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ANADOLU CENTER FOR NEAR EAST STUDIES

The Soft Power of Arab Gulf in Football



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A common quote among its enthusiasts is that football is much more than just a game. It is no longer limited to mere entertainment, leisure, or pure physical exercise. Rather, football has become an integrated social phenomenon that expresses, in part, the psychology of people and reveals the spirit of fighting or persistence.

In a more comprehensive sense, football expresses a form of positive social interaction and a rare relative justice in the ordinary life of human beings. In addition, the game is a socio-political phenomenon that is relied upon to ease the conflict between peoples through the so-called “sports diplomacy.”

Some may go a bit extreme in their opinions, like the Scottish footballer William Shankly who was once asked whether football is a matter of life or death, and he answered, "No, it is much more important than that."

Given the growing role of sports, and football in particular in social, political, and economic aspects, this study reviews the strengthening of three Gulf countries (Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia) for their soft power globally and locally through the so-called football diplomacy.

2. Football and Politics

Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, once said: “Beyond the touchline, there is nothing.” Derrida did not mean that football is superior to the goings-on of life beyond the pitch, but perhaps that everything that happens outside the stadium—politics, economics, or even art and culture—is automatically reflected inside it. The football pitch is a microcosm of life itself.

Since the dawn of the new millennium, football's popularity has grown exponentially worldwide, led by the English Premier League Empire that widely spread throughout Africa and Asia and then quickly followed by the Spanish, German, and Italian clubs.

Since its inception, football has been discussed through tribalism, protests, military propaganda, political symbols, and modes of masculinity. Football is also an important platform for sociopolitical distinction, both for hegemonic groups trying to demarcate normative cultural values and alternative groups and diasporas who use Football to criticize the status quo and celebrate its change.

In recent years, political actors have exploited football for social mobilization and political propaganda, which often evidence a network of relationships between football, politics, and society.

This political presence, which is not new, has become a feature of a phenomenon that has been addressed by several studies, including "Géopolitique du football," a book issued by one of the French strategic centers. In the book, football is regarded as an extension of war, but in a more civil and human form. It is also considered "a universal phenomenon in the globalization era," as it is more comprehensive than the market economy and the democratization process and one of the powerful tools in international diplomacy. For example, the book suggests using football to contribute to the efforts to unify the two parts of Korea or advance the peace process between the Palestinians and the Israelis. It can also help achieve national unity in multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, or multi-religious countries by uniting the various groups around


the national team, especially when it consists of players of those different groups.

Furthermore, politicians around the world often use the love of football teams as a political tool to appear more realistic and gain public support, as shown in Figure (1):

<h3>Political Figures</h3> <p>Known for Their Support of Football</p>	
 <p>Barack Obama</p>	 <p>Barcelona, Spain</p>
 <p>Berlusconi</p>	 <p>Former AC Milan president, Italy</p>
 <p>Britain's Queen Elizabeth II</p>	 <p>Arsenal, England</p>
 <p>Adolf Hitler</p>	 <p>Ajax Amsterdam, Netherlands</p>
 <p>Mussolini</p>	 <p>Lazio, Italy</p>
 <p>Vladimir Putin</p>	 <p>Zenit St Petersburg, Russia</p>

Generally, football's political influence appears in several aspects, most notably:

- 

Overcoming racial discrimination
- 

Promoting patriotism and nationalism
- 

Gaining internal legitimacy
- 

Gaining external legitimacy and breaking isolation
- 

Enhancing the economic growth of developing countries through football
- 

The subjugation of the crowds by authoritarian regimes
- 

Covering difficult political or economic conditions
- 

Inducing football fans and winning their votes in elections
- 

Showcasing the political authority's achievements and demonstrating its patriotism

3. Soft Power and Football

On the soft power of sports or the so-called sports diplomacy, Nelson Mandela said, "Sport has the power to change the world, it can create hope where once there was only despair, and it is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers."

Over the past two decades, the use of the sports diplomacy concept has increased and become a constant within the public diplomacy corridors, contributing to building long-term relations between peoples. During sporting events, crowds express their true feelings towards other countries. This can allow each country to build its mental image and soft power and indicate the risks that a country may be exposed to due to arousing the feelings of the crowds or their enemies of a particular country.

In a related context, Jonathan Grix and Barry Houlihan analyzed the extent to which sport contributes to strengthening the soft power of countries through a study of two models: the 2006 World Cup in Germany and the 2012 Summer Olympics in Britain. The study focuses on how countries utilize sports within the framework of policies to boost soft power and promote the model they represent globally.

The study presented two different models for exploiting sport as soft power. In the German case, major sporting events were used to create a new image and overcome some common stereotypes about German society, especially those related to the historical legacy of Nazism. As for Britain, which had a good international reputation, sports were used to achieve some strategic goals like security, assimilating young people, and changing the culture of the British society towards tolerance and acceptance of others.

On the other hand, the major oil-producing countries— or their wealthy individuals— worked to pump billions of dollars into football clubs, mainly in European leagues, in order to enhance their "soft power."

These points were highlighted by James M. Dorsey, the writer of *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, who asserted that the purpose was the soft power and projecting themselves through cultural diplomacy, not just military power. In the same context, while commenting on countries buying European clubs, Real Madrid president Florentino Perez said, "The time will come when the top 30 clubs in Europe will be owned by countries, which is not a principle of the European community."

4. Arab Models for Using Football As a Soft Power

The Arabs' influence extended beyond following football stars and enjoying the game to buying clubs and investing in them with an eye on the incredible returns of making history and money, for example:

	Club	Owner	Citizenship
	Sheffield United F.C. (England)	Abdullah bin Musaed bin Abdulaziz Al Saud	Qatari
	Lierse S.K. (Belgium)	Maged Samy	Egyptian
	Ergotelis F.C. (Greece)	Maged Samy	Egyptian
	Almeria F.C. (Spain)	Turki Al-Sheikh	Saudi
	Malaga F.C. (Spain)	Abdullah Al-Thani	Qatari
	Aston Villa F.C. (England)	Nassef Sawiris	Egyptian
	Hull City F.C. (England)	Assem Allam	Egyptian

In the following, we review the efforts of Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to build a soft power through football diplomacy and the exploitation of this popular sport for political and economic ends.

4.1 Qatar

In a report published by Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Pascal Boniface, one of the most prominent French strategic analysts on Qatar's sports diplomacy, stated: "Sport has been carried out as a fundamental component of Qatar's mental image-building strategy and as one of the country's foreign policy approaches to promote and enhance its position in international forums."

Boniface explained that the role of sports diplomacy can change a country's reputation. For instance, Qatar was associated with issues of political Islam, its encouragement to France to overthrow the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, and the extreme right's accusations of supporting terrorism. However, those perceptions by the French were completely changed after Qatar bought Paris Saint-Germain Football Club.

Boniface added, "Qatar and its influence diplomacy were known only to a limited number of the French elite interested in foreign policy, but Qatar's intrusion into the world of sports in France turned the situation upside down. The perception of Qatar's image in France is no longer after the purchase of Paris Saint-Germain as it was before. Today, everyone knows Qatar and knows where it is located."

Utilizing the sport to gain international stature is part of Qatar's multi-pronged approach to building its reputation, along with involvement in foreign policy mediations, property purchases in Western countries, and excellent investments. As James M. Dorsey put it, "The image that Qatar tried to project is a forward-looking and progressive one, as it is a good citizen of the world."

Figure No. (2): 3/1 Qatar and Sport

Within the comprehensive development of "Qatar National Vision 2030," sport is one of the most prominent areas of activity for Qatar's global participation that aims to enhance the country's competitiveness and attract investment.

Major Sports Tournaments Hosted by Qatar



**FIFA WORLD CUP
Qatar 2022**

Figure No. (2): 3/2



The Qatar Tourism Authority also signed a four-year sponsorship deal worth 300 million euros to place the Qatar Airways logo on FC Barcelona's jerseys between 2013 and 2016.

Football Clubs Sponsored by Qatar Airways



FC Boca Juniors,
Argentina



FC Bayern Munich,
Germany



A.S. Roma,
Italy



Qatar Airways has signed a deal with FIFA to be one of the official sponsors and the official airline of the World Cup tournaments until 2022.

Figure No. (2): 3/3



In 2010, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser Al Thani bought the Spanish club Malaga for 25 million euros.



The Qatar Sports Investment Corporation acquired Paris Saint-Germain in 2011 for nearly 100 million euros, including its purchase of almost 20 million of the club's accumulated debts.



The World Cup 2022 and its Importance for Qatar

Through the 2022 World Cup, Qatar is looking to improve its international standing, increase its tourism attraction, and achieve its sports ambitions within the "Qatar National Vision 2030."



Qatar is looking forward to taking advantage of the global significance of hosting the first Middle Eastern World Cup to boost its image as an open and sports-loving State.



Furthermore, hosting major sporting events is evident in bringing unprecedented media attention, which fosters the host country's position on the international map.

According to James Montague, "the introduction of two superstars by Paris Saint-Germain gives Qatar considerable weight in the Gulf crisis and amid accusations against it, despite the record financial cost" during the previous Gulf crisis.

“For Qatar, the football acquisitions are part of a far broader soft power strategy, which in many ways might be the most strategic approach in the Gulf. Not only is sport a key aspect of the country’s effort to amass soft power, but it is also a pillar of national identity, and the 2022 World Cup will be the strategy’s crown jewel.”

4.2 The UAE

According to the Global Soft Power Index 2020 report by Brand Finance, the UAE ranks as the number one Arab country and among the first positions in the world in global influence and international relations.

In 2008, the Abu Dhabi United Group for Development and Investment purchased Manchester City in a deal estimated - according to the value of the club's equity and debts - at 200 million pounds (360 million dollars). In 2013, City Football Group, a holding company, was created by ADUG and began expanding its investments worldwide. Now, the company owns ten clubs from different countries, most notably: New York City, the United States; Melbourne City, Australia; Yokohama F. Marinos, Japan; Montevideo City Torque, Uruguay; Girona, Spain; Sichuan Jiuniu, China; Mumbai City, India; and others.

As such, football, the world's most-watched sport, has become a global advertisement for Abu Dhabi and a way to promote the UAE's "soft power strategy."

Furthermore, the UAE capital was not limited to the ownership of European clubs but was expanded to include the world of advertising and commercialization. The aviation sector was the first to enter this market, with The Fly Emirates branding on the top European club shirts. The company signed a sponsorship contract with Chelsea in 2001 and another huge deal (\$150 million) with Arsenal, including changing its stadium's name to The Emirates. The company also concluded similar contracts with prestigious European clubs, including Real Madrid, AC Milan, and

Hamburg. The same applies to the "Etihad Airways" of Abu Dhabi, which was branded by Manchester City players. In 2013, the total value of Emirates Airline sports sponsorships amounted to \$272.25 million.

On the other hand, Uri Levy, an Israeli journalist covering football in the Middle East, believes that the transfer of an Israeli football player to a club in the UAE could be an important stepping stone in the relations between both countries.

"We live in an era when everything we thought was impossible is slowly becoming possible. The first Israeli player to sign for a club in the Emirates will probably be the second most-famous Israeli in the UAE after Prime Minister Netanyahu," said Levy.

Following the transfer of Dia Saba, the first Israeli player to an Emirati club, Levy added, "He'll practically be Israel's ambassador, maybe more than the country's actual ambassador in Abu Dhabi."

4.3 Saudi Arabia

Sports events have been recently taking place in Saudi Arabia in an effort to join the neighboring countries' ranks, most notably:

- Hosting the Italian Super Cup in two consecutive editions, 2018 and 2019
- Signing a ten-year agreement with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) to bring its events to the kingdom in 2018
- Hosting the World Heavyweight Championship boxing match between Anthony Joshua and Andy Ruiz in 2019
- Hosting the Super Globe Club World Cup in 2019
- Hosting the Dakar Rally, the Spanish Super Cup, and the Saudi International Golf Championship in 2020
- Hosting the Saudi 2020 Cycling Race in its inaugural edition
- Saudi Arabia Grand Prix 2021 - F1 Race

The Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund purchased FC Newcastle United in a deal worth more than £300 million after a legal dispute involving concerns about piracy and rights violations in Saudi Arabia.

The acquisition initially collapsed due to worries about the extent to which the Kingdom's leadership controlled Newcastle's management.

Therefore, the Public Investment Fund had to assure the English Premier League that its chairman, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and the Saudi state would have no control over Newcastle's administration.

“They’re using the soft power of football, which has a worldwide appeal, to try and change the narrative about Saudi Arabia,” Kristian Ulrichsen, an expert in Gulf state politics at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, told Foreign Policy. “People are now talking about the country for something that is not about Yemen or Khashoggi or human rights.”

"The deal shows the success of the public relations strategy of investing in sports projects to polish their image," Nabhan Al-Hanashi, executive director of ALQST Human Rights Support, told Reuters about polishing Saudi Arabia's image.

What exactly does Saudi Arabia want from Newcastle?

According to Simon Chadwick, Director of the Centre for the Eurasian Sport Industry, Newcastle will be the basis for promoting Saudi Arabia's broader political and economic goals, such as the new international airline and benefiting from English Premier League television broadcasts in more than 200 regions.

As a club and a city, Newcastle needs massive infrastructure, so the Robin brothers, the property billionaires, were brought into the deal, all the way to a broader residential and commercial development in the North East of England in general.

The River Tyne in Newcastle is also a vast container port that will help Saudi Arabia establish its global network, apart from the important use of wind energy by facilitating the capital infusion to manufacture and distribute turbines.

So basically, Saudi Arabia is trying to create a club that reflects its own image. Aside from financial profit, football can also be used to develop more effective relationships with stakeholders concerned politically and economically.

According to statistics, 97% of Newcastle fans do not care about the international organizations' criticism of Saudi Arabia. This seems logical as football is treated as a quasi-religion in Newcastle, where fans suffered decades of disappointment, with their last major title being in 1955.

It may be justified given that United's large and dedicated fan base indicates that the club was seen as a sleeping giant ready to revitalize. The acquisition will resonate well beyond the city limits, giving Riyadh a foothold in the world's most lucrative football league, with an average global audience of around 3 million per match.

5. Sports Events in Which Politics and Sports Merged:



Mussolini strengthened his political position by winning the World Cup twice, in 1934 and 1938



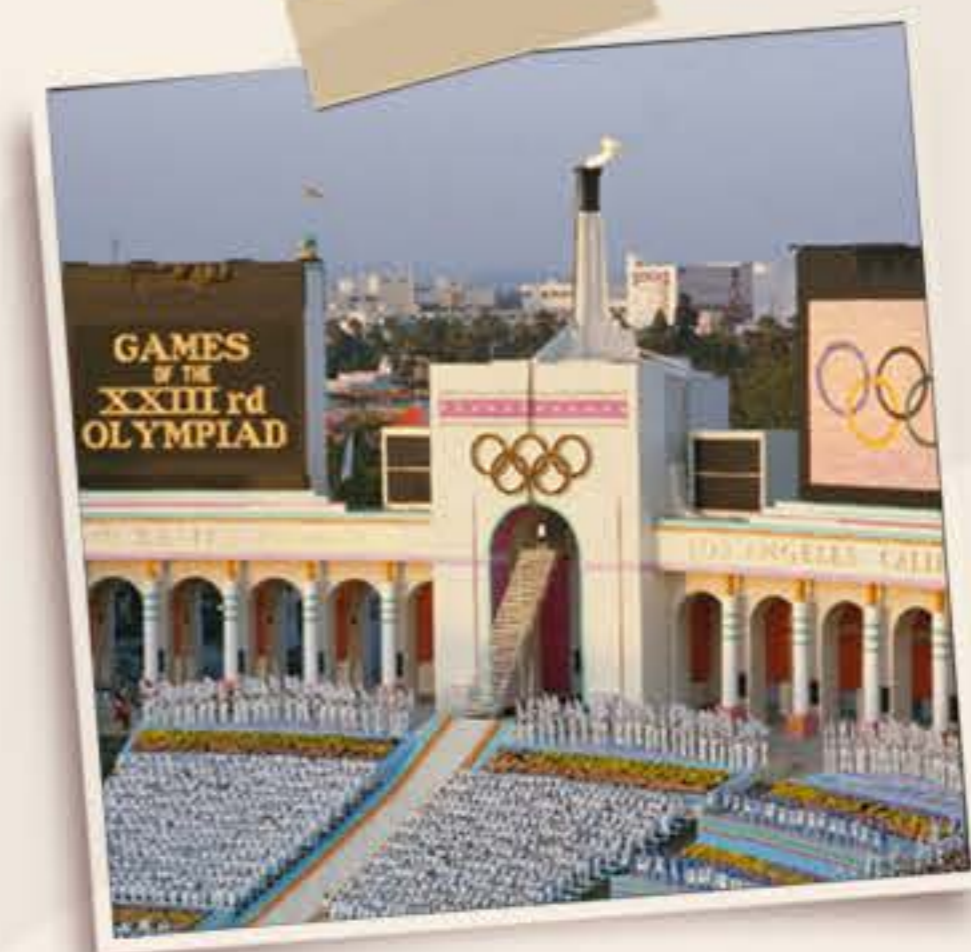
Germany, the Olympic champion in 1936, became a symbol of appreciation and strength of the ruling regime and its faith.



In protest of the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union, the United States and several Western countries boycotted the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980



Military confrontations between Honduras and El Salvador, after a series of football matches between them in 1969.



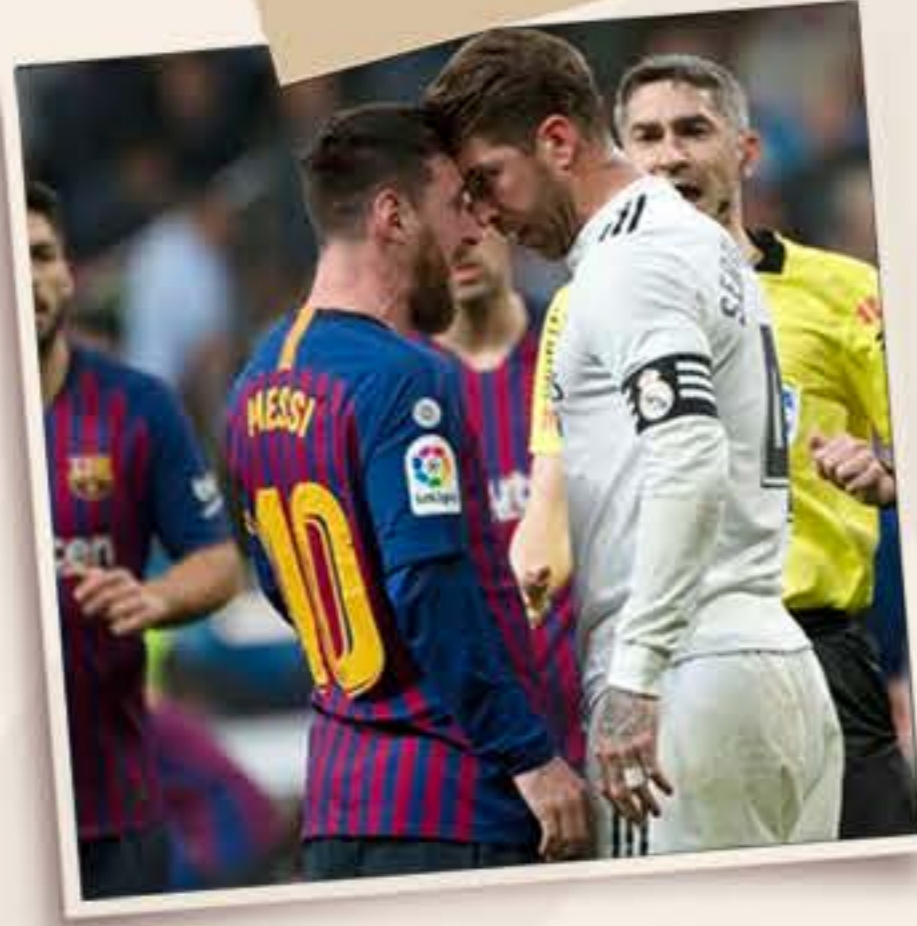
Moscow boycotted the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984



The match between Argentina and England in the World Cup in Mexico in 1986 was seen as revenge for the Falklands War by the Argentines



West Germany and East Germany match in the 1974 World Cup, which embodied the political struggle between the right and the left in Germany

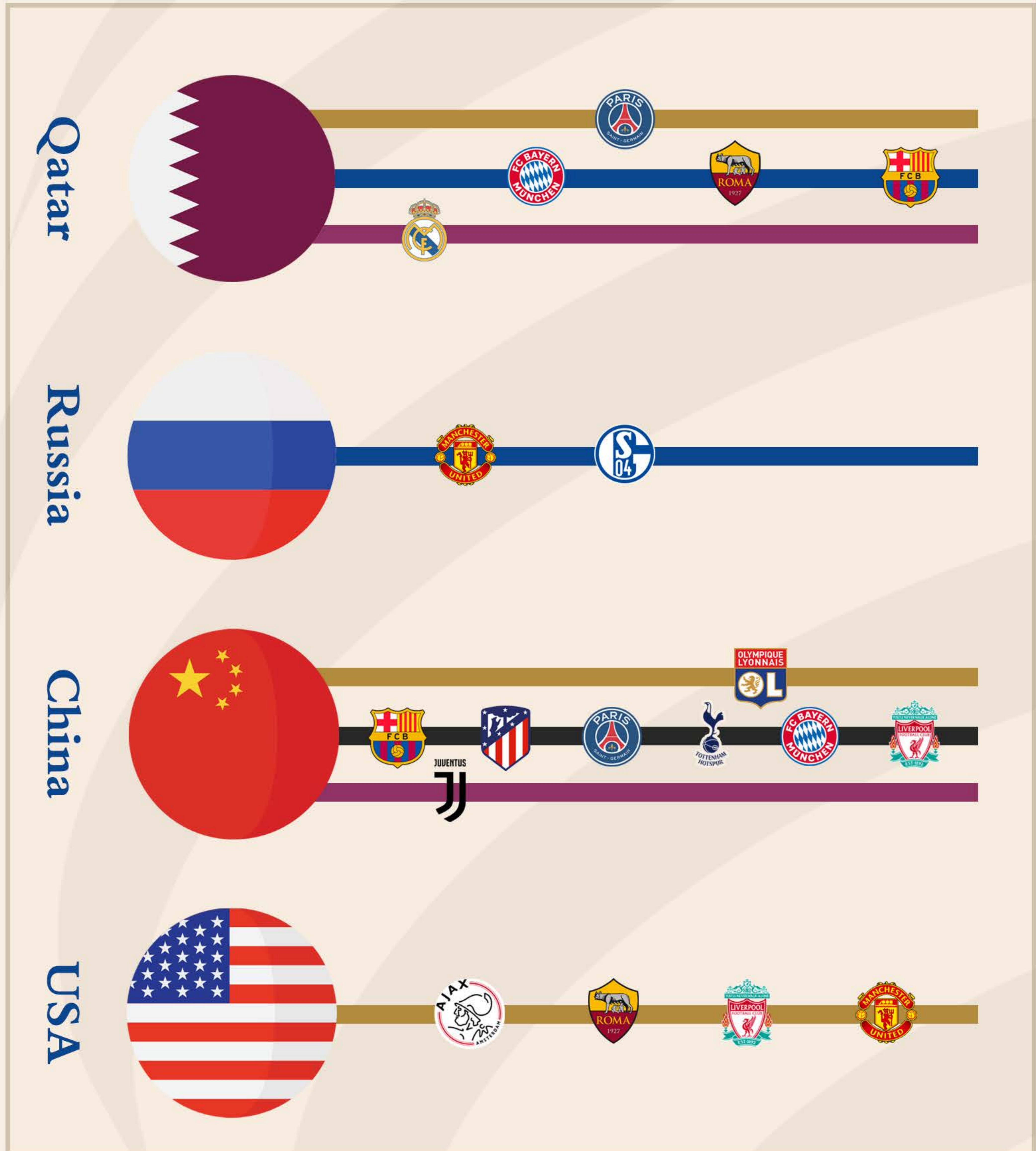


The historical animosity between the Spanish province of Catalonia and the ruling monarchy in the last century turned into a continuous hatred between Barcelona (the largest club in Catalonia) and Real Madrid, which was one of the clubs close to the ruling monarchy. Their confrontation (El Clasico Spain) is considered one of the most important sporting events that occur annually and is watched by millions worldwide

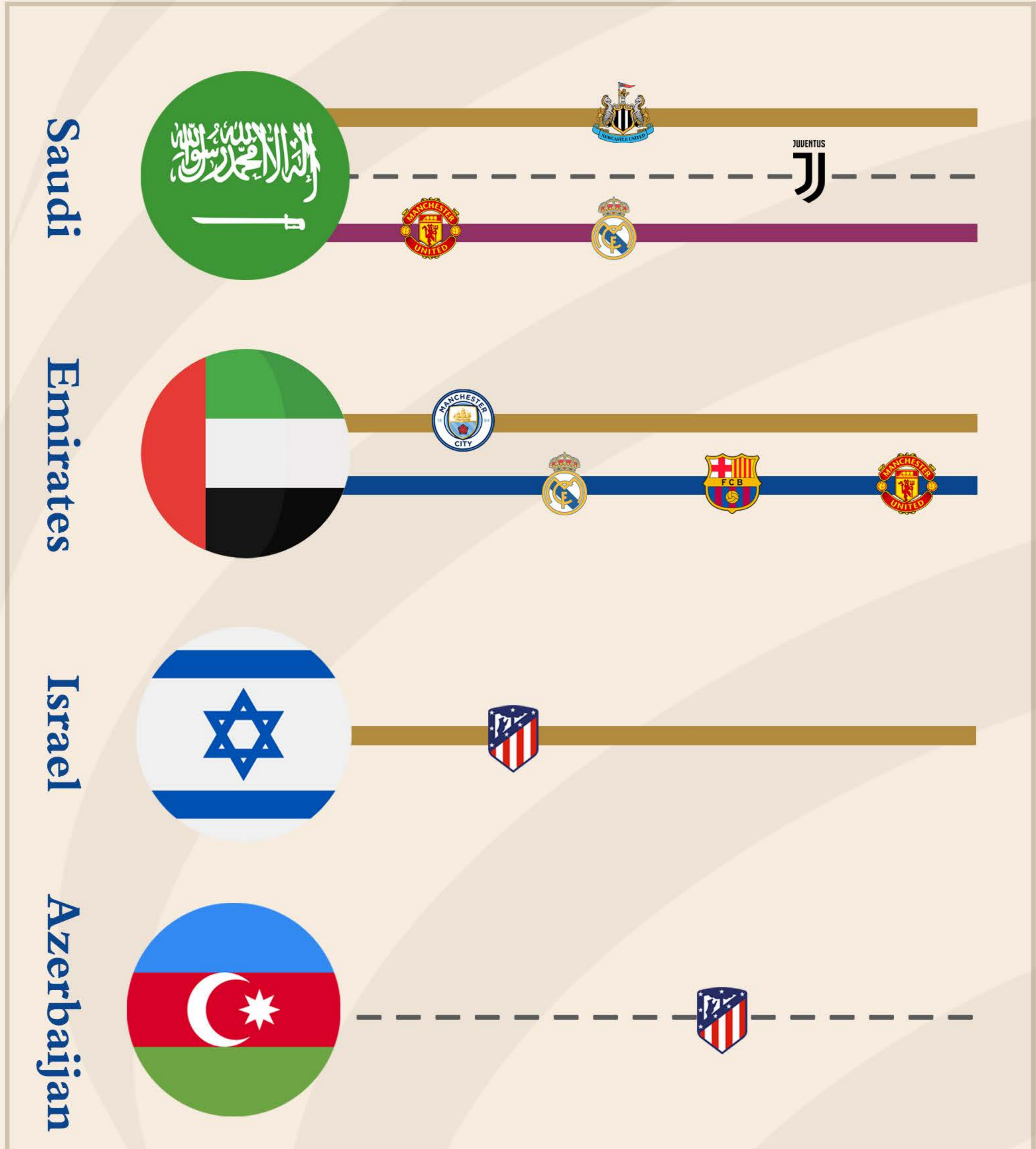


The match between North Korea and South Korea in the 2010 World Cup qualifiers was moved to Shanghai, China, after the North refused to play the South's national anthem in its home stadium

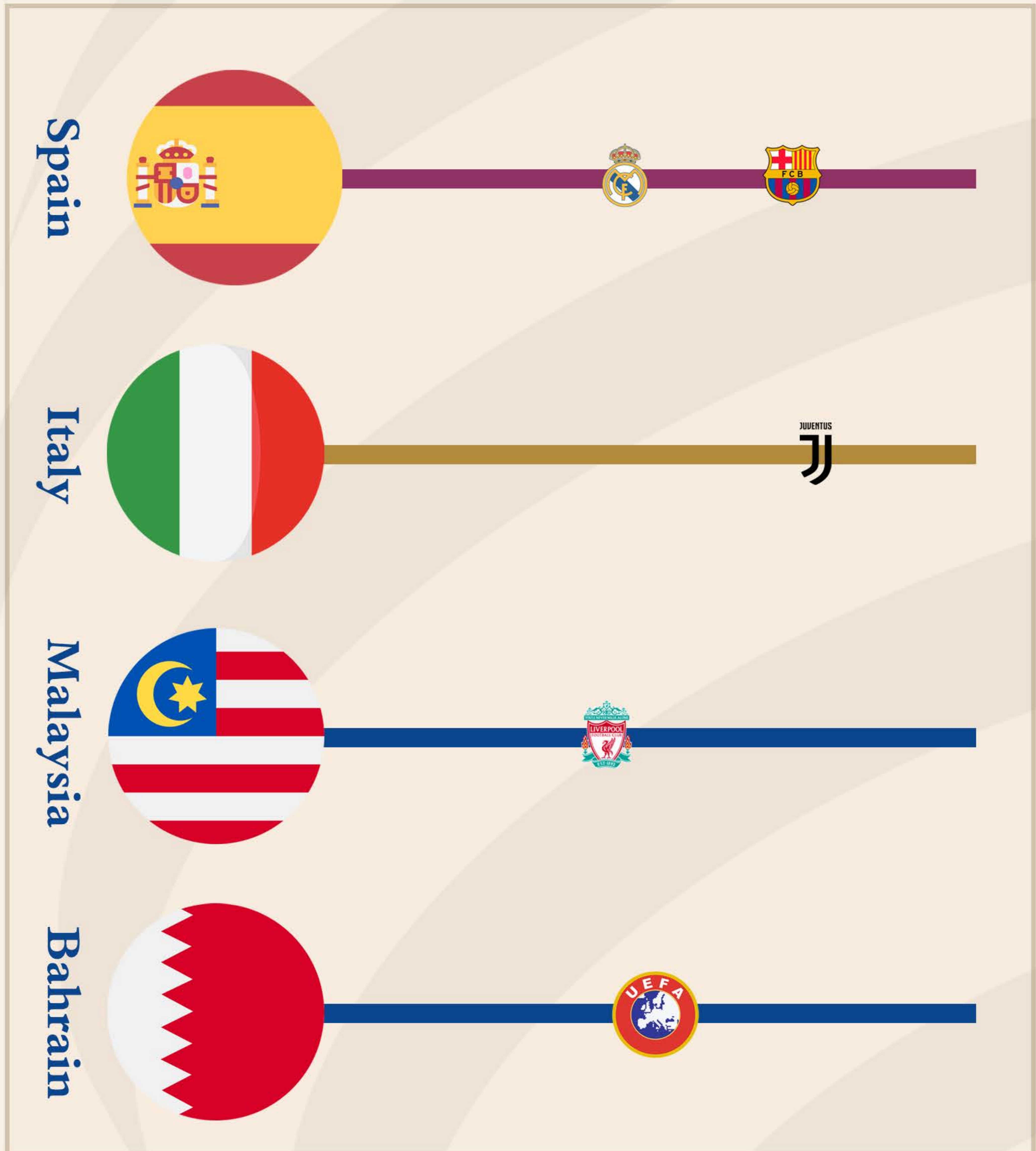
6. European Football's Connection with States (4/2)



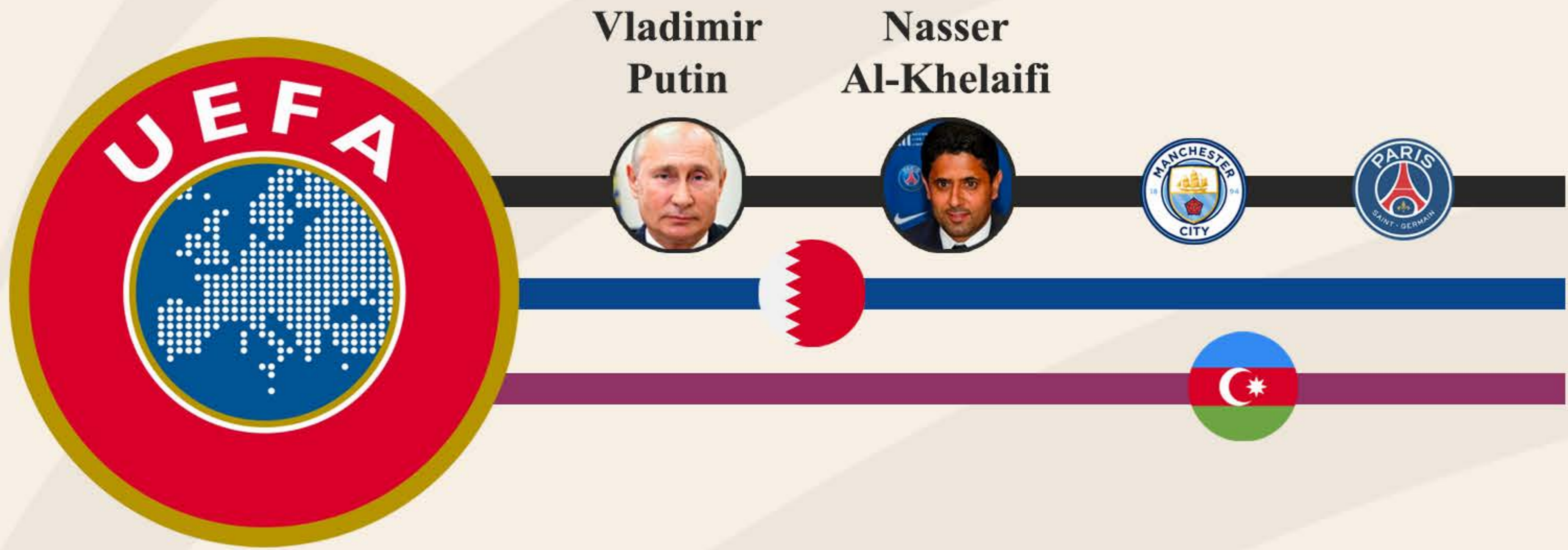
6. European Football's Connection with States (4/2)



6. European Football's Connection with States (4/3)



6. European Football's Connection with States (4/4)



The Union of European Football Associations

Owners	Sponsors	Common Interests	Other connection	Past relationships
Real Madrid, Spain Barcelona, Spain Manchester City, England Manchester United, England Atletico Madrid, Spain	Juventus, Italy Bayern Munich, Germany Paris Saint-Germain, France Liverpool, England Newcastle, England	Schalke, Germany Lyon, France Ajax, the Netherlands Tottenham, England Roma, Italy		

To sum up, football is widely believed to be an ideal tool for political and social disputes worldwide. It has been used to promote various nations' ideological or political interests and become a part of the nation-state. The sport has also contributed to the international order, regardless of the differences in political systems. In addition, football represents the soft power that states employ to gain a prominent political and economic status in a capitalist system ruled by competition, interests, and money.

Football significance has increased in the Arab Gulf region, which is seen in the huge volume of indirect investments to host international sporting events, such as Qatar's hosting of the World Cup, which presents a significant opportunity for Qatar to enhance its international image and political and economic influence globally.

On the other hand, direct investments were allocated to the ownership of football clubs such as Paris Saint-Germain (Qatar), Manchester City (Abu Dhabi), and Newcastle United (Saudi Arabia). In addition to the above are the contracts of sponsorships and naming rights for sports facilities (such as the Al Ittihad and Emirates stadiums in England) and the exclusive rights to broadcast major European and international sporting events.

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36. أبرز أحداث تداخل الرياضة والسياسة في العالم.



Ömer Hurşit

Ömer Hurşit is a researcher, translator, and sports analyst. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Education and is pursuing his Master's research. He is fluent in Arabic and Turkish



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