; Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016). For host nations, a World Cup can symbolise status, prestige and modernity. Developed and especially emerging economies that 'seek to be coupled in the eyes of the world with positive or globally altruistic causes' may strive to stage SMEs as a way of developing or cementing their status amongst the global elite (Giffard and Rivenburgh, 2000: 1).

Extending beyond the often intangible elements of image construction, are the tangible behavioural outcomes that may result from the strategic branding of a nation through a mega event. Given that these tournaments are 'highly malleable to political influence in terms of agenda building and frame setting strategies', hosts often attempt to use SMEs as platforms to work towards predetermined goals (Donos and Lowes, 2012: 64). Whether intended to help promote tourism, attract foreign investments or establish political and economic connections with other states, a host nation often attempts to dominate control over the messages communicated in the staging of a SME in accordance with broader objectives (ibid). For example, a primary goal of the 2006 World Cup involved promoting Germany's image in order to 'increase incoming tourism and position Germany as an economic and scientific country with which to trade' (Grix and Brannagan, 2016: 12).

SMEs offer a range of potential benefits in respect to soft power and nation branding, but the prospect of negative consequences in these contexts is also apparent. A nation often attracts immediate global attention once it expresses serious intent to host a mega event. Being under the spotlight and subject to critique for a prolonged period poses various challenges for hosts, and unattractive elements often emerge at the forefront of international headlines. Given the criticisms of the state and its preparations for the event, this has been apparent on a perhaps unprecedented level with Qatar. This has also been impacted by the exceptional award of the 2022 World Cup twelve years before the event is due to take place, as opposed to the typical eight years. At the other end of the spectrum, Egypt were announced as the replacement hosts of the 2019 African Cup of Nations five months before the tournament, with Equatorial

Guinea declared as the replacement host nation of the 2015 edition just two months prior to the event.

Regardless of the timespan however, media coverage leading up to the event can focus (sometimes disproportionately) on the negative aspects of a country, which can influence public perception. Even in the pre-event stage attempts to acquire soft power and manage nation branding can lead to soft disempowerment, as has arguably proven the case to a degree with Qatar, who have come under considerable scrutiny with respect to issues such as bribery, corruption and conditions for migrant labour (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014; 2015).

### **Research methods and analysis:**

Fieldwork was conducted over an eight-year period (January 2011 – June 2018) spanning five continents. The research was carried out principally at seven FIFA and FIFA-affiliated confederation events namely: the 2011 Asia Cup in Qatar, the 2011 Gold Cup in USA, the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the 2015 Copa America in Chile, the 2016 European Championships in France, the 2017 African Cup of Nations in Gabon and the 2018 World Cup in Russia. A total of 30 Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents from 20 different nations, including six females and 24 males. The initial decision to utilise this research method was informed by the work of scholars who have produced useful findings via the application of semi-structured interviews in relation to perceptions of soft power (Yang, 2010), public diplomacy (Maheshwari, 2011) and mega events (Florek, 2008), an approach also justified and inspired by the more recent work of Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015) who have done so by examining these elements in combination. These interviews were undertaken, coded and analysed in order to gain a depth of insight into what were perceived as key organisational challenges facing Qatar's World Cup, and in the context of perceptions of soft power and nation branding. The interviewees were selected for this work as they represented a variety of relevant demographics, including football journalists, tournament staff and volunteers, football supporters, and expatriates from Europe and North America based in Qatar and elsewhere in the GCC. This was informed by existing approaches, such as that of Brannagan and Rookwood (2016).

Fans and journalists were only selected for interview if they had experience of at least two previous football mega events. Given the growth and significance of the expatriate labour force across different sectors throughout the GCC, this research incorporates representatives from this demographic. However, this work does not include the perspectives of the South Asian contingent involved in building facilities, as this investigation does not focus on issues around the construction of stadia. (For an examination of relational power and responsibilities concerning these migrant workers in Qatar, see Millward, 2017). Instead, participating expatriates were those employed in the industries of security, media and sport in Qatar and UAE. Some interviews were conducted in other locations partly due to the difficulty of travelling to Qatar following the significant, ongoing Qatar-Gulf crisis which emerged in May 2017. The severing of diplomatic ties between Qatar and various GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) and the embargo imposed on Qatar, with land, air and sea borders shut from 5 June 2017 has made it difficult to travel between these countries (and impossible to move between them directly), and complicated the prospect of conducting interviews about Qatar in those countries.

Once the data collection stage had been completed, the transcribed interviews were then subjected to a thorough thematic analysis. The following coding system is employed here, denoting the demographic represented (staff, volunteer, supporter, journalist or expatriate) and the country they were from, the city where the interview was conducted (including those within the aforementioned mega event host nations as well as in UK, UAE, Turkey and Bahrain), the month and year. For example: 'Brazilian Fan, Rio: June 2014'. Expatriates were all from Britain or Canada and based in either UAE or Qatar. For example, a Canadian expat working in sport and living in Qatar but interviewed in Istanbul for expediency purposes is coded as 'C-E-Sp-Q, Istanbul: July, 2017'.

### **Organisational challenges facing Qatar's World Cup regarding soft power and nation branding:**

There have been various relevant criticisms levelled at Qatar by the international community relating for instance to allegations of corruption and bribery surrounding the acquisition of the World Cup (Blake and Calvert, 2015) and the treatment of its blue collar and primarily



South Asian workforce involved in the construction of facilities (Millward, 2017). Other critical assessments have centred on tournament legacies and the expenditure incurred in constructing stadia and other sites, together with connected plans for long term usage (Tomlinson, 2018). However, such issues are not examined here. Instead this section sheds light on the key overarching themes to emerge from the thematic analysis of this research, which centred on some of the perceived organisational challenges Qatar and those present at the event are expected to face during the 2022 World Cup. These relate primarily to access, security and diplomacy.

Firstly, in relation to access, two sub-themes were central here: The first centred on concerns about how Qatari organisers and local as well as other regional fans would treat those travelling from certain countries. There were numerous references to Israel, Israeli and Jewish supporters in this respect. For instance, one interviewee argued: 'What if Israel qualify [for the 2022 World Cup]? Most countries in the Middle East don't recognise them or have diplomatic relations with them' (Brazilian Journalist, Santiago: June 2015); while another described the 'theoretical involvement of Jews and Israel' in Qatar as a 'potential security nightmare' (B-E-Se-UAE, London: August 2017). Although Qatar established a bilateral trade agreement in 1996 and the Qatar Olympic Committee co-funded the construction of the Doha Stadium with the State of Israel in the Israeli city of Shakhnin in 2006 (Zubida, 2016), diplomatic relations between the countries have otherwise been limited. Israel's neighbouring entities Syria, Lebanon and Palestine have all qualified for the 2019 Asian Cup in UAE, however Israel (who have held UEFA membership since 1994 having previously competed in Asian and Oceanian competitions) have not qualified for a major tournament since 1970. Qatar have agreed to Israel's involvement in 2022 pending their qualification, although given the unlikelihood of qualification, this issue may only prove theoretical. However as one fan argued in a statement that bridged both the concepts of nation branding and soft power: 'If Qatar is trying to brand itself as a centre of global sport, it must be diplomatic and show its power and leadership, by including and welcoming those who qualify and fans who come from other countries like Israel and wave their flags at matches' (Argentine Fan, Moscow: June 2018).

An additional sub-theme centred on some of the wider access issues that interviewees considered to be significant for Qatari organisers and supporters leading up to the 2022 World

Cup. For example, one respondent asked, 'When December 2022 comes around the access issues will be about fans. Will everyone be permitted visas to enter Qatar?' (Brazilian Fan, Rio: June 2016). Five years earlier another respondent posed the following questions: 'Will the LGBT community be discriminated against? Will females be free to attend?' (American Fan, New York: June 2011). Furthermore, another suggested: '...for those who want to make a statement, maybe displaying the rainbow symbol or whatever, the Qataris are going to have an issue. Homosexuality is illegal in Qatar... But imprisoning a fan on this basis would have serious PR consequences for Qatar' (German journalist, Paris: June 2016). Such 'fundamental cultural differences between East and West' as one respondent referred to them as could 'undermine Qatar's attempts to brand itself as a progressive state, depending on how they're managed' (English Journalist, St Petersburg: June 2018).

A recent study found that same-sex sexual contact is illegal in 74 countries, and punishable by death in 13 states, including Qatar (The Independent, 2016). However, according to Article 296 of the current Penal Code in Qatar, sodomy between men can lead to imprisonment for a minimum of one year and a maximum of five years depending on the case (Al Meezan Qatar Legal Portal, Article 296). The same penal code applies to other sexual acts including prostitution within the country. Furthermore, according to Wasserman (2017) such forms of intolerance do not automatically translate into punishment or exile. In Qatar homosexuality is 'practiced privately and denied publicly' on a small scale and some consider it possible to comply with the state's interpretation of Sharia law by "'being" gay but not "doing" gay' (ibid). One respondent discussed these issues in relation to perceptions of Russia's position on homosexuality in 2018. 'There have been some protests here [in Moscow] and I do think there is intolerance of public displays of homosexuality, but ultimately I think Russia have managed to control the narrative at least. Qatar will look to do the same' (Mexican Fan, Moscow: June 2018). The content, direction and control of messages emanating from a country before and during a mega event being hosted there can be considered important in the context of soft power (or disempowerment), and the cultural influence on international audiences. This can be connected to the importance of using soft power to influence others, which Nye frames as a 'battle to win hearts and minds' (2008: 94). Such communication is also an important component of the state's public diplomacy (George, 2016; Nye, 2008). For Qatar 2022, as with Russia 2018, the challenge for the state extends beyond managing expressions of

homosexuality (in this case) but also the media's framing of the respective state as 'welcoming of all people' (Mexican Fan, Moscow: June 2018).

Despite the modernization and development of Qatar and other GCC nations which are central to their nation branding strategies (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015), these states are commonly perceived to be extremely conservative. In attempting to balance traditional and modern societal values Qatari women are permitted to vote, run for municipal elections and participate freely in parts of public and social life, while maintaining a high profile in professional and educational settings (Golkowska, 2017). A recent study found that 51% of Qatari women were employed in 2016, which is the highest proportion of female employment across the Gulf (AT Kearney, cited in *The New Arab*, 2016). Nevertheless, women in Qatar do face certain restrictions, notably within specific male-dominated environments. This gendered social exclusion has been recurrent across various international contexts, with sports such as football typically regarded as a traditional male preserve in and beyond Qatar (Cecamore *et al.*, 2011). Women are not banned from attending games in Qatar but the practice of social exclusion which positions Qatar in ideological contrast to that of many Western countries will inevitably shape levels of (dis)engagement amongst female supporters from outside the Gulf. As one observer noted at the 2011 Asian Cup in Qatar, 'I've seen most teams play here but only seen a handful of females. What will happen at the World Cup?' (Australian Fan, Doha: January 2011). The resultant profile of supporters in attendance in 2022 may shape external perceptions of Qatar which, to apply Nye's (2008) work on soft power, could impact upon the resultant acquisition of soft power/disempowerment and the subsequent perceptions of the nation relative to how it has been branded.

The second overarching theme to emerge from the analysis of this research centred on event security and safety management. All 30 interviewees made reference to the words 'security' and/or 'safety' in discussing the organisational challenges facing the 2022 World Cup. For instance, in looking ahead to 2022, one interviewee argued: 'Hooliganism is a potential problem. Some still want to fight if they're allowed. There has to be effective policing [in Qatar], as a response and deterrent' (Welsh Fan, Bordeaux: June 2016). When discussing the perceived threat of hooliganism, several interviewees referred to the scale of Qatar in relation to other SME host nations. For example, one respondent argued: 'Unlike Russia or Brazil, Qatar is a small country and fans from all over will be mixing, including rivalries. Segregation

outside of stadiums won't be easy... They'll have to police it carefully, and use football intelligence, particularly from those countries with a hooligan problem' (B-E-Se-UAE, London: August 2017).

However, in referencing the experience at the 2018 World Cup, one supporter suggested crowd management could be positively approached and influenced by events in Russia: 'If intelligence is shared then Qatar should be able to follow Russia's lead. Because despite all the fears, there's been no trouble here, so far. If Russia can prevent hooliganism, maybe Qatar can too' (Swiss fan, Kaliningrad: June 2018). By restricting instances of football violence, it was argued that Qatar can help switch attention to its showpiece event and 'demonstrate its unique culture' (ibid), in a way that can build and promote the acquisition of soft power and its position on the global stage.

In addition however, some interviewees articulated their fears over the associated "threat of terrorism": 'For people gathered in large public spaces the threat of terrorism has increased – especially in the Middle East. Any terrorism issues in Qatar, even just a credible threat, but certainly an attack, that'd mean people associating terrorists with the Middle East more, even though it's a World Cup... Beyond any direct consequences it would be a catastrophe for how Qatar is viewed' (B-E-Se-UAE, London: August 2017).

Qatar's acquisition of the World Cup was considered to represent a degree of risk, given the prevalence of conflict and terrorist activity in the region (Scharfenort, 2012) and the proposals to construct 12 stadia within a 20-mile radius, creating crowd management and other logistical challenges (Farred, 2016). In soft power/disempowerment terms, despite Qatar attempting to present itself to international tourists as a safe and attractive location – which forms a key country branding strategy (Ginesta and San Eugenio, 2013) – it was argued here that the media coverage which has associated the World Cup with a 'high-risk' location has potentially damaged the state's reputation to a degree: 'If the World Cup passes without any problems, any terrorist attack or fan problems, Qatar can say they're powerful enough to host any event or people safely. But the press coverage means people are questioning that power and might be too scared to go' (German Fan, Lille: June 2016). If the World Cup is attended primarily by those from Arab nations, and supporters from other parts of the world choose not visit in similar numbers to those seen in Brazil in 2014 for instance, which had over a million international visitors (Rookwood, 2017), this could undermine Qatar's engagement

with and influence on a global audience, and limit opportunities to showcase its wider cultural characteristics accordingly. However, according to one interviewee the 2018 World Cup 'should give Qatar hope. The huge numbers of Latin Americans here [in Russia] could well be seen in Qatar. They bring the festival, and Qatar gets to play host, with the world watching' (Swiss fan, Kaliningrad: June 2018). The World Cup is perceived by many to represent potential in the context of soft power therefore, subject to the engagement and management of the tournament.

The decision to travel to a specific city or country is often shaped by how attractive and desirable a given destination is perceived to be (Ragavan *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, a negative image or media representation can severely damage the reputation of a given place and its existing and future branding and potential to build a successful and sustainable tourism industry (Avraham, 2009). As more states develop nation branding initiatives in order to compete for international trade and tourism, target markets (including individual tourists) may find it difficult to form balanced and positive opinions on a specific destination's features, and thus come to rely on simple clichés and dominant mediated narratives (Anholt, 2007). In this case the findings of this work illustrate the view of Qatar as both an 'exotic and potentially dangerous place' (B-E-Se-UAE, London: August 2017), and highlight the challenges facing event organisers and nation branding practitioners to mitigate such perceptions and present Qatar as a safe and reliable SME host. Some also suggested the event could prove 'pivotal to how Qatar and the entire region is then viewed, positively or otherwise' (English Journalist, St Petersburg: June 2018).

Although a number of possible challenges were discussed by interviewees, in offering some solutions to potential organisational problems here, many respondents suggested Qatari organisers should carefully approach the use of Fan Parks. At each World Cup since 2006 'FIFA Fan Fests' have been set up in host cities, with organisers converting large, centrally located public spaces to temporarily erected, secure fan facilities (Rookwood, 2018): 'Fan parks have changed football tournaments. You pass through security, and it's enclosed, so everyone knows it's safe... You mingle with fans and watch matches on a big screen and drink beer. Plus, there's entertainment on stage between the football, and from the sponsors. Everyone loves it!' (Belgian Fan, Rio: June 2014). Another respondent suggested: 'Qatar should promote

their fan parks leading up to the World Cup as a chance to come together from across the world and experience the best of Qatar' (German Fan, Lille: June 2016).

A combined 30 million people visited the Fan Fests at the 2006, 2010 and 2014 World Cups with no major disorder reported (Rookwood, 2017). 82% of visitors in Brazil shared their experiences on social media and 86% suggested the Fan Fests improved their experiences (FIFA, 2016). One interviewee claimed this is a key if "indirect" component of a state's branding: 'Host nations need to provide the best experiences for fans, who then share them on social media, reaching people at home... Official branding is therefore connected to and supported indirectly by visitors, fans themselves. Official messages are therefore legitimated or undermined' (English Journalist, St Petersburg: June 2018).

According to one respondent a key reason for the widespread popularity and engagement in fan parks is that "fans are allowed to drink. It's secure and they're monitored and they behave" (Brazilian Volunteer, Rio: June 2014). However, highlighting another organisational challenge in this respect, another interviewee suggested: "Dry fan parks won't go down well in Qatar" (Northern Irish Fan: Lyon, June 2016). There were plans to prohibit the sale of alcohol in both stadiums and Fan Fests at the 2018 World Cup, as with Russia's 2017 Confederations Cup, reflecting an assumed causal relationship between alcohol consumption and spectator violence, following significant hooliganism at Euro 2016 (Rookwood, 2017; 2018). However, alcohol was served at fan parks in Russia and 'in the stadiums the beer was alcohol-free but some supporters are used to that situation anyway' (English Journalist, St Petersburg: June 2018).

For legal and cultural reasons, a strict approach is expected in Qatar: 'The laws in Qatar may make it impossible for drinking, but football fans are used to drinking. Here we have no problems inside the Fan Parks' (French Staff, St Etienne: June 2016). However, one supporter interviewed in Qatar predicted that the organisers of the 2022 World Cup would provide excellent service in these facilities, and that the frames of reference would prove beneficial: 'Judging by the fan zones at the last two World Cups [2006 and 2010] there's room for improvement with the entertainment and food. I expect Qatar's World Cup to be spectacular, to provide the absolute best of both, partly as a distraction from the fact they're alcohol-free.' (Australian Fan, Doha: January 2011). Similarly: 'If Qatar doesn't want its World Cup

dominated by the alcohol issue is must provide great food and entertainment in stadiums and fan parks' (Swiss fan, Kaliningrad: June 2018).

Related to this point, the final overarching theme to emerge from the analysis of these research findings centred on diplomacy, notably concerning the current GCC dispute between Qatar and its Gulf neighbours. One interviewee argued that Qatar's position on alcohol consumption could actually have a positive although perhaps unintended impact on the diplomatic standoff, through a resultant broadening of peripheral engagements in the World Cup: 'The GCC-Qatar dispute has made a lot of headlines but I think UAE realise they can get a slice of the tourism pie. For instance, Qatar is dry and fans drink, and there have been talks lately of fans staying in Dubai, flying to Qatar for games and coming back to Qatar to celebrate and party and drink. Alcohol consumption is certainly easier in UAE than Qatar... The standoff could still last a while, but the eventual softening of UAE's position will be shaped by connections like these' (B-E-Se-UAE, London: August 2017). Another interviewee suggested that the staging of and involvement in the 2019 Asian Cup could prove "crucial" to the 2022 World Cup: 'Qatar have qualified for the Asian Cup here [UAE]. If the GCC dispute is resolved by then... 2019 could help restore normal relations. It could be crucial to the World Cup running smoothly... If Qatar pull out though, you'd fear for the management of 2022' (B-E-Sp-UAE, Dubai: July 2017).

Most respondents interviewed after the boycott was initiated in May 2017 expect there to be a diplomatic resolution, with one intimating it would represent a 'governance fiasco on a par with anything FIFA had ever resided over' (B-E-M-Q, London: July 2017) if the GCC crisis prevented the World Cup from taking place in Qatar. When questioned about likely means of approaching a resolution, some respondents referred to the use of financial resources. For instance, one interviewee argued: 'With Qatar, money tends to solve everything' (C-E-Sp-Q, Istanbul: July, 2017), and another framed the Gulf state as 'a brand of wealth, resources and power' (B-E-Se-UAE, London: August 2017). Another participant presented the crisis as an "opportunity": 'The crisis is obviously not positive for Qatar. But it is also actually an opportunity for them to demonstrate their power and standing in the world. If they come through this and mediate peacefully and then host a successful World Cup it may well cement their place as the most powerful small nation on earth' (C-E-Sp-Q, Istanbul: July, 2017).

Finally, the 2022 World Cup was therefore perceived by respondents in this research to provide Qatar with opportunities to demonstrate its power and status, through peaceful mediation, on which grounds it was partly awarded the event in the first instance (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016). Such opportunities were thought to provide potential for nation branding and the acquisition of soft power through the resultant influence on a global and captivated audience; but these possibilities were set against 'considerable risk to the reputation of Qatar, the Gulf, the Middle East and FIFA' (B-E-M-Q, London: July 2017) should the boycott undermine and ultimately prevent the World Cup from taking place in Qatar.

### **Conclusion:**

'You tend to think of branding as... immediately recognisable and visible. Arriving in Doha you see huge planes all in national colours with 'Qatar' stamped on them... The national airline promotes itself as the 'World's five-star airline'. Its mission is 'excellence in everything'. Their branding starts on arrival" (C-E-Sp-Q, Istanbul: July, 2017).

As a significant example of a powerful small state committed to branding itself as a modern centre of world sport (Ginesta and San Eugenio, 2013), Qatar have invested heavily in international sport over the last decade, with the 2022 World Cup the intended pinnacle of the portfolio. Staging what some perceive as the ultimate sporting event in the Middle East for the first time would represent an achievement in itself, especially if the tournament is well received by fans and visitors and is heralded relative to 'the usual test – of being the "best World Cup ever"' (English Journalist, St Petersburg: June 2018). Previous work has found that many of those who travel to World Cups are positive about the prospect of Qatar's event (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016), but the findings here indicate that a number of organisational challenges remain apparent. These relate primarily to access, security and diplomacy.

Access issues for female supporters arguably presents the challenge on the broadest scale. I conducted research at Qatar's 2011 Asian Cup (at which there were no fan parks) and watched every competing team play, yet saw only six females in stadiums across fourteen matches. Conversely, Fan Fest sites at the 2006 World Cup in Germany, which served as 'levers' for improving fan experiences in terms of engagement, inclusivity and interaction, had



over 18 million users, 44% of which were women, with no major public disorder reported (Grix, 2012). There are models for inclusive, safe, and effectively managed mega events therefore, which also places prospective hosts under increased pressure – including but certainly not limited to Qatar. According to respondents in this research, the 2018 World Cup has ‘positively influenced most people’s perceptions of Russia’ (English Journalist, St Petersburg: June 2018) and Qatar’s organising committee might want to consider looking to ‘follow their example’ (ibid) in some respects. The Fan identification system (also serving in part as a visa waiver) employed in Russia 2018 is one such example.

Predicted restrictions of access for female supporters, and the response to associated cultural expectations of those who do choose to attend presents further challenges for the organisers of Qatar’s World Cup. The access for, involvement of and behavioural restrictions placed upon LGBT supporters is another concern in this respect. In addition, the threat of hooliganism highlighted by fan violence at Euro 2016 emphasises the significance of Qatar’s crowd management techniques. With 12 stadiums situated within a 20-mile radius, segregating rival supporters is a potential organisational concern. Complex and fluid notions of rivalry can be shaped by the players themselves, as was evident at the Serbia v Switzerland game at the 2018 World Cup where Swiss forward Xherdan Shaqiri angered Serbian supporters with a celebration of his last minute winning goal that invoked ‘nationalist symbols that celebrated his Kosovan heritage’ (Swiss fan, Kaliningrad: June 2018), resulting in some unexpected crowd disorder.

It is uncertain whether the use of a Western-centric view of effective football intelligence and proportionate policing usually recommended for football mega events (Rookwood, 2017; Rookwood and Spaaij, 2017) will or should be adopted in Qatar. This would represent an important addition to the knowledgebase in respect to future research. Such potential problems may depend partly on the results of the qualification process, tournament draw and schedule of fixtures. The connection between this form of control and the hard/soft power discourse is also noteworthy here. Furthermore, terrorism was also perceived here to be a particular concern for the management of Qatar’s World Cup, given the relatively ‘high risk’ location and the reputational association of the Middle East with terror attacks. The occurrence or absence of terrorist activity in the region around the timeframe of the World

Cup is likely to have significant consequences for subsequent nation branding and soft power possibilities, as well as approaches to public diplomacy.

Many of these concerns and potential organisational challenges have however been framed as opportunities in this research. Most respondents commented on the wealth of Qatar, which one interviewee perceived as 'a key feature of the state's brand identity. Read anything ever written by or about Qatar, it will always reference its GDP status' (German Journalist, Paris: June 2016). The general consensus of this research is that Qatar's nation branding practitioners are perceived to have an important role in the build up to the 2022 World Cup. The findings here also suggest that there is confidence that Qatar can use its considerable financial resources to prepare for and manage the World Cup effectively. One connected priority in this respect could include approaching the 2019 Asian Cup as an opportunity to rebuild peaceful ties with other GCC states and begin to engage in cooperative partnerships with neighbouring countries in mitigating the current diplomatic crisis (notably concerning the group match between Qatar and Saudi Arabia). This could perhaps involve mediating roles played by the relatively neutral Gulf States of Kuwait and Oman.

Subsequently, during the World Cup the use of Fan Fests as innovative spaces and entertainment centres could provide fans with alternatives to alcohol, and encourage visitors to promote their experiences and excitement via social media and thus connect with a more global audience, and legitimise and reinforce the work of Qatar's nation branding practitioners. Finally, despite the apparent challenges, the potential remains for Qatar to offer visitors the chance to experience the country in a relatively moderate winter climate, showcasing a relatively inclusive version of the ultimate sporting event that represents a showpiece of a nation branding strategy, facilitating the acquisition of soft power.

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