

Middle East Pillars or Regional Opponents?

The Sport Interactions of Iran and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Purpose: The attempts made by Saudi Arabia to utilize the soft power of sports over the last decade have helped it envision a promising post-oil future. This study aims to explain the paradigm governing the expansion of sports interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Methods: The statistical population consisted of 11 political science and sports science professionals with written work (e.g., papers, books, notes, or interviews) on public diplomacy, sports diplomacy, and diplomatic interactions in the Middle East, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Sampling was performed through purposive (snowball) sampling and the Delphi method until theoretical saturation. The validity and reliability of this research were evaluated with the contribution of interviewees with Intra-subject agreement of two coders.

Results: The research findings indicated that four indirect categories (i.e., geopolitical, ideological, economic, and sociocultural categories) and three direct categories (i.e., sports events, human capital, and sports economy) constituted the paradigm governing the diplomatic interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The key components of indirect and direct categories were economic concepts with a mean of 4.17 and sports economy with a mean of 4.30, respectively.

Conclusion: According to the research findings, since Saudi Arabia has put substantial effort into organizing sports events and paid special attention to this area over the last decade, sports can be considered an intriguing means for these two countries to expand their political and economic convergence in the future.

Keywords: geopolitics, sports events, Middle East, soft power, sports diplomacy.

Introduction

Because of its energy resources, old theorists refer to the Persian Gulf region as the “heartland”; several factors such as energy resources, regional competition, and foreign powers have affected the convergence and divergence of the Persian Gulf states (Raeissadat et al. 2021). Hostile relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are a major contributing factor to political instability in the Middle East (Fraihat, 2020). Iran and Saudi Arabia have long been the most cost-effective ways for the Persian Gulf states to access the open seas (Adisönmez et al., 2023). Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have changed dramatically throughout history. There were many reasons for the increased tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, e.g., the establishment of a Shia political regime in Iran, the reduced US influence in the Middle East, and the US attention to Saudi Arabia as an alternative to Iran (Sadeghi & Ahmadian, 2011; Karimi Firozjaei, 2018). Iran and Saudi Arabia have remarkable geopolitical weights in the Middle East. The divergence between these two countries in the Middle East has intensified over time. During the Iran—Iraq War following the Islamic Revolution, Saudi Arabia's financial and material support to Iraq within the framework of Pan-Arabism, amounting to billions of dollars, exacerbated tension between the two sides. The divergence of relations between the two countries has been accelerated in the last decade, especially after the developments known as the Arab Spring. The proxy wars in Syria and Yemen have further inflamed the political atmosphere of the region. As a result, in today's global political environment, the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is referred to as the “Middle East Cold War” (Ahmadian & Kahrizi; 2021).

The relations between these two countries are mainly characterized by two factors: 1- ideology (sectarianism) and 2- geopolitics

(regional polarizations). Both factors are among the features and coordinates of a cold war (Aghaie & Ahmadian, 2010). Bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been strained over several geopolitical issues, such as aspirations for regional leadership, oil export policy and relations with the United States and other Western countries. Diplomatic relations were suspended from 1987 to 1990, and in 2016 for seven years following certain issues like the intervention in Yemen, Iran embassy bombing in Yemen, incidents in 2015 Hajj, the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, the attack on the Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran. However, in March 2023, after discussions brokered by China, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to reestablish relations (Hafezi et al, 2023).

Saudi Arabia and Iran are two pivotal political-spatial units in the Middle East (Mohsenifar et al., 2022) with geographical and human similarities as well as various geopolitical similarities, e.g., sports, causing the two countries to confront each other in a variety of fields. Sports have played a significant role in the divergence of these two powerful countries in the region over the last decade, especially since the arson of the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

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 (Raeissadat et al. 2021)

Sports are viewed as competitive advantages among the Persian Gulf states in the new millennium. In fact, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, as Arab states of the Persian Gulf, have invested heavily in sports (Shariati Feizabadi & Zare, 2022). Sports in this region are a political tool for them to improve their image on a global scale. The following cases are some examples of extensive investment in sports by Arab states of the Persian Gulf: Bahrain hosted Formula One in 2004, and the UAE hosted the Asian Nations Cup in 2019. Qatar hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2022¹. These examples demonstrate the attempts made by these countries to take advantage of sports to create and enhance national branding on the global stage and then to capitalize on the heritage of hosting these events.

Sport can act as a trigger in changing world. This change can take place both in a physical sense and in a political sense. Obviously, the Persian Gulf with 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. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have invested in sports to pursue the following objectives: 1) to use sports as a suitable means to strengthen their soft power, 2) to consider investing in sports as a good lever to become independent of oil revenues, and 3) to reduce the health costs and public health issues (Karimi Firozjaei, 2018). While sport is a peaceful actor in international relations, partially it can play as an anti-diplomatic phenomenon; what we see in 2023 Asian Cup and the challenges between Iran and Qatar football fans in social media (Parsineh, 2023), Alireza Faghani Iranian referee and Iraqi fans (Grezz, 2023), *women, life and freedom* movement in 2022 FIFA World Cup

(Ashrafian, 2022) are the recent negative points of sport in Middle East challenges.

The Qataris managed to host the first international sports event, i.e., the ATP World Tennis Tour (ATP Tour), in 1993, thanks to the support of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the former Emir of Qatar. Ever since, this country has hosted 450 different international events, including the Asian Games in 2006, the World Men's Handball Championship in 2015, the World Boxing Championship in 2015, the Gymnastics Show Championship in 2019, the World Professional Judo Championship in 2019, the World Swimming Championships in 2023, and the Football World Cup in 2022. This country also applied for hosting the 2024 Olympics. Financially backed by Qatar Q.S. from summer 2011 to the spring 2012, this country purchased Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) club and then recruited some of the elites of the football world including Zlatan Ibrahimović, Edinson Cavani, Neymar Jr., and Messi for its football team (Shariati Feizabadi & Mahdi, 2022). In 2013, the "Qatar Foundation", later renamed Qatar Airways, became the first commercial sponsor of Barcelona, Spain's most popular club. Afterwards, this airline became an official FIFA partner and organized horse racing, tennis, and squash tournaments in Qatar. Furthermore, after Al Jazeera Sports, which broadcast sports events in the region from 2003 to 2013, the Qataris established BeIN Sports as the first sports TV channel with exclusive broadcast rights in the Arab world for the first time. In addition to the FIFA World Cup, this channel has exclusive rights to broadcast the Olympics and five European championships in the Middle East and North Africa (Shariati Feizabadi & Zare, 2022).

In contrast to Qatar, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly attempted to position itself as a modern and open country for sports in the region and all over the world. For example, in competition with Qatar's Al Jazeera, Saudi Arabia attempted to compensate for the failure

¹ Qatar invested 220 billion dollars in hosting the 2022 World Cup, which is 15 times more than Russia did in the previous round in 2018.

of getting the broadcast rights through the Al Arabiya channel. To compete with the Qatari company's sports achievements, the Saudi Etihad Airways Company has attempted to establish itself as a safe and modern airway by supporting sports clubs, particularly Manchester City (Reiche & Sorek, 2019). This country has recently adopted a novel approach to women's sports. In 2018, the world squash tour was held in Saudi Arabia with the presence of women for the first time after the ban on the presence of women in stadiums had been lifted. To confront Qatar's sports achievements, Saudi Arabia attempted to hack the Qatari BeIN Sports channel by using its hacking group called BOutQ. Following this event, the Qataris dubbed Saudi Arabia the "home of hackers," which strained the relations between the two Arab states of the Persian Gulf. In fact, Al-Arabiya's failure to compete with Al-Jazeera resulted in Qatar's BeIN Sports leading the television broadcast of sports events among Arab-speaking states (Shariati Feizabadi & Zare, 2022).

Unlike Qatar, Saudi Arabia does not need to resort to sports as a substitute for its defense and military powers due to its military equipment and population of 35 million. Summarizing Saudi Arabia's sports policy, Chadwick states, "Criticisms of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's governance have caused this country to use sports as a tool to wash away the dark points of governance such as the war in Yemen or the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi" (Reiche & Sorek, 2019; Shariati Feizabadi et al., 2023). "When Saudi Arabia and Qatar are compared, we can see that Qatar seeks to influence the region through sports, whereas Saudi Arabia seeks to use sports to dominate the Middle East," stated Dorsey, a famous sports journalist. The Saudis have been seeking to purchase a European club to compete with Qatar (i.e., the owner of Manchester United and PSG) since 2018. Following the international scandal of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Bin Salman

attempted to purchase a football club for \$4 billion in order to wash this scandal away and erase the memory of Khashoggi's murder from the public mind. The two prominent French clubs, i.e., Olympique de Marseille and Olympique Lyonnais, as well as the English Premier League club Newcastle were among the offers, and the Saudi managers ultimately chose Newcastle as the final option. In fact, Mohammad Bin Salman purchased this English club to compete with the soft power of Qatar and UAE in football (Reiche & Sorek, 2019).

Saudi Arabia published its 2030 National Vision in 2016. This strategic plan focuses on economic sectors, infrastructure development, social changes, soft power projects, and military force strengthening. This comprehensive map attempts to introduce Saudi Arabia to the rest of the world in three ways: 1) introducing this country as the Arab and Islamic world's pole, 2) establishing a position to connect Africa and Asia, and 3) accumulating investment (Dehghani Firouzabadi et al., 2021). Hence, Saudi Arabia should prioritize a lucrative plan independent of oil, gender equality, and the introduction of tourism destinations. Sports can play a key role in achieving the goals of the 2030 National Vision of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi state has attempted to make sports account for half of the basic dimensions of the 2030 National Vision by investing heavily in sports, especially mother sports. Saudi Arabia pursues three major goals of extensive investment in sports in accordance with the implementation of the Saudi-American Business Council: 1) encouraging physical activity, social health, and healthy lifestyles; 2) motivating regular and widespread participation in sports and sports activities; and 3) using sports to make this country independent of oil revenues and increase their role in GDP (Firoozi et al., 2021).

After Mohammed bin Salman became the king of Saudi Arabia in 2017, he took some measures to modernize Saudi Arabia, including

the establishment of two new megacities, Qaida and Neom. These cities paved the way for the development of sports infrastructure. In fact, the city of Neom will host the Formula One Grand Prix in 2023 (Afzali et al., 2020). Bin Salman has attempted to use sports' competitive advantage to help Saudi Arabia differentiate itself in the region. This issue has increased the number of global golf and football events held in this country in recent years. Politically speaking, sports, particularly Saudi championship sports, should be able to promote the brand identity of a new country while also contributing to the development of Saudi soft power. Saudi Arabia, similar to its neighbor (i.e., Qatar), is attempting to change the world's perception of Riyadh by taking advantage of sports and hosting sporting events. Nevertheless, some experts believe that Saudi Arabia is utilizing sports or, in other words, "sports washing" to divert the world's attention away from its political actions (Sabzi et al, 2019). This theory drew further attention following the purchase of Newcastle United F.C. by Saudi oil capitals as well as the disclosure of the source of funding for this purchase by the Qatari BeIN Sports, which revealed Riyadh's intention to use sports as a tactic to divert the attention of the world and its own people away from the Saudi state's unfavorable political performance.

Saudi Arabia has undergone many experiences in the past years when it comes to hosting sports events. This country seeks to host electronic sports events as an appealing arena for its young community to use this platform to guide virtual sports in today's world. The attitude of Saudi Arabia people toward sports, especially women's sports, has changed since

the Saudi girl won the e-football world championship in 2017 and the student Universiade e-sports championship in 2020 (Al-Sayed Ghafoor, 2014). Sports provide social, cultural, and economic benefits to Saudi Arabia, prompting the country to invest heavily in its professional athletes. For example, Saudi Arabia's national football team was sent to a preparation camp in Spain before the 2018 FIFA World Cup in order to both improve their performance in the tournament and promote the brand and reputation of this country in an international event. In January 2021, Saudi Arabia hosted the Dakar Rally, which is the largest event ever held in this country. Riyadh's contract with the Italian Football Federation to host the Supercoppa Italiana (Italian Super Cup) in this city from 2018 to 2022 is another measure aiming at improving Riyadh's position on the global map. Another event through which Saudi Arabia attempts to draw international attention to this country is the friendly match between Argentina and Brazil, which is traditionally held in Riyadh. In the most recent example, Riyadh was selected as the host of the Asian Games in 2034 by the Olympic Council of Asia (Sabzi et al, 2019). Sports have turned into a symbol of change in Saudi Arabia over the last two years, an instance of which is the removal of gender discrimination in sports, as evidenced by the presence of women in sports halls and stadiums. Furthermore, women can now compete in open golf competitions. Moreover, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud, a Saudi woman, has been recently elected to be in the International Olympic Committee (Reiche & Sorek, 2019). Table 1 indicated the most relevant databases to topic:

Table 1. Literature review about Iran & Saudi sport interactions

Year	Author/ Authors	Result
2023	Mostafapour	It was specified that communication with wellknown persons in international football, appropriate relationships with Asian Confederation, and taking national and club hosting are appropriate strategies to gain and retain powerful seats in

	et al.	Asian Football Confederation.
2020	Lysa	The women are actively promoting and engaging in change and women's opportunities to practice sport by building organizations, creating awareness, and negotiating norms and regulations. They are not in opposition to the regime, but supportive of reforms in favor of increased rights for women, while seeing conservative elements in the society as their opponents and the royal family as their allies.
2020	Ruwaili	Sex segregation in sport and physical activity was strongly preferred, for a mixture of explicitly religious and social reasons.
2019	Ghoble	The current situation is a product of a struggle between the two regional powers and the positioning of the US and Russia in the changing dynamics. It evaluates the continuing adversity, emphasizing that the crisis is significantly driven by geo-economic factors, and is not merely confined to the regional hegemony aspect.
2018	Mason	Islamic State's relationship with Football echoes many of the issues that prevent religious leaders from achieving de facto successes when denouncing football.
2014	Dorsey	The granting of entry to stadia to foreign women supporting a visiting team has sparked heated debate in Saudi Arabia.
2012	Szuszczkiewicz	With regard to the fact that football has been accompanying the regions' societies and nations through the years, it could have not been absent during the Arab Spring.
2005	Amirtash	The seventh Asian Games were known for their strict security measures due to threats from the terrorist groups. They were also known for their rich preparations, high technology and proper organization. It was claimed as a new start for the development of sports in Asia, as well as for the social-political relationships among the participants.

In addition to Saudi Arabia's efforts to take advantage of the championship and professional sports, the prevalence of obesity and overweight among Saudi people has caused political decision-makers to pay special attention to sports to prevent inactivity problems. Nearly 70% of people in Saudi Arabia are under 35 years, and the Saudi youth, as new applicants of sports facilities and activities, strongly seek gender equality and solutions for a modern lifestyle and entertainment. Along with state support, Saudi

Arabia has attempted to increase the role of the private sector in infrastructure development, reducing reliance on the state and oil revenues. Researchers argue that, in addition to encouraging an entrepreneurial and creative spirit, this will boost the productivity of this country. This also affects Saudi Arabia's sovereign policy on sports. This country is attempting to develop its championship and professional sports by privatizing and nationalizing sports, with professional football serving as an example.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has faced scores of West-led sanctions, terrors, and riots over the past four decades (Delgado, 2003). Various political and religious challenges in the recent decade, such as the Mena disaster, the execution of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr in Saudi Arabia, and finally the burning of the Saudi embassy in Tehran in December 2014 (Hadzikadunic, 2019), severed diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. During this period, Iran's sports faced a serious challenge regarding international relations. By exploiting the issue of its embassy in Tehran being burned down, Saudi Arabia has filed lawsuits in international sports institutions such as the Asian Football Confederation, claiming that the safety of athletes and football players on Iranian soil will be jeopardized and that Iran is unable to provide the security of Saudi football players. Misusing the issue of the 2016 attack on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran, Saudi Arabia filed lawsuits in international sports institutions, including the Asian Football Confederation, to legally claim that the safety of athletes and football players on Iranian soil will be jeopardized. They also claimed that Iran would be unable to provide the security of Saudi football players. Finally, the AFC voted in favor of Saudi Arabia, and all Iranian representatives in the AFC Champions League were denied the opportunity to host their opponents in Iran. Due to confrontations with Saudi Arabia, as the most effective player in the Arab world, Iranian sports, particularly football, have faced a variety of national and club challenges such as delay in issuing the Saudi VISA for Iranian football players, suspending and changing the time of flights, limitations for Iranians football fans to see the matches in stadium as a result of political conditions. For example, Iranian football clubs have to host their competitors in a third country, and Iranian fans are deprived of supporting Iranian clubs or national teams in stadiums. Another challenge that Iran faces in this regard is the reduced revenue of this

country from the rights of the TV broadcast of sports events and advertisements in stadiums. More importantly, Saudi Arabia is attempting to present Iran to international sports agencies as an insecure country in the region. In fact, some studies have demonstrated that the Iranian state does not follow specific models as well as clear and transparent policies for sports diplomacy (Hassanpourghadi & Dousti, 2021; Javadipour & rasekh, 2019).

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. The significance of neighborhood relations 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.

As a result, it is crucial to identify the concepts influencing the development of sports interactions between Iran and key countries in the region. In other words, the main question of this research is that, what are the main concepts of sport diplomacy between Iran and Saudi? What is the paradigm of sport interaction between these two pillars of Middle East?

Material and Methods

This was a qualitative applied-descriptive study based on a paradigm of interpretivism. In the interpretive paradigm, reality is composed of

mental perceptions and interpretations of reality. Unlike social science researchers, interpretivism advocates believe that human studies should not and cannot use the same methods and criteria as natural sciences. Based on this paradigm, researchers analyze the production of meaning in society by studying personal intentions, goals, and intentions in the social sciences, humanities, or communication (Shariati Faizabadi, 2019). In contrast to social science researchers who strictly adhere to the scientific method, interpretivists take a different approach to the scientific method. This is not to say that the interpretation paradigm lacks rules and principles. Furthermore, interpretative research, like scientific and critical research, can answer many same questions in different ways. Interpretivists, similar to other research paradigms, frequently propose or test theories. Although interpretivists derive meaning from theories, they rarely use hypotheses and,

instead, rely on problem statements to guide their work. Public knowledge is not dismissed as non-scientific in interpretivism but rather is considered a useful tool for explaining daily events and understanding the rich meanings that people give to their daily lives. In other words, the meanings that people use in their daily interactions are hidden in their common knowledge, and understanding their world is only possible through the perception of common knowledge (Shariati Feizabadi & Mahdi, 2022). Purposive (snowball) sampling was employed to select the study sample. The goal of this sampling method is to extract core themes and categories that include an ideal set of diversity. One reason for using this method is to prevent any claims that the researcher did not consider certain types of cases (Shariati Feizabadi, 2019). Demographic feature of study sample indicated in Table 2:

Table 2: Demographic feature of study sample

No.	Gender	Age	Position	Major	Degree
1	F	38	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
2	M	55	Dean of Research Institute	International Relations	PhD
3	M	57	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
4	F	49	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
5	M	35	Policy Makers	Political Literature	Master
6	M	32	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
7	M	44	Former ambassador	Political Relations	PhD
8	M	41	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
9	M	69	Faculty Member	Sport Management	Master
10	M	73	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
11	M	50	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
12	M	28	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
13	M	66	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
14	F	44	Vice President of Federation	Sport Management	PhD

The sampling process continues until theoretical saturation in order to estimate the sample size. In other words, by zigzagging the selection of interviewees and then immediately transcribing and analyzing the interview content, this process is repeated so many times that no new findings are added to the previous

categories. Since data saturation was achieved after 11 interviews, the sample size was equal to 11.

The validity and reliability of this research were evaluated with the contribution of interviewees (Table 3):

Table 3. Validity and reliability of research

Validity/ Reliability	Strategy	Method
Validity	Credibility	Research process verification by 2 experts.
	Transferability	Opinions of three sports diplomacy activists who did not participate in the research.
	Verifiability	Recording all interviews.
Reliability	Audit study of the process	Codes extracted from the interview text to 3 participants in the research.
	Intra-subject agreement of two coders	Analysis of two interviews by the researcher and another analyst and identification of similar and dissimilar codes (agreement rate was 86%).

In the second round of Delphi, all the results of the first round were provided to the experts along with a questionnaire; According to

experts, 18 concepts with a mean score higher than 3.75 in two Delphi rounds were obtained as very important and important concepts.

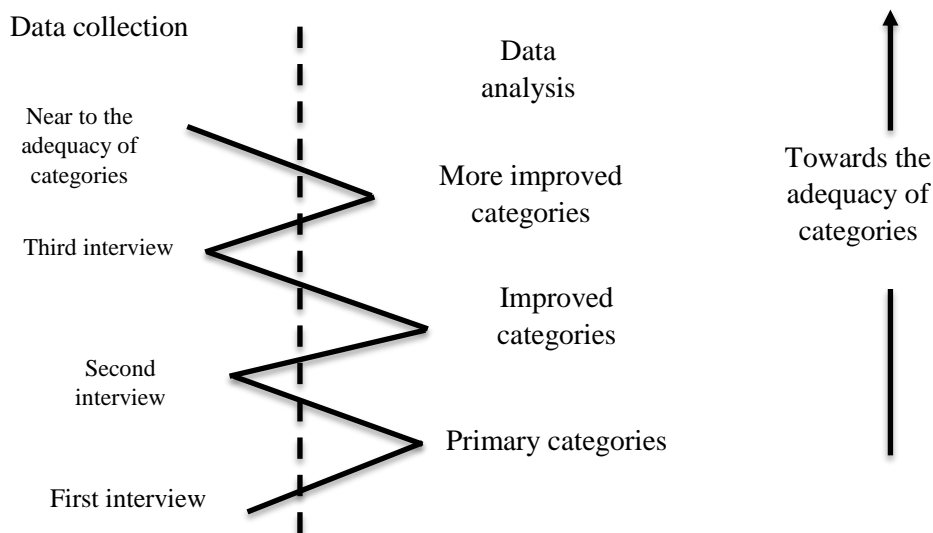


Figure 1: The zigzagging process until qualitative sampling adequacy

Thematic analysis was employed in this study to analyze the content of interviews. This method focuses on the identification of patterns or themes in qualitative data to determine the

pattern of meaning in a dataset. This study also used Sternberg’s five-step model, which is as follows: 1- data management: to organize the selected articles and prepare them for analysis,

2- data engagement: at this stage, the preparations for data analysis are made by performing a series of coding, which necessitates several factors such as open coding, theme development, and focused coding, 3- data display: the extracted categories, themes, and patterns are presented as data maps and conceptual frameworks in this step, 4- analysis development: to initiate and develop analyses based on the extracted categories and themes, and 5- typology: In the final step of the analysis, the researcher categorizes and ranks the patterns based on their differences and similarities (Figure 1)

(Shariati Feizabadi & Zare, 2022). In this study, the key concepts were extracted separately from each paper or interview after preparing and reading the text of the selected articles and interviews. The key concepts were then classified into secondary subcategories based on similarities and differences at a higher level. The secondary sub-categories were then assigned to the set of primary sub-components based on similarities and differences. Afterwards, a conceptual diagram of the findings was drawn. Finally, the procedure of research indicated below (Figure 2):

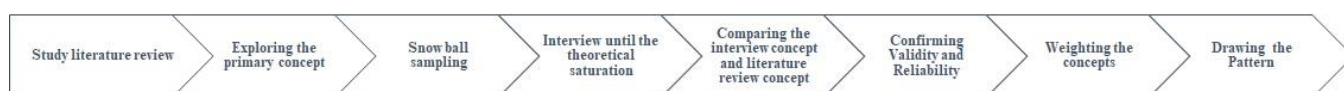


Figure 2: The procedure of research

Results

Table 1 depicts the demographic characteristics of the study sample. The Delphi expert group included two groups of sports science and

political science faculty members who had authored different works (e.g., books, papers, notes, and interviews) about the Middle East sports and politics. Other study findings are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Demographic characteristics of the study sample

Variable	Status	frequency	Percentage
Occupation	Political Science and International Relations	3	27.2
	Sports Science	8	72.2
Educational attainment	PhD	10	90.9
	Masters	1	9.0
	Bachelors	0	0
Age	30-40	2	18.1
	40-50	1	9.0
	50-60	5	45.4
	Over 60	3	27.2
Total		11	100

According to the methodology, in the first round of the Delphi technique, one concept was identified as a very insignificant indicator (i.e., the formation of a united global nation) among the 45 concepts. Furthermore, due to the semi-open nature of the questionnaire, experts confirmed its quality, which is a sign of

validity. All of the results from the first round as well as the questionnaire were provided to the experts in the second round. According to the experts, two indicators were considered less important (i.e., disrespect for pilgrims and the history of the two countries in the region), and the rest of the indicators (42 indicators) were

considered important and very important factors of the paradigm governing the development of sports diplomatic interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As Table 2 depicts, the most important components among indirect and direct categories were economic concepts and sports economy, respectively. After sports events, sports economy and human

capital obtained the highest mean among direct categories, whereas the ideological, economic, and sociocultural issues played the most important role in drawing the above paradigm. Finally, indirect categories were reported to play a more prominent role than the direct categories in this paradigm (Table 5).

Table 5: The concepts affecting the paradigm of sports interaction between Iran and Saudi Arabia (source: study sample)

Variable	categories	Concepts (mean score)	First-round mean	Standard deviation	Second-round mean	Standard deviation	Interviewee code
Direct	Sports events (4.28)	Diplomacy on Olympic sports (4.67)	4.74	0.79	4.61	0.69	8, 3, 1, 6
		Football events, especially those organized by AFC (4.01)	3.93	0.80	4.09	0.77	5, 8, 9, 11
		Co-hosting of sports events (4.68)	4.55	0.60	4.81	0.63	1, 2, 7
		Constructive literature in sports media (4.38)	4.36	0.73	4.41	0.64	3, 4, 5, 9
		Exchange of sports gifts and symbols (3.7)	3.77	0.72	3.63	0.59	2, 8, 10
	Sports economy (4.30)	Direct/indirect employment (4.31)	4.33	0.88	4.29	0.89	5, 6, 9
		Sports and competitive advantage in the region (4.20)	4.21	0.73	4.19	0.65	5, 9
		Post-oil economy (4.39)	4.41	0.70	4.38	0.84	3, 11
		Sports business interactions (4.71)	4.73	0.62	4.69	0.62	4,7,8,9,11
		Sports sisterhood agreements (4.03)	4.02	0.76	4.05	0.61	4, 8, 9, 10
		Charitable sports activities (3.91)	3.88	0.88	3.95	0.89	2, 5, 6, 10
		Major oil-gas partners in sports (4.56)	4.58	0.88	4.55	0.89	4,5,8
		Modeling the think tank of Saudi sports (4.07)	4.13	0.70	4.02	0.84	3,6,8,9,10
		Development of sports privatization (4.52)	4.54	0.62	4.51	0.62	6, 5, 11
	Human capital (3.64)	Sports ambassadors of two countries (4.68)	4.81	0.75	4.56	0.69	2,4,5,7,9,11
		Public decision-makers' perception of sports (4.0)	4.04	0.74	3.97	0.71	1,2,7
		Further attention to women's sports	4.53	0.85	4.55	0.74	3,4,9

		(4.54)					
		World sports stars as peace ambassadors (3.79)	3.88	0.76	3.71	0.83	6,8,10
		Sports fan training (3.13)	4.19	0.66	4.08	0.76	4,11,12
		Joint coaching/referee/educational courses (3.97)	4.03	0.62	3.91	0.60	6,10
		Sports-focused comprehensive public diplomacy initiatives (4.38)	4.42	0.65	4.34	0.75	6,10
Indirect	Geopolitics (4.16)	common sources of energy (4.20)	4.21	0.59	4.19	0.71	2,3,8,9,11
		Neighborhood and common water border (4.04)	4.03	0.74	4.05	0.64	2,7,10
		Young population (3.94)	4.01	0.79	3.88	0.76	2,4,8,10
		American military intervention (4.37)	4.41	0.70	4.33	0.72	2,5,8
		Military security and militarization of the region through proxy wars (4.61)	4.68	0.80	4.55	0.83	
		Saudi Arabia's interactions with Israel (4.55)	4.58	0.62	4.53	0.62	4,7,9
		Conflicts in the Strait of Hormuz (3.93)	3.96	0.76	3.91	0.59	3,4,7,11
		Iran as the only non-Arab country in the Middle East (3.71)	3.70	0.78	3.73	0.79	2,5,6,9
	Economic issues (4.17)	Disruption in the energy market (4.14)	4.21	0.83	4.08	0.75	4,7,9,10
		Saudi Arabia's membership in the Group of 20 (4.06)	4.03	0.79	4.10	0.69	2,3,5,6,11
		Failure of the nuclear deal (4.18)	4.17	0.69	4.19	0.69	5,11
		Oil-gas economic competition (4.31)	4.28	0.81	4.35	0.76	4,7,8,9,11
	Sociocultural issues (3.82)	Ethnic and tribal commonalities (3.92)	3.87	0.84	3.98	0.70	4,8,9,10,11
		The history of the two countries in the region (3.30)	3.44	0.62	3.16	0.68	2,3,5,6,10
		Common environmental challenges (3.79)	3.77	0.67	3.81	0.71	4,8
		Media broadcasting, especially Al-Arabiya (3.97)	4.00	0.83	3.95	0.81	3,6,9,10
		Growing mistrust (4.06)	4.04	0.66	4.09	0.59	1,2,5
		Sectarianism in the Islamic world	4.01	0.59	4.06	0.62	7,11

	(4.03)					
	Disrespecting pilgrims (3.29)	3.38	0.61	3.20	0.72	1,4,7
	Iranphobia and Shiaphobia (4.24)	4.18	0.61	4.31	0.72	1,4,7
Ideological issues (3.76)	Execution of Sheikh Nimr and burning of the Saudi embassy to Tehran(3.72)	3.78	0.82	3.66	0.68	1,3,5,6,8,9
	Iran's efforts to export the values of the Islamic revolution and become a regional hegemonic power (4.29)	4.42	0.69	4.16	0.77	2,5,8,11
	Supporting Shia and Sunni groups (3.75)	3.55	0.73	3.60	0.79	2,4,8
	Formation of a global united nation (3.36)	3.38	0.81	3.35	0.76	3,5,11
	National religious identity and ideology (3.86)	3.95	0.84	3.77	0.70	4,8,7,9,11,6

Figure 3 demonstrates the paradigm of concepts governing sports diplomatic interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

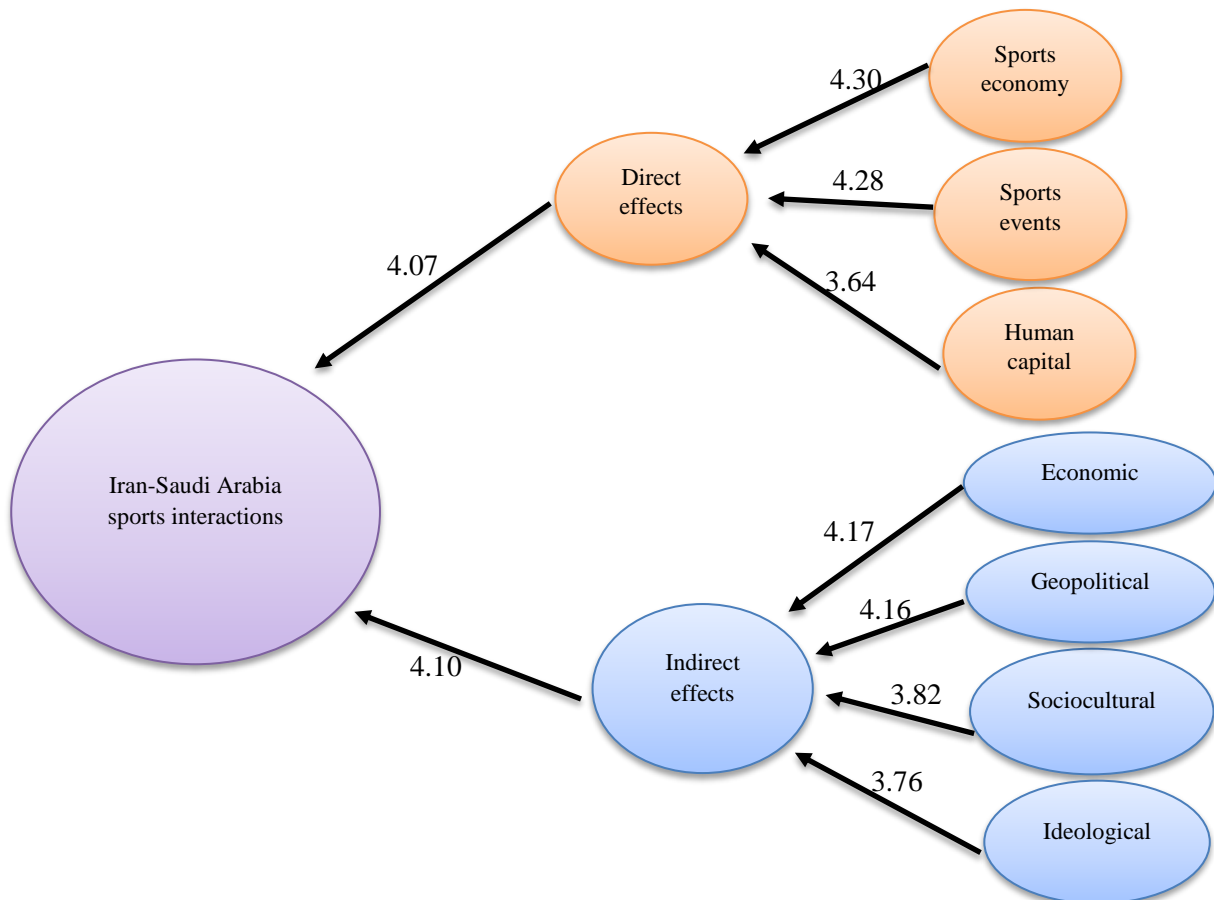


Figure 3: The paradigm of concepts governing Iran’s sports interactions with Saudi Arabia

Discussion

Sports are now regarded as a requirement for the global ranking of countries. Success in various sports events such as the Olympic Games, the Football World Cup, and other high-profile events can strengthen the competitive advantage and introduce a state/country into the modern global geometry. The Persian Gulf Arab states have attempted to take advantage of the soft power of sports diplomacy to improve their positions in the Middle East region and further in the world arena (Amirtash, 2005). They also use sports as a lever for their post-oil/gas future while building a new national branding of themselves. The UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are the emerging hosts of international sports events among the Arab-speaking countries of the Persian Gulf. Because of its strong geopolitical indicators such as its young population (i.e., 70% of the population is under 35 years old) and large geographical area (the largest country in the region) (Turan & Hoang, 2019), Saudi Arabia can present itself as a modern and open country for sports events. Considering the role of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East and the existing challenges to their relations, this study explained the paradigm governing the development of Iran's sports diplomatic interactions with Arab-speaking countries, especially Saudi Arabia.

Based on the mean scores of extracted concepts, indirect categories had a greater effect on the paradigm of Iran's sports interactions with the Arab-speaking states of the Persian Gulf, specifically Saudi Arabia, from the perspective of experts. In fact, the experts argued that macroeconomic, geopolitical, cultural, social, and ideological indicators play key roles in improving or weakening the sports diplomatic interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Consistent with this finding, Mousavi et al. (2023) introduced social and economic factors that can promote Iran's sports diplomacy. In a study by Ahmadi

et al. (2021), sports diplomacy, particularly football diplomacy, was shown as being particularly important in cultural and economic development.

The Saudi oil-based economy, as well as the country's influential role in the global economy through controlling the supply of energy-related products such as oil and gas, seems to indirectly affect the development of sports capabilities and continues to be Saudi Arabia's trump card in this area. The design of new cities, such as Qaida and Neom, with investments in the hundreds of billions of dollars is part of Saudi Arabia's larger project to use energy resources for its post-petroleum future (Afzali et al., 2020). Moreover, Saudi Arabia's influence in Iran's international treaties with Western parties, including Iran's negotiations with the P5+1 meeting over the last decade, as well as the country's fear of strengthening Iran's nuclear power, is another factor impeding the development of sports diplomatic interactions. This has resulted in economic political diplomacy directly affecting public diplomacy and, thereby, sports diplomacy.

Geopolitics and geographical-political concepts such as the common water border, the Strait of Hormuz, proxy wars, US military intervention, and shared energy resources were among the major factors influencing sports diplomatic interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In fact, due to their national geopolitical interests, the two neighboring countries have undergone neutral and sometimes constructive relations during some periods (for example, during Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency in Iran or before 2003). However, because of the sensitive geopolitics of the region and the two countries, most of these cases have caused the two states to diverge, an instance of which is Iran's threats and attempts after the Islamic revolution to overthrow the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In fact, Saudi Arabia's actions as a result of convergence with the West and, more recently, the Zionist regime have dissatisfied

Iranian politicians and posed challenges to the use of soft power, particularly sports diplomacy.

According to the research findings, the most important sociocultural factors affecting the development of diplomatic sports interactions between the two countries are ethnic and tribal commonalities, the history of the two countries in the region, common environmental challenges, exclusive media broadcast (especially Al-Arabiya), growing distrust, sectarianism in the Islamic world, disrespect for pilgrims, and Iranphobia and Shiaphobia. Considering the remarkable Iranian Arab population in the provinces of Khuzestan, Hormozgan, and Bushehr, the two countries can emphasize their cultural, ethnic, and tribal similarities to cooperate to solve common challenges, build mutual trust, and, ultimately, expand their sports interactions.

Due to ideological issues and sectarian tendencies, Iran and Saudi Arabia, known as the world's two Muslim bases, try to form terrorist groups and strengthen them outside their borders against each other. This not only counteracts any efforts to eliminate the difficult discourse conditions but also adds to the region's political challenges day by day. For example, following the execution of Sheikh Nimr in Saudi Arabia and the burning of the Saudi embassy in Tehran, football matches between the representatives of Iran and Saudi Arabia were held in a third country. Sports, particularly football, as an anti-diplomatic concept, were the main victims of this geopolitical challenge and conflict.

From the study sample's perspective, the most important direct factors affecting sports diplomatic interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia were sports economy, sports events, and, finally human capital. This is consistent with the findings reported by Javadipour and Rasekh (2019), who emphasized that factors such as hosting and attending sports events and using sports human capital could help realize

the objectives of sports diplomacy (Javadipour & rasekh, 2019).

Sports business interactions with major oil partners (e.g. Aramco as one of the world's largest oil companies) can play a major role in the development of sports interactions between the two countries because of their role in sports infrastructure development.

Iranian and Saudi oil companies, such as the Persian Gulf and Aramco, can take advantage of the experience of other countries, such as the presence of the Russian Gazprom in major sports events (as a sponsor of Chelsea, the Russian football league, and so on), to use their commercial portals in order to pave the way for sports to play a more prominent role in economic and political interactions between the two countries.

Considered the major category of any country's sustainable development, the economy plays a critical role in achieving strategic sports goals. For example, the Iranian state announced that it faced a construction budget deficit of nearly 52 thousand billion tomans in 2021 for completing unfinished sports projects, providing this credit necessitates an increase in oil exports as the primary source of national income. Considered the third fastest-growing industry (after energy and automobiles), sports can greatly contribute to direct and indirect job creation. For example, some Iranian sports companies, including Merooj (Majid) Sports Wear, provided sportswear for 35 national wrestling teams competing in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. This not only brought significant foreign exchange income to Iran but also increased the country's soft power. Another factor that has motivated Arab-speaking countries, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, to resort to sports as a tool to strengthen international prestige and continue to dominate the Middle East is the competitive advantage of this emerging phenomenon in strengthening regional hegemony.

Sports events, both as participants and hosts, play a key role in the long-term development plans of Arab-speaking countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Hosting the Dakar Rally in 2023, applying to host the 2034 Asian Games in Riyadh, and hosting the Italian and Spanish Super Cup are all clear examples of Saudi Arabia's efforts to draw the world's attention to the country as a modern, safe, and open tourist destination.

Given the great sports human capital of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the use of sports ambassadors from both countries, particularly national-regional figures such as Ali Daei, Mohamed Al-Deayea, Sami Al-Jaber, Ali Karimi, and others, can play a key role in alleviating the situation and improving interactions in the aftermath of recent political challenges. The presence of eminent football players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, as peace ambassadors to the region and Saudi Arabia may provide an opportunity to mediate and calm the tense relations between the two regional superpowers. This study finding shows that the attitude of political decision-makers (e.g., Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president of Iran) can bring Saudi Arabia and Iran closer together as the two Islamic world superpowers. Sports, as an appealing and influential category for the people of both countries, play a unique hastening and facilitating role in this regard.

Conclusion

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are presented:

To increase convergence with Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran should try to increase trust and cooperation in sports projects such as co-hosting sports events, particularly in medal-winning and prominent sports such as football, volleyball, wrestling, Taekwondo, and weightlifting.

Increasing the share of sports in energy resource exports will lead to rapid development and alter Iran's national image as a leading and

modern country in the field of sports infrastructure, resulting in a competitive balance of sports in the Middle East.

Avoiding ethnocentrism and ideological debates among political and governmental decision-makers in favor of soft power and the use of athletes and artists as diplomatic tools.

Organizing joint sports events based on the two countries' specific geopolitics, e.g., Riyadh-Tehran car rallies and peace and friendship competitions and festivals, particularly for women.

Funding

Research Restriction

Due to political chaos in Iran and Saudi in recent decades, many of interviewees were not willing to talk about the matter clearly and sensor some information about this sport diplomatic relations; Beside some of them did not believe the sport can solve the political predicaments; The researcher tried to have interviews with the Saudi scholars about the title, but it does not succeed.

Future Suggestions

According to findings and based on research restrictions, it was suggested that:

- Due to governmental attention to female sports and Islamic environment, it was suggested to work on female sport diplomacy between Iran and Saudi.
- Football has critical role on national happiness of two nations, a specific research about football club diplomacy can empower the convergence of two nations.

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