

## **The Geopolitics of Sport and Diplomacy of Neighborhood Relations in the 2022 World Cup in Qatar (Case study: Iran and the Persian Gulf Arab States)**

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### **Abstract**

The significance of neighborhood relations in geopolitics cannot be over-emphasized. As a space for neighborhood relations, sport is one of the most effective issues in power, competition, and convergence on national and transnational scales. International competitive sports are useful for remembering people to compare themselves with the other nation's achievements and capabilities. Meanwhile, the Persian Gulf is the most significant region in the world due to its energy resources and strategic position. Tensions between the regional states have increased, especially between Iran and some Arab states. Most of these tensions have appeared in sport and athletic competitions. Therefore, the emergence of political-geographical rivalry in sports contests can be studied as the geopolitics of sport. This descriptive-analytic paper explained the power aspects in sport and politics from the point of the geopolitics of sport in the Persian Gulf region and studied geopolitical competitions in the region and its interaction in the sporting arena. The results of the research indicate that sports contests can bring sphere of convergence and cooperation and in some cases can provide the increasing and strengthen of tension and competition.

**Keywords:** Sport, Geopolitics, Persian Gulf, Competition, Convergence.

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## **1. Introduction**

No nation would like to be in a position of constant fear about its neighbor(s) and divert valuable resources to unproductive activities like piling up arms. This is particularly so in the case of weak and developing nations. A nation has by convention certain rights, privileges and commitments. Meanwhile, Sport has interacted with geopolitical features not only in the modern era but also in the pre-modern era. Examples of interaction of sport and politics in the regional and global scales are as follows: political extraction of the Nazis from Berlin Olympic contest in 1936, Ping-Pong diplomacy in enhancing of China and the United States in the 70th, sanctions on Moscow 1980 Olympic and LA 1984 Olympic on behalf of the eastern and western blocks, winning of Argentina football team on England in México 1986 World Cup and overcoming of Iran's national football team on Iraq in 1989 at the friendship cup in Kuwait (Cooper,2014: 27). However, states struggling in real and historical aspects represent in popularity spaces like stadiums (Elias and Dunning,2018:30).

Sport also played an important role as an "aspect of national self-assurance" after 1945 with regard to the Austrian sense of community. Theoretically, sport and politics are very different in one respect. Sports competitions have simple and public rules; the course and form of conflict resolution are transparent for all results can be quantified immediately. Political conflicts are fought on many invisible levels. Consequences of politics are rarely measurable within seconds, but have medium- or long-term consequences with a far-reaching effect. Nevertheless, it is the seemingly apolitical nature of sport that sets no limits to political influence. The success or failure of sport stars often dependent on trivialities and coincidences, must not legitimize or question a political system (Gharehbeygi and Pourali Otikand, 2018:330). The national and international prestige gain is so nothing bad, after not every aspiration to independence or aspiring country per se as a "manslaughter argument" may be comparable to the Nazi regime in Germany. Even a politician who maximizes votes by means of camaraderie co-habitation can be tolerated since he carries the risk of ridicule (Rider, 2011:42). Based on the above debates, the present paper has explained the moods in sport and politics from the point of the geopolitics of sport in the Persian Gulf region and has studied aspects of geopolitics and its interaction in sport arena. Traditionally, the academic studies with classical approach

focused on the territorial competitions but they barely centered on the other spatial aspects of competitions such as sport. Do to such researching lacking, the paper has studied the representation of territorial competitions in the sport field in the 2020 World Cup in Qatar.

## **2. Methodology**

Methodology of this study is descriptive-analytical and the required information collected through library research. The information gathered from sources such as books, magazines and online articles. To achieve the goals, we have first discussed the theory and concepts of the geopolitics and sport. Therefore, by using these concepts and theories we have presented the findings and the conclusion.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3-1. Politics and Sport**

The politics can be defined as “peaceful or hostile leadership of relations among people, groups and social parties in a state and setting of their relations across governments in an international scale” (Goudarzi et al, 2012:11). “International competitions such as Olympic Games provides an attractive space for gathering different people without considerable tensions. These competitions bring an opportunity to cultural exchanges and exhibition of traditions and folklore. Although the founders of the Olympic has made it as a sphere to absorb different and variant ethnicities, beliefs and nationalities as an unified body, but it is one of the most important stages of rivalry and competition. Most competitions in sport have political roots and the states with political tensions have the highest heroic spectacles, as if the loss of one side makes popular euphoria and elation. In the history of sport, sometimes the politicians replaced athletes and game space became an arena to overplaying of political aspects. For instance, Argentina overcoming England in the 1986 World Cup was a revenge of Falkland Islands conquest for years or astonishing resistance of Algeria against France and winning of England against Germany are the most important examples of replacing sport with politics” (Smart,2017:117).

Sport captures the national imagination. When an athlete representing her country competes and wins, they elicit a feeling of success and a patriotic identification among her countrymen that no other form of art, music, entertainment or politics can replicate. “The key link between sport and identity is emotion. Victories represent the validation of one’s place in the

world or they symbolize an aspiration point that the nation wants to rise to. Sport is a cathartic and emotional experience that lends to prideful self-identification” (Cha,2009:1585). Therefore, “sport offers a powerful prism through which national identity gets refracted. It affects how a nation sees itself and the image it wants to portray to the rest of the world. The desire to host major events like the Olympics and to perform well is intimately related to a nation’s sense of its self-image and pride of its citizens. Participation and performance in global sport is also related to a country’s international prestige and the message that a government wants to send to the world about its country. This dynamic applies uniformly, whether we are talking about Beijing in 2008, Los Angeles in 1984 or even Berlin in 1936. Sport acts as a prism through which national identity gets refracted domestically and internationally” (Fisher,2012:2-3; Large,2017:14).

### **3-2. Neighborhood Relation and Sport**

In the complex system, the simplest element is a nation. A nation, as recognized today, is a country or a geographical entity contained within recognized international boundaries. A nation by convention has certain rights, privileges, and commitments. It is expected to behave according to some internationally recognized and agreed codes of behavior with respect to its immediate neighbors and other members of the comity of nations. The effectiveness of these relationships is dependent on a given nation's ability to exist as an independent entity. Viability is therefore the main concern of any nation. It should not only exist but must exist to relate itself to others properly since Living in isolation is impossible in the present-day world (Sabaghiyan,2014:144). In the following sections, we mention some objective examples where sport has led to solving political tensions:

#### **3-2-1. Ping-Pong Diplomacy**

The most effective event of interaction of sport and convergence took place during the cold war. In the years since Mao Zedong’s communist revolution in 1949, relations between the People’s Republic of China and the United States had been clouded by Cold War propaganda, trade embargos and diplomatic silence. The two superpowers had met on the battlefield during the Korean War, but no official American delegation had set foot in the People’s Republic in over 20 years. By 1971, however, both nations were looking to open a dialogue with one another. China’s alliance with the Soviet Union had soured and produced a series of bloody border clashes,

and Chairman Mao believed ties with the Americans might serve as a deterrent against the Russians. U.S. President Richard Nixon, meanwhile, had made opening China a top priority of his administration. In 1967, he had written, “We simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations” (Lopez and O'Brien,2011:63). The historic visit began on April 10, 1971, when 15 American table tennis players, team officials and spouses crossed a bridge from Hong Kong into China. The U.S. team was diverse, including everyone from the hippie Glenn Cowan to a college professor to a Guyanese immigrant to a pair of high school-age girls. None of the players were particularly accomplished at ping-pong—the U.S. men’s team was ranked 24th in the world at the time—and most had been forced to beg or borrow the money to make it to the championships in Japan. Now, only a few days later, they had inadvertently become the most important American diplomats on the planet. “A cadre of Western journalists was set to follow their every move, and a few members of the team were enlisted to serve as correspondents for newspapers and magazines” (Andrews,2016:2). “The ripple effects of what had become known as “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” only continued the following year. In response to the American trip, the Chinese sent their table tennis team to the United States for an eight-city tour. “Ever more earth shattering was Richard Nixon’s February 1972 visit to the People’s Republic, which marked the first time in history that an American president had traveled to the Chinese mainland. As part of the eight-day trip Nixon would call it “the week that changed the world” the President met with Zhou Enlai and Chairman Mao and took the first steps toward normalizing U.S.-Chinese relations” (Andrews,2016:7).

### **3-2-2. Football and Diplomacy**

Sport especially football matters for diplomacy in two basic ways. First, sport can facilitate diplomatic breakthroughs in ways that ordinary foreign ministry negotiations cannot. Sport offers an ‘out-of-the-box’ tool for creating openings and progress between estranged countries. Sport can create public goodwill, or provide the opportunities for high-level contacts that might help to spur forward a stagnant diplomatic process. Second, sport has been used as a tool of coercive diplomacy. “Politicians have not been averse to utilizing sport as a tool of statecraft in the form of aggrieved governments boycotting against participation in sport events, or in the form of bans against offending countries from participation in events. In this

sense, sport has been used as a form of sanction that sends high profile and symbolic political messages of disapproval” (Cha,2009:1592).

Some diplomacy affairs in football occurred in the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. Vladimir Putin played host to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, later laughing and joking with his guest as Russia thrashed Saudi Arabia 5-0 in the World Cup opening match, leaders from Panama and Senegal and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. Away from the Kremlin, Japan's Princess Takamado travelled to the World Cup host city of Saransk to watch the Japanese team compete, marking the first visit to Russia by a member of Japan's royal family since 1916. Putin told Moon that Russia intended to continue playing its part in the search for a solution to the confrontation on the Korean Peninsula (Robertson,2013:33). The Russian and South Korean leaders met right after a historic summit in Singapore between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Some Kremlin-watchers point out that Putin's visitors are largely from countries already friendly to the Kremlin (Rogge,2017:15). The guest list at the World Cup opening ceremony was marked with leaders from Central Asia. Major breakthroughs with countries such as Britain and France, who have clashed with the Kremlin over its actions in Syria and the poisoning of a former Russian spy in Britain, are still a long way off (Scholte,2019:61). “Nevertheless, hosting the world's biggest soccer tournament could brought diplomatic rewards for Putin. Increasingly isolated on the global stage, Putin has used the World Cup to send a defiant message to his opponents that Russia is succeeding despite Western efforts to hold it back. The tournament has also allowed him to step up his diplomacy and discuss everything from Syria to North Korea in a short space of time, projecting the impression that he is at the center of international affairs”t(Garrie,2018:4).

### **3-2-3. Judo and Diplomacy**

Geographical and historical tensions between Japan and Russia is one of the remaining issues in geopolitics of pacific region. In January 2016, Putin was filmed at a training session in Sochi alongside the Russian Olympic Judo team. Following a short grappling demonstration, the Russian president honored the team's Italian head coach Ezio Gamba by granting him Russian citizenship. Under Gamba’s guidance, the Russian male judo team won gold medals atthe Olympics for the first time in the nation’s history (Şahin, et al,

2010:159). The achievement, which helped raise the team's status in competition, as well as enhance the state's image on the global stage, did not go unnoticed. In 2013, Gamba was awarded the Order of Friendship for his contributions to the development of Russian sport. Putin even suggested that Gamba's success in Russia has helped strengthen ties between Russian and Italy. Over the past 10 months, Prime Minister Abe and President Putin have met twice at bilateral summits to make progress in the decades-long territorial dispute between their respective countries. In December 2016, the two leaders met in Japan, while the second summit took place in Moscow last April. The aim of their repeated meetings is to come to a resolution regarding the disputed Northern Territories (the Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan and the Habomai islet), which Russia has had control of since World War II. Japan views the territorial dispute as an unresolved issue from World War II and as a matter of national security (Donnelly,2011:70). A resolution would do much to deepen the relationship between Russia and Japan. While a transition of ownership back to Japan was unlikely Putin's election campaign in 2018, the two countries are still discussing potential economic cooperation on the islets (Giulianotti and Robertson,2017:149). "Yet while it is certainly a start towards establishing good will with Japan, it also highlights the complicated history between the two nations. In this particular case with Russia and Japan, sports have been able to transcend the historical and political boundaries placed between the two countries, at least to a certain extent. Through martial arts such as judo, Russia and Japan have been able to realize their shared interests and cultural elements through sports" (Zidan,2017:3).

### **3-3. The Geopolitics of Sport**

The term Geographies of Sport arises from two broad trends in contemporary geographic scholarship: the first is the institutional weakness of "sports geography" as a disciplinary subfield, and the second is an opportunity to advance existing work through directly engaging critical theoretical approaches, both within geography and beyond. United by a common research interest in sport and power, geopolitics brings together geographers and sports studies scholars to showcase the merits of a deeply geographic approach to the study of sport, as well as the synergies and new avenues of inquiry opened up when geographers work toward a more substantive engagement with the wider body of sports studies scholarship.

“By holding power relations at the center of our analyses, the aim of the geopolitics of sport is to take up sport as a lens for considering how scale, space, and identity come to life in a grounded fashion in diverse settings around the world and this is a project that cannot – and should not – be confined to a disciplinary silo” (Koch,2017:1-2).

Sport can act as a trigger in changing world geopolitics. This change can take place both in a physical sense and in a political sense. Countries that host major sport events like the Olympics undergo a massive facelift in which entire cities are virtually rebuilt and refitted with new infrastructure to meet the standards of modernity and user-friendliness for the globalized traveler. Tokyo in preparation for the 1964 Games, and Seoul in preparation for the 1988 Games underwent physical transformations at a breakneck pace in everything from building new state-of-the-art airport terminals to a national campaign renovating rest room facilities. Cities that host a mega sport event like the Olympics undergo a massive and rapid physical transformation. Its not just about a couple of stadiums, but a general package of infrastructure, environment, transportation, airport, tourism, and athletic facility construction and upgrades on a scale unprecedented in the country’s history (Hietanen and Varis,2019:51). “This change, moreover, is usually compacted into a very short time frame. Once a country wins the bid to host the event, a race begins to complete in five to seven years what might otherwise take well over a decade. Much of the physical features we associate with cities like Seoul, Tokyo, and now Beijing – in everything from their skylines to their parks – are the result of the physical ‘facelift’ the metropolis undergoes as it puts its best face forward to the world for the Olympic Games” (Wang and Heodoraki,2017:120).

The bullet train (Shinkansen) and the elevated highway system in Tokyo, for example, were a direct result of preparations for the Tokyo Games. The ‘88’ highway, the subway system, and the cleaned-up Han river estuary bisecting Seoul were also the result of preparations for the 1988 Games. In some cases, the race to be ready for the games takes place from a standing start, with very little infrastructure already in place. Sochi’s successful bid to host the 2014 winter Olympics, in this regard, required a massive USD\$12 billion-dollar capital commitment by Russian president Putin in order to be credible. One of the stories to be written in the run-up to these games will surely be the massive transformation of this sleepy Black Sea resort into a



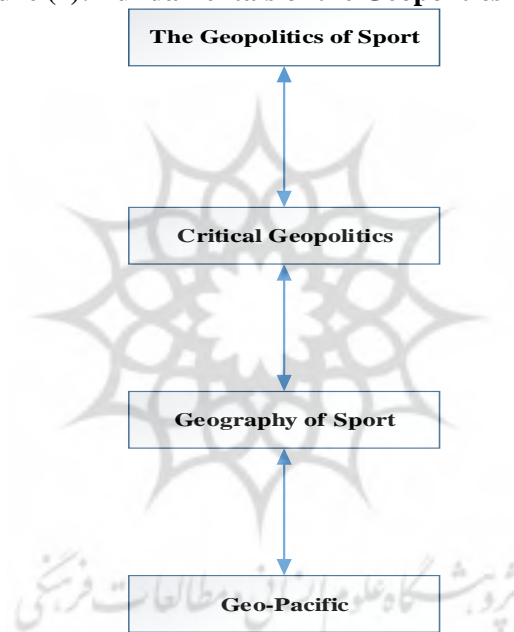
world class winter sports mecca with Russia's newfound oil and gas wealth (Cha,2009:1595).

Geopolitical change engendered by sport is a function of the media microscope and the deceptively powerful ideals of Olympism. These create tactical and ideational pressures on the regime for change. Groups inside and outside utilize the Olympic microscope to organize and demand change. This in turn creates new audience costs and calculations for the leadership about its own practices that they did not have to make without the Games. What was once a standard way of doing business now has new costs associated with it, including the fear of being boycotted, labeled a pariah, and embarrassed before the world. These forces compel political change. The most historic case of sport and political change was the impact of the Seoul Olympics on Korea's democratic transition in 1987. At the time the Games were awarded to Seoul by the IOC in 1981, the ROK government was a military dictatorship with practices anathema to the Olympic ideal. The yawning gap between practices and ideals was something the Chun regime had to contend with. Geopolitical dissidents, democracy activists, and international human rights groups leveraged the international attention heaped on Seoul to corner the Chun junta into choosing between democracy or martial law, all under the glaring spotlight of the Olympics. Chun and his cronies, a group of middling generals who had taken power in a coup, desperately sought to gain domestic and international legitimacy through the Games (Cha,2009; Larson and Heung-Soo,2013:25). "Their stakes in avoiding an Olympic failure were real and critical. This confluence of forces made the Seoul Olympiad a very important agent of political change. In the end, the government made the monumental and unexpected decision in June 1987, one year before the Games, to yield to the political protests and agree to hold direct presidential elections that fall for Chun's presidential successor" (Cha,2009:1596).

According to the examples of the geopolitics of sport, we studied its spatial examples in the Persian Gulf region. Obviously, the Persian Gulf as such does not sponsor sports. Rather, a vast array of state and parastatal agencies, individuals, and companies based in the Persian Gulf states are involved in directing and funding international sporting teams, events, and international organizing bodies. Regionally, actors in Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been the most involved countries in international

sports sponsorship over the last decade (Koch,2019:4). Therefore, the geopolitics of sport is “a subfield of geopolitics that studies interactions of sport and geopolitics and its spatial dimensions including competition, cooperation, peace, tension, convergence, divergence, etc. (Figure 1). As it can be concluded from conceptual examples of the geopolitics of sport, we can see both convergence and divergence between the states of the Persian Gulf region.

**Figure (1): Fundamentals of the Geopolitics of Sport**



#### **4. Findings**

##### **4-1. The geopolitics of sport in the Persian Gulf Region**

The first evident that proves sporting convergence in the Persian Gulf is a feeling of intense happiness and elation of the Arabian states when Iran’s national football team won Israel in the 1968 Asian Nations Club. This elation was some kind of victory cause to the Arab and Israel wars (Rasissosadat,2015:95). The Persian Gulf Arab states were deprived of having any possible and potential football team, except Kuwait. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Arab states changed and made the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Persian Gulf in 1981 (Mojtahedzade,2001:48). Form this year ahead, sport and athletic events

have been affected by political moods in the Persian Gulf region. Generally, if politics can repair damage caused by wars, then sports can sometimes repair damage caused by politics (Ahmadypour et al,2013:7). However, sports can also reflect tensions surfacing from time to time, as was the case with the UAFA Club Championship hosted by Egypt in August 2017. Moreover, sports are employed by every state in the region to serve its own goals. Goals backing, or attempting to restore the lost legitimacy of regimes that are falling apart such the Assad regime, fending off accusations of supporting terrorism, as is the case with the Qatari regime seeking to host the 2022 World Cup, or enhancing and promoting the image of sports stars as national symbols, as is the case with Egyptian footballer Mohammad Salah. Additionally, some countries rely on its prominent athletes as ambassadors or diplomats.

Similar to some other contexts discussed above, the Gulf Arab states' leaders pursuing event-focused boosterism are concerned with fostering a positive image of their countries and cities. In promotional materials, the region's rapid development is a key trope reiterated by sparkling images of hypermodern sporting venues set against impressive new skylines (Koch, 2016:2012). Advancing elite sport is thus an important means to spread an image of Gulf cities as 'cosmopolitan', 'modern' and 'globalized'. While regional leaders have also promoted more nationalistically-oriented sports, like falconry and camel racing (Khalaf,2000; Koch,2015), the viewing audiences (both in-country and virtually) of globalized elite sporting events are far more international. Given the more obvious 'outward' orientation of globalized sporting events, scholars of mega-events typically focus on their role in elite-led imaging campaigns. Seeking to explain why policymakers choose to host such costly events, a number of sports studies researchers have turned to Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of 'soft power' as a tool that elites in smaller or less geopolitically-influential states use to exert global influence or assert a new identity on the global stage (Koch,2016:2012).

In the Persian Gulf region, sport sometimes was a mediating space to representation of matches between disputing states (Mossalanejad, 2012; Hashemi, 2011). A good instance is Oman which maintains well-balanced relations with other Gulf Cooperation Council members and Iran. In statements delivered in Tehran following a meeting with Iranian sport minister Masoud Soltanifar, FIFA president Gianni Infantino stressed that

politics should stay out of football and football should stay out of politics. All issues, including issues between Iran and Saudi Arabia over hosting games, that led to serious deterioration of their bilateral relations, can be solved, according to Infantino. It should be noted that the Asian Football Confederation had to choose neutral Oman to host fixtures with Iranian clubs as part of the AFC Champions League. Oman's football federation president Khaled bin Hamad al-Busaidi welcomed the move in statements delivered on March 31, 2016. Saudi cut its ties with Iran after angry protesters attacked its embassy and consulate in Iran in January 2016. To play against Iranian clubs on neutral soil, in the same tournament, Saudi Al-Hilal FC chose Kuwait while Al-Ahli Saudi FC chose the UAE.

For the teams hailing from the Persian Gulf region, geopolitical rivalry and international relations undergird the action playing out on the field. The politics mirror the game itself, with frustrating ebbs and hopeful flows that leave observers on the edge of their seats (Pashapoor, 2018: 201). For instance, Qatar has led other Gulf states in spending massively on becoming a global sports hub as part of its effort to increase its diplomatic and economic influence, punch internationally above its weight, and amass the kind of soft power that embeds it in the international community, and enhances its security, branding and access. In doing so, Qatar has challenged the traditional wisdom that a state's ability to project power is at least partly dictated by its size. Qatar's embattled 2022 World Cup has laid down multiple gauntlets for Middle Eastern and North African nations. Qatar is fighting to retain its hosting rights as US and Swiss investigations into corruption in the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the body that governs association soccer, which include credible assertions that it won its World Cup bid through a combination of massive vote buying and backroom political and commercial deals. Qatar's woes serve notice to the region's largely corrupt autocratic regimes of the risk of murky, international deal making and abuse of human rights as governments try to project themselves on the international stage. Widespread criticism by human rights and trade union activists as well as FIFA, its corporate sponsors and soccer players and fans of Qatar's labor regime that puts the Gulf state's majority migrant labour population at the mercy of employers has already put the United Arab Emirates in the firing line with Dubai's hosting of the 2020 World Expo and Abu Dhabi's high-profile museum

projects and hosting of campuses of top Western universities (Dorsey,2019: 7).

Geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been reflected in sport competitions particularly football. The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Champions League 2016 matches involving clubs from Saudi Arabia and IR Iran were to be played at neutral venues. The AFC Competitions Committee decided in Doha in late January that the matches would be moved to neutral grounds if there had not been a return to normal relations between Saudi Arabia and IR Iran by March 15, 2016. In a letter to both the Saudi Arabia Football Federation (SAFF) and the IR Iran Football Federation (IRIFF), the AFC said: "It is most unfortunate for the AFC to learn that at the time of writing, the Saudi Arabian government has yet to lift the travel restrictions on their nationals, which prohibit travel to IR Iran. This travel ban offers no special dispensation for football teams. Furthermore, there has been no significant development in the relationship between the two countries concerned, which was considered the main factor according to the AFC Competitions Committee decision dated January 25, 2016."

On the other hand, sport also has the potential of becoming an agent of geopolitical change. Choosing Qatar to host the 2022 World Cup has already forced improvement of the material living and working conditions of foreign workers who constitute a majority of the population. Two Qatari institutions, the Qatar Foundation and the 2022 Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, have adopted standards for the employment of migrant labor that are ultimately likely to be embedded in national legislation. The awarding has also prompted all Persian Gulf states to tinker with their labor regimes. Moreover, it has served as a feeder for similar pressure on the United Arab Emirates where workers on a New York University campus as well as museums, including a branch of the Guggenheim and the Louvre, toil under similar conditions. Potentially, the Qatar World Cup could transform the political structure of a country whose politics are dictated by the fact that Qatar's citizenry accounts for less than 15 percent of the population (Dorsey,2019:14). Sport-driven change in the Persian Gulf state would follow in the footsteps of the 1988 Olympics that helped facilitate South Korea's transition from an autocracy to a democracy and environmental change in China as a result of the 2008 games.

Another geopolitical effect of sport is dealing with gender norms of sport spectators, particularly in football in Iran. In Iran, women have been banned from attending football matches in the stadiums since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The government imposed the compulsory wearing of a headscarf; banned riding bikes in public; and prevented women from attending sports events involving the opposite gender. In March 2017, 35 women were detained for trying to attend a football game between the Tehran-based teams Esteghlal and Persepolis. In September of the same year, women staged a protest outside the Azadi Stadium as they were not allowed in to watch Iran's World Cup qualifying match against Syria, despite the fact that they had tickets. However, during the 2018 FIFA World Cup games in June 2018, Iranian women were allowed to enter a stadium to watch the matches from a 1,200 square meter screen that was set up on the field at Azadi stadium in western Tehran. A recent scandal related to depriving women of entering the sports complexes happened on September 1 when a young woman, who was spotted in the stadium despite the ban, set herself on fire outside the public prosecutor's office in Tehran. She died from burns on September 10. She tried to get into the stadium in March to watch a match of her favorite club, Esteghlal Tehran, disguised as a man, but was arrested and later sentenced to six months in prison for insulting a government official. In protest against the conviction, the 30-year-old set herself on fire. Her death led to protests across social networks against the Iranian police and the judiciary. Banning women from watching live soccer matches is against regulations set by the International Football Federation - FIFA, and it outlaws any sort of discrimination. FIFA has given a caution to Iran until October 2019 to pave the way for women to freely enter sports arenas and watch men's soccer matches live. Otherwise, Iran could face removal from all international soccer events. The Iranian Deputy Minister of Sports, Mohammad Reza Davarzani, reiterated that the ministry does not support allowing women to attend Iranian league soccer matches since conditions are not suitable. Furthermore, Iran's prosecutor-general has also reiterated his opposition to women's attending live football matches, dismissing a deadline by FIFA to force Iran to scrap the ban.

Another linkage between sport and geopolitics is about to the rivalry in certain places and its effect on the sport. Therefore, assassination of Iranian one top General in Iraq by UAS had its own immediate tensions on sport. At

20, January 2020, The Football Federation of the Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI) said AFC had sent a letter announcing all international matches involving Iranian teams would have to be held in a third country. The FFIRI said it held a meeting on the matter shortly after receiving the letter. Amirmahdi Alavi, a spokesman for the Iranian federation, said that the AFC should avoid “false” notions regarding Iran. “Iran is fully ready to host various teams as it has repeatedly proven during the past several years,” he said. Iranian Clubs like Persepolis and Esteghlal, have issued a statement saying they will refuse to compete in any competition in a third country. The statement added that the football club rejects the AFC decision and believes it is for “political” reasons.

Abandoning Iran’s club from hosting came after the strike of Ukrainian Airplane in Tehran. Iran’s foreign ministry authorities linked the AFC’s decision to a geopolitical rivalry. As in official statement, Iran’s foreign ministry declared “they (Saudis) wanted to link the killing of the people to their own political objectives and deprive Iranian teams of their right so that they can win the competition, which is aimed at international friendship, the diplomat added”. Geopolitical tensions between I.R.I and U.S.A and its outcomes in the Middle East can effect most daily and social settings including sport in the Middle East. It seemed despite coronavirus, Qatar 2022 World Cup would go on as planned. Football is a sport that has been uphold during the epidemic. However, Qatar diplomacy worked and despite the critics about the labors and disqualification to holding 2020 world cup, Qatar is still the main option to do it.

## **5. Conclusion**

The geopolitics of sport is a new and critical approach in political geography and geopolitics as an academic discipline. A football match can provide an opportunity for a certain state to send out messages and express good will to other states. Perhaps, the football match on Iraq’s Basra Sports City Stadium with Saudi Arabia, which marked the first time in four decades that Iraq has played a home match against the neighboring Arab country, is proof that bilateral relations are burgeoning after their standoff following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Also, sport can highlight geopolitical convergence between states. therefore, Iran’s foreign policy toward the Persian Gulf and Caspian Basin regions is becoming more pragmatic, and Tehran is working

hard to improve relations with its Arab neighbors and the Muslim peoples of the Caspian region. It is hard to know what the Iranians are up to; perhaps they are trying to force a negotiation to alleviate the “maximum pressure” the Trump administration has sought to apply, or maybe their actions simply reflect Tehran’s fundamental hostility to international norms. In this regard, football matches between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates reflect such convergence. Besides, the geopolitics of sport can reveal denying geopolitical legitimacy of adversaries. In the Persian Gulf region, Qatari students called for normalization with Israel to be stopped and denying access to Israeli athletes. They took this stance after two Israeli teams took part in a handball tournament held in Qatar on February 22, 2018. Finally, the geopolitics of sport can indicate geo-economic and iconographic aspects of a political-spatial unite. For instance, Qatar is keen to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup after it hosted Asian, Pan-Arab and other international events in a bid to enhance Qatar’s global image, as part of Qatar’s geo-cultural and hegemonic power.

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