

Sebastian Sons



Abstract:

Building a Local Sport Identity: The World Cup and its implications on community sports in Qatar and Saudi Arabia

The FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar has resulted in more engagement in Qatar to promote local and domestic sport on different levels. Driven by the overarching goal to enhance and improve physical activities among the Qatari population that is suffering from civilian diseases such as obesity or diabetes, Qatari governmental and non-governmental stakeholders have introduced a plethora of initiatives, programs, and projects related to community sports. Against this backdrop, the World Cup needs to be considered as a driving force and inspirational source for Qatar's engagement to identify sports as an instrument for social cohesion and human development on a national and local level. Additionally, the promotion of sports and physical activity in light of the World Cup preparation has further emerged as a cornerstone of Qatar's identity construction and domestic nation branding and as an instrument of soft power consolidation. In contrast, the development of a national sports industry inside Saudi Arabia with multi-faceted implications on local sports communities is a relatively new phenomenon which is driven by the Saudi leadership's aspiration to promote socio-economic and sociocultural transformation, create a new Saudi identity and include sports as a main driver for identity politics. Hereby, the World Cup 2022 and the efforts Qatar has undertaken since it won the bid in 2010 has indirectly impacted the measures inside Saudi Arabia to promote a local sports culture. Based on comprehensive empirical research, the article aims to provide analytical insights into the emergence of a community-based sports industry in both Qatar and Saudi Arabia by outlining the respective efforts to promote a local sport identity prior to the FIFA World Cup 2022. The contribution thus deconstructs the political approaches outlined in the respective development visions, addresses concrete case studies in both Qatar and Saudi Arabia and finally provides a comparative dimension how the construction of a local and community sports industry features prominently in both countries ambitions to preserve social cohesion amid fundamental social, economic, and cultural transformation. For instance, Qatari champions in the promotion of the local dimension of sports such as the Aspire Academy or Qatar Foundation are portrayed as well as Saudi institutions such as the newly established Ministry of Sports and the Sports for All Foundation. In doing so, the contribution provides a new insight into the nexus of identity construction, sports, and power consolidation on a local and national level. In turn, it also analyzes the respective approaches inside Qatar and Saudi Arabia on a comparative level which consequently contributes to the academic discussion on inner-Gulf competition in terms of sports promotion.

Bio:

Sebastian Sons works as researcher for the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO). Prior to that, he served as an advisor for the Regional Programme “Cooperation with Arab Donors” (CAD) of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. He holds a Ph.D. from the Humboldt University Berlin on media discourses on labor migration from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia.

He studied Middle Eastern Studies, Contemporary History and Political Sciences in Berlin and Damascus. He was further trained as journalist at the Berlin School for Journalists and worked as a sports journalist. As Head of Research at the German Orient-Institute and as a project researcher at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), he focused on foreign and security policy as well as labor migration, sport politics and development cooperation of the Arab Gulf states.

Among many other articles and analyses on the Arab Gulf monarchies, he published the book “*Built on Sand: Saudi Arabia – A problematic Ally*” (in German). In September 2022, his new book is published which addresses the implications of the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar on Germany’s and Europe’s strategic foreign policymaking on the Gulf region.