

All Asian Football

MAGAZIN



FOOTBALL WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

ALL ASIAN FOOTBALL MAGAZINE



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It is with great pleasure that we present to our readers the first issue of All Asian Football Magazine, a new project that will focus on different regions of Asia, exploring football, economic and social issues linked to our favorite sport.

In this first release we decided to focus our attention on the Arabian Peninsula, exploring the political diatribe that has been going on since 2017, when Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies decided to end diplomatic relations with Qatar. Doha has been accused of supporting terrorism, as it is closer, politically speaking, to Shiite Iran, the great enemy of Riyadh.

For over a decade, the Arab states, through the richest sovereign wealth funds, have started investing in football by changing the balance of power on a global level, in a way that Russia and China have not yet managed to accomplish. The Emirs' Manchester City and Qatar's Paris Saint Germain have overturned the European transfer market by raising the bar more and more every year, up to the over 200 million euros that the Parisians spent to snatch Neymar from Barcelona. These aggressive maneuvers have led to a surge in the price of the players transfer prize, but for the two 'Arab clubs' there are consequences to pay: Manchester City was banned by UEFA to participate to European Cups for the next two years having violated the Financial Fair Play, and Paris Saint Germain could be the next club to be banned.

The biggest controversy in world football was the assignment of the World Cup in Qatar, an unexpected event that put the small Gulf state at the center of global attention. In recent years, tourism and foreign direct investment in Qatar have increased, but at the same time, the risks of this great media exposure have brought to light many controversies that undermine the image of Qatar: from the accusations of terrorism by the Saudi Arabia, up to the investigations on the corruption for the assignment of the World Cup and the countless deaths on the construction sites of the stadiums.

Saudi Arabia is the last major actor who has decided to invest in the entertainment and sports sector. After years of isolation, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin-Salman's reforms want to bring Riyadh to a new dimension and football is also part of this plan: organization of international sporting events such as the Formula E Grand Prix, or the Super Cups of Italy and Spain, and also the acquisition of Clubs, with the Royal Family Fund close to taking control of a historical team like Newcastle United in England.

The three most important countries of the Gulf area, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE, seek to use football entertainment in general as a vehicle to improve their image in the public eye and take advantage of new economic opportunities, thus becoming key players in the global economy, in order to become independent from oil in the long term, through investments in strategic sectors such as automotive, banks and luxury brands. Football therefore also becomes a battleground between the states of the Arabian Peninsula: in recent times, the Qatari state broadcaster BeIn has asked the Premier League control committee to block the acquisition of Newcastle as Saudi Arabia hacking the signal of BeInSports, illegally transmits the English championship in the Arabian Peninsula.

In this first issue of All Asian Football Magazine, we will explore the economic, political and social issues of football in the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East in general. In the first section we will analyze the investments in European football, the benefits and risks. The second part 'Football and Society' we dedicated a focus on the women's football movement in the various Arab states, and we also talked about the rebirth of football in Yemen, a country afflicted by a long civil war, whose national team, despite everything, took part in the last Asian Cup. The third part is dedicated to the keyrole people: we will analyze the Saudi entertainment minister Turki Al-Sheikh, owner of Almeria, and Omar Abdulrahman, the 'Maradona of the Desert'. The last part will be dedicated to the best teams of 2019: the Qatar National team winner of the Asian Cup and Al-Hilal, who triumphed in the AFC Champions League.

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Thanks to **Franco Ficotola** (@Franco92C14) who designed the cover of All Asian Football Magazine



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An overview of investment in Football by Arab Investors

EUROPEAN FOOTBALL CLUBS OWNED BY INVESTORS FROM THE ARAB PENINSULA



City Football Group Family - Footballbenchmark.com

Arab Investments in European Football

A direct way to take a place in the heart of Football Entertainment



uk.reuters.co

Take a plane with me, obviously respecting the sanitary conditions that the moment requires, and we will fly to three of the richest countries on the planet. We will first stop in Qatar, continue our travels in the UAE and then finish it in Saudi Arabia. These three countries spent hundreds of millions of euros on football. Is it a sincere love for the sport that we all love or rather a strategic plan that hides other goals?

Football is an extraordinary passion capable of moving billions of people but which carries all the stylistic features of a big business. "It's capitalism, baby," quoting a famous mockumentary by American director Michael Moore. FIFA, the most represented international football body, is one of the most important holding companies on the planet. Its president, the Italian-Swiss Gianni Infantino, admitted that the organization has a treasury of 2.4 billion euros to spend. In 2018 its revenue was 4.2 billion euros, with a profit of

around 1.5 billion euros. Much of this economic success is due to the excellent results achieved by the 2018 World Cup which took place in Russia and which went beyond all expectations.

While I am flying over the Mediterranean I open the airline's free magazine and see the logo of the 2022 World Cup and below the Chinese FIFA sponsors, from Dalian Wanda to Hisense. China has been a major investor in world football. A soft power strategy that has brought famous players and coaches to the eastern country, as well as heavy investments for the purchase of European teams. Then, from 2019, the Chinese government has decided to put a stop to this expansion, blocking sporting investments abroad. This has ensured other important investors already present in European football to have free ground after seeing a contest disappears. If we dig deeper and take a closer look at the relationship between the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and the Chinese state, we realize that, as far as investments in the sports

sector are concerned, they are closely linked. China has officially stepped back but under track it continues to invest heavily in major international sporting events through important partnerships.

I look out the window. I landed in Doha, the capital of Qatar, the first stop on our tour. The trip you are going to do with me in will be among exotic places, numbers, football, politics and sport washing in the three richest nations of the Arabian Peninsula. Three absolute monarchies, in which social and civil rights are very far from being reality. I still have a final premise to make for you. What do I mean by sport washing? To explain it, I borrow the words of Simon Chadwick, a professor at the University of Nottingham and one of the leading experts on the subject: "It is the use of the sports field, creation or participation in world-class events, by authoritarian regimes with wide-ranging projects that involve host countries and their citizens to clean up their image and distract those same citizens from the continuous violations of rights that take place within their borders".

QATAR



Lonelyplanet.com

Population: 2,350,000 inhabitants

Capital: Doha

Surface: 11,437 sq km

Form of government: Constitutional monarchy

Re: Emir Tamir Bin Hamad Al Thani

Prime Minister: Abdullah Bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al-Thani

Growth rate: 4.93%

We arrive in Doha and it's definitely chilli. Strange, isn't it? Air conditioning is the friend you can rely on to survive these latitudes during the summer heat. Despite these climatic contraindications, the

next soccer world cup will be played in Qatar, even if it will be done in December. It is in these conditions that the World Athletics Championships were held last September between empty stadiums, organizational problems and athletes collapsed on the ground during the marathon. The controversial assignment of the football World Cup to the detriment of England and the United States meant that on that day all the fans began to realize the power of a small country in front of the Persian Gulf that until that time didn't have a relevant sports history. Why did Qatar decide to invest with such force in the world of football? Let's try to understand it by dividing the issue into two topics, the sports and the political.

The ramifications in European Football

Spain has been under Arab rule for many centuries and their civilization has left indelible artistic marks. This is why the first Qatari intervention in professional football takes place in Spain. We are in 2010 and Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Abdullah Al Ahmed Al Thani buys Malaga FC, a team that plays in La Liga. The sporting results are immediately interesting, in the 2012/2013 season, the Andalusian team manages to arrive in the Champions League after a brilliant 4th place. But it's a straw fire because since the following year the situation becomes explosive. The Qatari owner makes it very clear that he is there to win the contract for the construction of new infrastructure in nearby Marbella, a 400,000,000 euro deal. But despite this the Ayuntamiento malague does not grant the contract. The sheikh keeps his promise and the team is dismantled, while never completely disengaging.

In the distance, i can see a torch-shaped tower, casting its shadow on the Aspire sports center, the largest indoor academy in the world that gave birth to the National selection that became the Asian champion in 2019 and which will have to perform well at the 2022 World Cup. Qatar has expanded its influence in European football thanks also to the Aspire Foundation, acquiring clubs such as Kas Eupen in Belgium and Cultural Leonesa in Spain as well as forging partnerships with Lask Link and Leeds United in order to loan the main youth talents to complete their training process.

We are at the beginning of the summer of 2011 and while we are relaxing at the sea, Paris St. Germain is purchased by Qatar Sport Investments (QSI), the

subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), the investment fund that directly belongs to Emir Abdulla bin Mohammed bin Saud Al-Thani, distant relative of the president and owner of Malaga. The keyrole person for this operation is the president of QSI, the 47-year-old businessman and former Qatari tennis player, Nasser Al-Kelaifi. The businessman has made a career within the monarchist regime and today takes on many important positions: he is minister without portfolio of the Arab state, President and CEO of the beIN Media Group and President of the Parisian team. Why exactly Paris St. Germain? A medium-cabotage team up to that time, but a city where to build a work base in one of the most important political-economic capitals in Europe and improve its image, create new political and economic relations at a time when Qatar was starting to be listed as one of the financiers of some terrorist groups.

In the meantime, the investments have continued incessantly: the beIN Media Group (formerly known as Al-Jazeera Sport), the media arm of the QSI, has invested 200 million euros to acquire the television rights of Ligue 1, while the football club has started purchases international stars bringing to the Parc des Princes, players of the caliber of Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Edison Cavani, Angel Di Maria, Kirian Mbappe and obviously Neymar. Suddenly all this overexposure has started to arouse the indignation of many international media.

In conjunction with the purchase of the Brazilian player, Saudi Arabia and the other countries of the Arabian Peninsula have broken off relations with the Qatariot emirate because, according to their information, Doha had become the basis for Hamas' terrorist activities. A sort of unexpected short circuit for those who are familiar with the Arab-Islamic world because the organization we are talking about is Palestinian, and cannot be traced back to the Al-Qā'ida network. Why then was Qatar isolated from its Arab neighbours? The political and diplomatic expansion that the small Gulf state managed to achieve in a very short time were succesfull and bothered its most powerful neighbours, Saudi Arabia at the head, because they questioned age-old balances. The second reason concerns how the World Cup was awarded and the nation that came out defeated, the United States, which do not welcome the friendly relations between Iran and Qatar.

The controversial World Cup



Global launch for official Qatar 2022 World Cup emblem -en.as.com

Qatar enters in the map of football fans on December 2nd 2010. Today we know that that assignment of the world cup was at least controversial and various directors of the FIFA board have been convicted or are investigated for bribery, like the former President. plenipotentiary, Joseph Blatter. The assignment of the world championship started a series of investments that changed the foreign policy of the small state forever. But from great powers, great responsibilities arise. Trying to avoid them through illicit subterfuge is not acceptable. At the time when the covid-19 pandemic was exploding all over the world, Nasser Al Khelaifi was investigated by ordinary Swiss justice together with the ex FIFA Secretary General, Jerome Valcke (barred for 10 years). The accusation is of corruption and incorrect management of the announcement for the concession of the television rights of the next world championship and the subsequent Confederations Cup. Al Khelaifi, through one of his companies bought a house in Costa Smeralda for the FIFA manager. Overall, this game would have saved or earned Valcke, it depends on how you look at it, about 1,800,000 euros.

In June 2019, former UEFA president Michel Platini was placed in pre-trial detention and interrogated following investigations by the European Investigation Consortium. According to the reconstructions of the investigative newspaper Mediapart, on November 2010, the French presidential palace, the Elysée, hosted a table at which sat Michel Platini, the Crown Prince Al Tani, as well as Claude Gueant, secretary of the Elysée. Exactly nine days before the assignment of the World Cup, the fate of European football was decided: Micheal Platini would have guaranteed his vote to Qatar, and in exchange the QIA would have purchased Paris Saint Germain and invest in the Legardere Group.

As we reach the center of the futuristic Qatari capital, sitting in the back seat of the cool and comfortable taxi, our gaze stops on the sports facilities under construction and we notice the hundreds of migrant workers who struggle under the scorching heat. Safety conditions are an accessory norm reluctantly accepted by large companies. Here we are at off-scale levels. Thousands of Nepalese, Filipinos and Indians move on the scaffolding flooded by the desert sun. We know that they are exploited. It's called Kafala System and it is a sort of internship in which the owner of a company acts as a tutor to every single worker he hires. The owner becomes the master and this allows him to seize the passport of the worker who is thus a real prisoner. In 2016, the Qatari government declared that it had abolished this revolting practice but in fact it is still used today by companies that work on construction sites in the world. We are facing a real slavery. A word that many think outdated but which is practiced in many areas of the world, even the most unsuspected as we will see later.

The 2022 Qatar World Cup will go through despite everything, the big sponsors who have decided to put their brand on the most important world sporting event will not allow the road map to be further modified, pandemic permitting. But from external observers we have to ask a question: are we willing to accept that fundamental social achievements for a democratic society are canceled or suspended? It is with this weight in my heart that I go to the airport and continue my journey. If my first stop has put so much strain, what awaits me in the others?

UAE



Lonelyplanet.com

Population: 9,701,315 inhabitants

Capital: Abu Dhabi

Surface: 83,600 sq km

Form of government: Federal elected absolute monarchy

Re: Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahayan

Prime Minister: Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktun

Growth rate: 4.93%

The arrival in Abu Dhabi is less mundane than the previous one. There is a lot of police. They stop me and check my things. They are abrupt but they let me go shortly thereafter. Everything is very controlled. We are talking about one of the most repressive monarchies on the planet. Nothing is left to chance. The UAE is a confederate state. There are seven emirates that make it up: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain. The emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi are the only ones with veto power on legal issues and the two share the management of political power, the monarch is from Abu Dhabi while the prime minister is from Dubai. I am accompanied to see the local attractions as I begin to study how this combination of countries has decided to put football among their desires.

From Fly Emirates to City Football Group

Apparently the Emirati intervention in sport was not born as a national strategic political choice. The first protagonist is the only Emirate of Dubai and has as its ram head the airline of the emirate's flag, Fly Emirates, which over the years has made lasting partnerships with the main European clubs. Starting from 2004 with Arsenal (until acquiring the naming rights of the gunners' stadium) and then branching out into Italy with Milan and exploring other markets by sponsoring SL Benfica, in Portugal, Olympiakos FC, in Greece, and Hamburg SV in Germany and especially Real Madrid CF. Fly Emirates has interests in tennis where it is main sponsor of Australian Open, Roland Garros and US Open and 60 ATP events, main sponsor of Formula 1, and among the main supporters of some of the most important symphony orchestras in the world, the San Francisco Symphony, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the Sidney Symphony Orchestra. The project that foresees a repainted facade of the emirates with a vision of a broad perspective that links sport and culture. Yet partnerships alone could not have been sufficient for the political ambitions of the leaders of the Arab country, so we moved on to what we can call a more aggressive phase 2, direct acquisition.