

# **Qatar in the Olympic System: The emergence of the Al-Thani Nation representatives and diplomatic recognition (1971-1981)**

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to analyse the Qatar authorities' practices towards the internationalization of local sports bodies to have a National Olympic Committee (NOC) legitimized. Specifically, the study aims to investigate the emergence of the nation representatives after the country's independency (1971) until the diplomatic recognition as an Olympic nation (1981). The primary written sources used in this paper are documents of different international sports bodies (IOC, IOA, FIFA, etc.) and also the State of Qatar legislation documentation (decrees, constitution, etc.). To be part of the Olympic system, getting recognition by International Sport Bodies was necessary and also an important move for national-building after the country independency and Sheikh Khalifa's coup (1972). It can be considered the beginning of an 'internationalization' process for the Qatari sport people. Not only as national athletes, sport authorities, members and staff of the local federations had a chance to be selected as "Al-Thani nation" representatives; a public distinction and an opportunity for social ascension. Taking advantage of the civil and military sport institutions, the Qatari royal family adapted on paper the sport governance system, to step into 'Western-modernity' and use as a tool to unify the population around Hamad lineage national plan.

## **Keywords**

Qatar, Olympic, Nation-Building, Sport, Governance, Al-Thani

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## Introduction

The first attempt to analyse the Qatar insertion in the Olympic system evidenced that the Qatar National Olympic Committee (QOC) establishment in 1979 was part of a nation-building process experienced by the country after the independency (1971), as well as, the QOC was created under the Youth Welfare Supreme Council (YWSC), a governmental body (Rolim Silva, 2014, p. 11). However, it still remained unclear the sociocultural practices within Qatar's sport field to insert the local federations in a Western-sport governance system. Thus, based on prior research<sup>1</sup>, this paper aims to analyse the Qatar authorities' practices towards the internationalization of local sports bodies to have a National Olympic Committee (NOC) legitimized. Specifically, the study aims to investigate the emergence of the nation representatives after the country's independency (1971) until the diplomatic recognition as an Olympic nation (1981).

In order to contextualize the study, it is important to understand that Qatar<sup>2</sup> became a British protectorate in 1916 when Sheikh Abdallah Al-Thani (country's royal family representative) signed a General Treaty with Great Britain in 1916. Fifty-five years later, on September 3rd, 1971, Qatar's Heir Apparent appeared on the state TV to announce the country independence; and the fact that it was not the Emir announcing such historical step, indicated the political friction among the Qatari royal family in the succession line<sup>3</sup>. This dispute for the power, culminated with a *coup d'état* in 1972 by the country's Heir Apparent, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani (Fromherz, 2012, p. 79). After that,

1 The results presented in this paper are part of the author's PhD thesis entitled "The Formation of an Olympic Nation in the Persian Gulf: sociocultural history of the sport in Qatar, 1948-1984" (Rolim Silva, 2019).

2 In this study, Qatar's historical, sociocultural and political peculiarities are understood in the context of other Arab countries of the Persian Gulf Region and broadly the so-called Middle East. Thus, Qatar is considered an Arab-Muslim country ruled by a royal family (the Al-Thani family). The Qatari Emir has absolute sovereign with constitutionally authority, being ex officio the primary beneficiary of the country revenues, and responsible to re-allocate as benefits to nationals (Rolim Silva, 2019, p. 1). In other words, the population is "bought off with democratic input sacrificed by society in exchange for a share of the rental wealth accruing to the state from abroad. Those who do not accept this rentier bargain are subdued by the strong repressive apparatus affordable to the rentier state" (Gray, 2011, p. 6).

3 It is important to remind that a royal family lineage dispute for the country leadership had its origins when Sheikh Abdallah bin Jassim (ruler 1913-1949) signed in 1935 the British Anglo-Persian Oil Company agreement to consolidate himself in power and settle any dispute within his family. The agreement with Britain also recognized Hamad bin Abdallah (Sheikh Abdallah's favourite son) as Heir Apparent. "Although Hamad died in May 1948, his recognition by the British allowed Abdallah to prevent and contain rivalry and rebellion from hopeful heirs until just before the beginning of major oil shipments from the Peninsula" (Fromherz, 2012, p. 76). After Hamad death, Sheikh Abdallah abdicated and put his other son, Sheikh Ali bin Abdallah (ruler 1949-1960), in power. Sheikh Ali agreed reluctantly to place Hamad's son Sheikh Khalifa, rather than his own heir.

the new Emir moved forward a nation-building development plan which included structural changes in the sport governance system (already set before the country independency) to achieve national representation through international sports and Olympic system (Rolim Silva, 2019, p. iii).

The primary written sources used in this paper are documents (letters, telegrams, etc.) of different international sports bodies (IOC, IOA, FIFA, etc.) and also the State of Qatar official legislation documentation (decrees, constitution, etc.). The study also uses oral sources (interviews) from the Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum archive which were interpreted based on Oral History method (Portelli, 2006; Abrams, 2010). The analytical guide is based on the hermeneutical “circle of understanding” (Gadamer, 2004) and all sources were analysed under the post-structuralism paradigm of the Cultural History (Chartier, 2000; Burke, 2004). Moreover, the study has an interdisciplinary approach including ethno-symbolic and modernist paradigms of nation-building and national identity (Smith, 2009; Norman, 2006).

## **Qatar Sports Internationalization and Nation Representatives (1971-1981)**

It is important to remember the “historical timeline” of the national sport bodies to contextualize the insertion of Qatar in the Olympic System (Western-sport governance model). On September 26th, 1964, the “Supreme Sports Committee” led by Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al-Thani<sup>4</sup> was created as the first “governmental sports body” (under a governmental education department) dismissing a civil society organization called “Qatari Sports Federation<sup>5</sup>”. The “Supreme Sports Committee” endured eight-years. After the creation of the Provisional Constitution (2 April 1970) and before the country independency (3 September 1971) it was transformed into “Youth Welfare Department” (YWD) on February 3rd, 1971, under the officially established Ministry of Education. In 1974, the Military Sports Federation (MSF) was

<sup>4</sup>Jassim bin Hamad Al-Thani (1921-1976) eldest son of Hamad bin Abdallah Al-Thani (died 1948) and brother of Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani (ruler 1972-1995).

<sup>5</sup>Created in 1958, the “Qatari Sports Federation” is the first and the only bottom-up initiative in Qatar’s history to regulate “sports activities”. The Federation is the representation of a fast growing up “passion” for football which occupied the leisure-free time of the male society in 1950s. It had an endorsement by the royal family, acting as a non-official “youth monitor” related to any pan-Arabism feelings led by the presence of Arab foreigners (teachers in Qatari schools) who influenced in the organization of sporting activities but they “could use sport against the royal family as a tool for social reforms incited by ethnicity, class, nationality, etc.” (Rolim Silva, 2019, p. 339).

created and had Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani<sup>6</sup> on top of it. Once Sheikh Jassim passed away (1976), the “sport” became Sheikh Hamad informal responsibility as he became the Minister of Defence and the country Heir Apparent (31 May 1977). And on January 1st, 1979, he was officially entitled the president of the Youth Welfare Supreme Council (YWSC). The YWSC can be considered the first “Ministry of Sport” in Qatar, since it was a national sport body created aside from the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, the Qatari sport governance system included re-organized sport clubs as well as local sports federations to organize the participation of national teams and athletes at regional sport events. However, the ultimate goal of the royal family was to place Qatar among the “Olympic nations”<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, a new “adaptation” of the local sport governance system was necessary to have the local federations internationally recognized and finally established a National Olympic Committee (NOC) recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

#### *The first Olympic representation: Guests at IOA 12th Session*

In 1972, after being selected as Manager of the Youth Welfare Department (YWD), Ahmed Al Ansari contacted the International Olympic Academy<sup>8</sup> (IOA) by telegram. Al Ansari wanted to “confirm [the] possibility [of] attendance [of] two members [of the] Qatar Youth Welfare [in] your Olympic course [between] 12-30 July” (Al-Ansary to Greek Olympic, 1972). Epaminondas Petralias, IOA President (1970-1974), replied the telegram confirming the participation of the two Qatari representatives on the IOA 12th Session as well as requesting the participants details (Petralias to Al-Ansary, 1972a). Al Ansary informed the IOA that himself and Aly Othman Mustafa (YWD inspector of sports) were the participants and they would arrive in Greece on July 11th, 1972 (Al-Ansary to Petralias, 1972). Thus, on June 29th, 1972, Petralias confirmed their participation providing accommodation and transportation to the IOA (Petralias to Al-Ansary, 1972b).

6 Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani was son of Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani (ruler 1972-1995). He became the Emir of Qatar from 1995 to 2013, when he hands over the power to his son, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. Since that, Sheikh Khalifa received the title of ‘Father Emir’.

7 During the 1970s, “governments began to fully realize the political importance of the Olympic System” (Chappelet, 2016, p. 744) and, once independent from Britain and led by the Youth Welfare Department, the Qataris became interested in the “Olympic system” of “nation” recognition.

8 The IOA was officially established on June 14th, 1961 in Olympia, Greece. The IOA inauguration coincided with the 58th Session of the IOC in Athens as well as the moment that the German Archaeological Institute of Athens had just completed its work in Olympia, and “impressively presented the ancient stadium to the Greek government” (Brundage, 1972, p. 52).

In total, the 12th Session had seventeen lecturers from eight countries; 139 participants (109 men and 30 women) from thirty countries; and fourteen guests from nine countries (IOA, 1972, p. 11). Ali Al Ansari and Aly Othman Mustafa were considered “guests” since Qatar did not have NOC. Thus, their participation represents the starting point of Qatar (Al-Thani nation) insertion in the Olympic system. Therefore, the firsts “nation” representatives that “raised the Qatar flag” in an Olympic Movement event (Al Ansari, 2012) were not any athletes but the government employees Al Ansari and Mustafa. Al Ansari (2012) mentioned during his interview the importance of “be open to the world”. It represents the Qatari context which was recently independent and under Sheikh Khalifa nation-building plan including the “modernization” of the country through sport. “Even without voice” (Al Ansari, 2012) i.e. as guests of the event, “the participation was seen as remarkable to assert national autonomy and also it was relevant to the manager of the YWD understands the importance of becoming part of the Olympic system” (Rolim Silva, 2019, p. 286). It is important to understand that the IOC was also keen to include all the recent independent Gulf countries in the Olympic Movement. For instance, on April 15th, 1978, Mohamed Mzali<sup>9</sup>, representing the IOC president, attended the first Olympic Day ceremonies held in Kuwait (an IOC member since 1966). During his speech in the event, he called for cooperation among Departments of Education, Culture and Youth in the Arab countries to work together with NOCs in order to have the “right guidance for the youth” (Mzali, 1978, p. 389) and this it was necessary to create “national Olympic Committees in the remaining Arab countries” following the IOC’s procedures (Mzali, 1978, p. 390).

The speech of the Mr. Mzali towards an Olympic Movement as utilitarian tool for development of a “good citizen” was also embedded in a pan-Arab imagined community of sport uses. And pan-Arabism feelings were already expressed in Qatar in 1960s during the “School Festivals”<sup>10</sup>, however in the end of 1970s the “national representation” was the main goal of the Sheikh Khalifa to consolidate his power in the country. Thus, when Sheikh Jassim

9 Mohamed Mzali was the Tunisian Olympic Committee president (1962-1980) and an elected IOC member (1965) who was part of IOC Executive Board (1963-1980) and held the position of IOC vice-president (1976-1980).

10 The school festivals in Qatar in 1960s acted as a “collective memory” moment to celebrate Arab-Muslim and national identity. Through this “invented tradition”, authorities inculcated values and behaviour norms by repetition and people became aware of their citizenship across symbols and semi-rituals practices (Hobsbawm, 1984, p. 1). The desire of “national unity” and sense of belonging to a pan-Arab “imagined community” (Ummah) sentimentalized a “national identity” among different social groups (Rolim Silva, 2019, p.158).

passed away in 1976 and Sheikh Hamad started his leadership period in the new YWSC (1979), he was already aware of the importance of being part of the Olympic system for diplomatic recognition and to place Qatar in the world map. However, as mentioned on Mr. Mzali's speech, in order to establish a NOC and actively have a "voice" in the Olympic Movement, at least, five local federations would need to be recognized by their IFs. The considered sporting activities<sup>11</sup> in Qatar were governmental regulated and practiced in the sport clubs and, ultimately, controlled by NFs such as athletics, basketball, football, handball, table tennis, volleyball and shooting.

### *The military role in the Olympic nation-building*

However, even before the establishment of the YWSC and the Qatar NOC in 1979, the Military Sport Federation (MSF) was also responsible for the development of sporting activities including athletics, boxing, martial arts and shooting. As mentioned before, the MSF was created in 1974 and recognized by the International Sports Military Council (CISM) in the same year. The CISM recognition allowed Qatar (male athletes) to take part in the World Military Championships<sup>12</sup> for different sports such as basketball, boxing, cross-country, football, judo, shooting and track and field. It is important to point out that Qatar became the CISM Middle East Regional Office in 1977 and Sheikh Abdallah bin Khalifa Al-Thani its president (1978) under the Commander-In-Chief (Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani). After that, the investments on military sports increased with the arrival of foreigner coaches, reaching its apogee with the hosting of the final stage of the 30th CISM World Military Football Championships. As a host, Qatar was automatically qualified for the event which happened in the capital Doha at the "Olympic" Khalifa Stadium from 12 to 23 June 1981. Therefore, after the 1976 Gulf Football Tournament, the CISM Football Championship in 1981 was the major football event hosted by Qatar. It can be considered the first opportunity to present to the 'world' the economic power of the country and an important tool to legitimize the royal family leadership

<sup>11</sup> The government did not consider "sports", the so-called "leisure activities" because they were not regulated by NFs and practiced at school level or at private and community associations using hotels and oil companies' facilities. At least sixteen "leisure activities" out of the NFs system were identified until the end of 1970s (Rolim Silva, 2019, p. 286): bowling, chess, cricket, cycling, equestrian sports, field hockey, golf, gymnastics, martial arts, motorsports (including desert rallies), sailing, squash, swimming, tennis, water motorsports (including jet ski activities) and cultural sports (camel races, falconry, etc.).

<sup>12</sup> A detailed table containing the Qatar's participation in the World Military Championships is available in Rolim Silva (2019, p. 288).



as the 'providers' and 'protectors' of the Qatari modern-society. In this sense, Sheikh Hamad – a royal family member holding simultaneously the positions of Heir Apparent, Ministry of Defence & Commander-In-Chief and President of the YWSC – was celebrated as the promoter of the event together with the Emir and the “athletes-soldiers were celebrated for fighting well and hard for the nation” (Rolim Silva, 2019, p. 289).

Despite the football popularity, it was the cross-country military athletes who first brought to Qatar a 'cup' and victory over the 'Gulf brothers'. The 1977 Gulf Cross-Country Championship in Kuwait was a turning point regarding the royal family understanding of the use of sport for national purposes. Once Qatar won the “cup” for first place (team overall) in Kuwait, the government introduced rewards (such as salary bonuses, cars, houses, military ranks, etc.) for athletes representing the nation and to motivate the local 'youth' to take part in sports; and became a social ascension opportunity offered by the royal family. Besides that, 'public recognition' practices (such as royal reception, airport welcome and car parades) were an important tool for the 'nation' to recognize their new heroes. Belgium *Fred Herbrand* who came to train the athletics national team in 1977 reminds that his best runner was “a strong Bedouin” called Mufla Saad (Herbrand, 2014). Mufla Saad was important to Herbrand team as well as to the royal family consolidate their 'sovereignty' among the other Gulf countries. Therefore, the strategy of inserting a 'Bedouin', in a modern-nation discourse, was promising to him social and financial benefits such as a military rank of Lieutenant (Herbrand, 2014). Therefore, the 'rivalry' among the Gulf countries made the Qatari government invest more in sports which included the arrival of foreigner coaches and 'rewards' to successful athletes. The consolidation of Qatar as the 'number one' in the Gulf was an important step for nation-building as well for the insertion in the Olympic system.

Therefore, the MSF had also under its scope sports “regulated” by the governmental National Federations such as athletics and football. Moreover, on August 13th, 1978 an official letter of the State of Qatar from the Military General Headquarter written in both Arabic and English by the Heir Apparent and Minister of Defence, Sheikh Hamad, was addressed to the International Shooting Union (UIT) requesting the Qatar Shooting Federation (QSF) to be included as one of its members as well as informing

that QSF created on July 31st, 1978 (Althani to UIT, 1978, p. 2). The letter confirmed that QSF was recognized as the solo legal authority in the State of Qatar which had the “full right to control and supervise all activities of the shooting sports i.e. rifles, pistols and clay pigeon targets” (Althani to UIT, 1978, p. 1). The letter written by the Minister of Defence had a nationalistic tone towards a sporting activity and it represented the royal family intentions in place Qatar among the other “nations” through shooting. In this way, he also asked to QSF application to be included in the Agenda of the General Assembly meeting scheduled to Seoul (South Korea) from 24th September to 5th October 1978. The hurry of the sheikh was not to lose the opportunity of sending Qatari shooters to the 42nd World Shooting Championship which was held in the same date and place of the Congress. Eventually Sheikh Hamad request was accepted and for the first time in history fourteen shooters were registered to represented Qatar in a World Championships; nevertheless, only five qualified for final rounds (UIT, 1978, pp. 188/203).

*Ahmed Al Ansari: empowered to acquire international status*

Hired by the Military Sports Federation, Herbrand (2014) mentioned that there was “no active track and field federation in the country”, although the Qatar Amateur Athletics Federation (QAAF) was the first Qatar NF to be officially recognized by and IF in 1966 (IAAF, 1966, p. 4). Despite the QAAF recognition as a member and entitled to take part in any IAAF competition, the political statues of the country (Great Britain protectorate) limited the possibilities of a national team creation to represent the country in the events. In this sense, after the independency, Ahmed Al Ansari, acting as secretary-general of the QAAF sent a letter to IAAF informing a changing of address of the federation as well as congratulating the results of the IAAF results of the elections which happened during the 28th Congress held during the 1972 Munich Olympics (Al-Ansary to Holder, 1972). Thus, it seems the QAAF was a mere ‘administrative office’ and the ‘operational’ responsibility was under the Military Sport Federation.

Besides signed letters from the Qatar Amateur Athletics Federation as acting secretary-general, the Manager of the Youth Welfare Department (YWD), Ahmed Al Ansari, also held the position of general-secretary of the QFA right after FIFA granted “provisional” membership status to Qatar takes part in the 1970 Gulf Cup in Bahrain (Käser to QFA, 1970). And although QFA had adapted its



statutes to acquire FIFA membership and, in theory, dismissed the “Supreme Sports Committee” authority to become the sole entity responsible for football in Qatar (Zowyer to FIFA, 1970); once the YWD was created in 1971 “all the national federations were under its umbrella and Ahmed Al Ansari responsibility” (Rolim Silva, 2019, p. 296). The YWD new headquarters constructed in the following year centralized in one location the sports federations and helped Al Ansari to keep under government control their administrative affairs. For instance, Ahmed Al Ansari also informed FIFA about the new address of the QFA on September 7th, 1972 (Al-Ansari to FIFA, 1972a) which was actually the YWD building and the same informed to the IAAF in the same year. On November 5th, 1972 Al Ansari replied a letter from FIFA which informed the acceptance of the QFA as a full member, “a decision taken at the meeting in Paris on 23rd August” (Al-Ansari to FIFA, 1972b). Two-years after QFA also became full member of the AFC (Teik, 1973, p. 395). Hence, besides the Gulf Tournaments, Qatar became entitled to participate at Asian Tournaments and FIFA World Cup qualifiers in senior and youth levels<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, Qatar became represented in football world through referees<sup>14</sup>.

On July 1st, 1972 Ahmed Al Ansari also wrote a letter to FIBA informing that a “Basketball Association” was formed in Qatar “to encourage the spread of the game all over the country” as well as requesting information to become a member of it (Al-Ansari to FIBA, 1972). As he had already experienced in the IFs autonomy expectations in the association process, the manager of the YWD informed in the same letter that QBA would “stand by itself” taking “all the responsibility and full control of the game” in the country (Al-Ansari to FIBA, 1972). Al Ansari signed as secretary-general of the QBA in a letter without a letterhead. On April 14th, 1973, already with the YWD letterhead, Al Ansari wrote again to FIBA which did not have reply to the first letter (Al-Ansari to FIBA, 1973a). Finally, on August 15th, 1973 FIBA replied explaining that the first letter never reached them. After welcome Qatar intention to become part of the “big basketball family” the requirements were explained (Jones to Al-Ansari, 1973a). Ahmed Al Ansari replied the letter with a certificate of the YWD as the “sole authority responsible for sports in the State of Qatar” (Al-

<sup>13</sup> A detailed table containing the Qatar’s participation in the FIFA’s recognized tournaments is available in Rolim Silva (2019, p. 293).

<sup>14</sup> In 1976, Taleb Ballan was the first to receive a FIFA international badge and in the same year worked in three matches during the Saudi Arabian Friendship Cup (FIFA, 1977, p. 23; FIFA, 1976, p. 254).

Ansari to FIBA, 1973b). The certificate stated that “the Youth Welfare Department, Ministry of Education, State of Qatar, hereby certifies that ‘Qatar Basketball Association’ is the sole controlling body of the game in the State of Qatar” (Al-Ansari to FIBA, 1973b); and it was also signed (different handwriting) by Ahmed Al Ansari as director of the Department with an official stamp. On October 24th, 1973 FIBA acknowledged the receipt of the payment and documentation welcoming Qatar to the “family” (Jones to Al-Ansari, 1973b). Thus, within a period of approximate two-months Qatar acquired one more “administrative” international recognition through sports.

On December 29th, 1972 it was the time of the Qatar Volleyball Association (QVA) become part of the FIVB. Replying to Ahmed Al Ansari in a letter, Paul Libaud (president of FIVB) informed that QVA was accepted into the IF; however, the “definitive membership” would only happen with the submission of the Qatari association statutes (Libaud to Al-Ansary, 1972). Eventually the QVA submitted its statutes and in the FIVB Congress held in Mexico 1974 the membership was homologated (Canaff to Berlioux, 1980). Therefore, before the Montreal 1976 Olympics, Ahmed Al Ansari had already affiliated Qatar NFs into four IFs (FIBA, FIFA, IAAF and FIVB) and such practice was important for the creation of an “administrative delegation” to travel to Canada. The administrative delegation had two missions: (1) to watch closely the Olympic Games (Al Ansari, 2012); and (2) to participate at IFs meetings as Ahmed Al Ansari confirmed that himself as a president of the QAAF and other four members (Mr. About, Mr. Al-Ali, Mr. Ziyara and Mr. Yousef) were going to take part in the IAAF Congress that was held during the Olympic Games (Al-Ansari to IAAF, 1976). The lesson learnt by Ahmed Al Ansari in 1972 during the IOA Session of “give voice” and raise the “Qatar flag” in the Olympic world it was under way. Despite athletes of Qatar still not presented in this moment, such participation in IFs meetings and ‘observation’ of the Games could be understood as the first Qatari delegation in the Olympics. However, in order to get into the Olympic system, Ahmed Al Ansari still required to get more international affiliations.

In this sense, on March 3rd, 1978, the general-secretary of the ITTF Tony Brooks, received a letter from the Saudi Arabian Table Tennis Federation<sup>15</sup> written on behalf of the Qatar Table Tennis

<sup>15</sup> It is important to remember that Saudi Arabia was the home of the Arab Table Tennis Federation since 1976, after being formed in 1956 with offices in Egypt. Thus, it was not by surprise the ITTF received the letter from the Saudi Arabian Table Tennis Federation.

Association (QTTA) asking for membership forms as well as all any necessary requirement to include QTTA as full member (Almalik to Brooks, 1978). Brooks replied twenty-days later enclosing to his letter the application form and explaining that an English copy of the QTTA statutes needed to be submitted (Brooks to KSA Almalik, 1978). The YWD manager did not take long to submit the requested documentation. As for the other NFs, Ahmed Al Ansari filled the thirteen points of the ITTF application form and signed as vice-president of the QTTA (ITTF, 1978, p. 2). Interestingly, Al Ansari wrote in the form that the QTTA was created in 1966 and, in that time, supervised seven clubs with a total 150 players registered. Also, he answered that QTTA was “wholly independent” from other sports associations, however at the three-pages QTTA Constitution enclosed with the application form, the “General Provisions” stated: (1) “The Youth Welfare Department is the competent authority in settling any disputes occurred between the Q.T.T.A. and the other sports’ clubs and associations”; (2) “Decisions of Q.T.T.A. shall not be effective unless they are approved by the Youth Welfare Department” (QTTA, n.d., p. 3). Like in the other IFs affiliation situations, Qatari authorities seem to lack an understanding of the requested NF “autonomy” from the government because *de facto* the local sports federations were under the responsibility of the manager of the YWD. On June 27th, 1978 Tony Brooks wrote to QTTA’s secretary confirming the provisional status which meant that the Association could participate of ITTF events and attend the Biennial General Meeting (BGM); however, in order to Qatari delegates had a “voice” or “vote” the BGM should formally confirm QTTA membership. Moreover, a Preliminary Notification Form for the 35th World Championships was enclosed in case Qatar had an intention to enter players in the tournament (Brooks to Faraj, 1978). The full membership of QTTA was finally confirmed in the ITTF First Session held in the People’s Palace of Culture, Pyongyang, on Saturday 28th April 1979 (ITTF, “Membership”, 1979).

The Qatari insertion in the Olympic (Western-sport governance) system also included handball. The Qatar Handball Association (QHA) had confirmed its full membership in the IHF in the 17th Regular Congress held in Reykjavik (Iceland) from 7th to 11th September 1978 (Peppmeier to Berlioux, 1980). It was not found primary sources which indicated that Ahmed Al Ansari wrote to IHF as the QHA vice-president or general-secretary. Although,

under the scope of the manager of the YWD i.e. “civil” sports federation, handball was the last NF which needed to get an IF recognition. In this sense, at the end of 1978, Ahmed Al Ansari had six national sports bodies representing different sports (Athletics, Basketball, Football, Handball, Table Tennis and Volleyball) recognized at their respective IFs under an outside-borders perspective of independent of governmental interference; but internally all under the administrative jurisdiction and financial support of the Ministry of Education Department for Youth Welfare . In this sense, “Ahmed Al Ansari was the ‘nation’ sports manager in administrative matters, a royal family empowered authority who helped to insert Qatar into the international sports governance system which led to the creation of a National Olympic Committee” (Rolim Silva, 2019, p. 296).

In 1979 Sheikh Hamad officially took the leadership of the sports in the country and became the president of the newly YWSC. And, once the way was already paved by Ahmed Al Ansari, the royal family intention was, finally, enter into the Olympic system. Then, on March 14th, 1979, the Sheikh Hamad made official his decision to appoint “new” leaders for six national sports federations (Qatar, “*Qarar ra'is al-majlis raqm 1 sanat 1979*”, 1979, Article 1) to oversee eight sports activities in the Qatari clubs<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, Sheikh Hamad established the Qatar National Olympic Committee (QOC) and placed Colonel Sheikh Abdallah bin Khalifa Al-Thani as the president and Rashid bin Hussain Al Naimi as vice-president/general-secretary (Qatar, “*Qarar ra'is al-majlis raqm 1 sanat 1979*”, 1979, Article 2). The QOC board would be completed with the heads of the federations. Thus, the six “new” sports federations would become under this new department (QOC) of the YWSC; appointing Sheikh Abdallah (president of the CISM Middle East Regional Office), Sheikh Hamad (Heir Apparent, Ministry of Defence and Commander-In-Chief) inserted the ‘military’ into to the country sports governance, consolidating the *Hamad lineage* in power. In this sense, Ahmed Al Ansari, who was since 1960s involved in the government sports departments, handed over his central position to the new empowered ‘leaders’. He was ‘rewarded’ by the royal family with a position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Al Ansari, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> The appointed leaders were (1) Sheikh Abdullah bin Ali Al-Thani as president of the Equestrian and Shooting Federation; (2) Sultan bin Khalid Al Suwaidi as president of the FA; (3) Mohammed bin Hammam Al Abdullah as president of Volleyball and Table Tennis; (4) Mohammed bin Nasser Al Naimi as president of Handball Federation; (5) Ahmed bin Ghanem Al Rumaihi as president of Basketball Federation; (6) Yousif Al Saie as president of Athletics Association (Qatar, “*Qarar ra'is al-majlis raqm 1 sanat 1979*”, 1979, Article 1).

### *Samaranch visit and the Olympic diplomatic recognition*

On September 30th, 1979, a letter from Sheikh Abdallah informing the establishment of the QOC was written to the IOC's president (Al-Thani to IOC, 1979). Seeking for a national representation, the Qatar's authorities had to face the model imposed by the IOC and 'adapt on paper' the QOC's constitution in order to be accepted as part of this new "international social status", i.e. a country recognized by the IOC (Rolim Silva, 2014, p. 309). The IOC granted full recognition to the QOC in 1980 (Berlioux to Al-Thani, 1980). With the QOC established and fully approved by the IOC, its symbolic inauguration was in 1981 when Samaranch visited the country. Between 30th March and 3rd April, the president of the IOC visited five countries of the Gulf region: Kuwait (March 30th to 31st), Bahrain (April 1st), Qatar (April 2nd), the United Arab Emirates (April 3rd) and Saudi Arabia (April 4th). Elected after Moscow 1980 Olympics, Juan Antonio Samaranch was the first President of the IOC to visit the region, invited by the president of the Kuwait NOC, Sheikh Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah<sup>17</sup>. The delegation arrived in Qatar for a one-day official full-agenda which included: (1) airport welcome reception at VIP room by Sheikh Abdullah; followed by (2) meeting with Sheikh Hamad at Ministry of Defence office; after lunch time (3) meeting with Sheikh Abdullah at QOC headquarters; followed by (4) "talk session" with QOC members; and finally (5) official dinner at the Gulf Hotel (QOC, 1981). On top of the busy agenda, the IOC authorities visited sports facilities at the Khalifa "Olympic" City. The opportunity to welcome and meet the "highest Olympic sport authority" and the "highest Olympic academic authority" represented the national consolidation of the QOC and Sheikh Abdullah as the "Olympic authority" in the country as well as the achievement of the royal family vision to assert national autonomy through sport (diplomacy). The young Sheikh Abdullah became an "Olympic player" and gained power in the Qatari social imaginary besides the "supreme" youth welfare leader, Sheikh Hamad.

In order to transmit the idea of one "Olympic family", it was culturally important to Sheikh Abdullah to express the highest diplomatic tied between "leaders and authorities" as well as a representation of mutual understanding. In this sense, Sheikh

<sup>17</sup> He was accompanied by his Chief of Staff, Alain Coupat as well as Nikolaos Nissiotis, IOC member in Greece and president of the IOA. The IOC authorities travelled to Kuwait on March 30th and afterwards they were escorted by Sheik Fahad throughout his trip to enable them to acquaint themselves better with the area ("The president," 1981, p. 282).

Abdullah sent a month later a two-page replied letter with “ideas and thoughts which could contribute effectively in serving sports and sportsmen” (Al-Thani to Samaranch, 1981, p. 1). These “ideas and thoughts” were discussed during the meeting with the IOC delegates and the QOC members and comprised of four points: (1) Provision of specialized experts in order to make a comprehensive survey and a field study of the standard of sports in the State of Qatar, and rendering advice about how it should be, whether in plans programming, or in sports facilities; (2) The extent to which the I.O.C. may contribute in establishing a sport academy in the State of Qatar for serving the area, and neighbouring countries as well; (3) The extent to which the I.O.C. may contribute in establishing a physiotherapy centre in the State of Qatar to serve area and neighbouring countries as well; (4) The possibility of I.O.C. organizing and supervising a small scale Olympic Games Tournament to the Arab Gulf States (Al-Thani to Samaranch, 1981, pp. 1-2). The first point mentioned by Sheikh Abdullah represented the royal family necessity of “foreign expertise” to assess and guide them towards decisions about the development of sport; a common practice used by the Qatari authorities to develop not only sports but most of country industries and national plans. This point is also explained connected with the possibilities of using the Olympic Solidarity “to send experts, either in the field of planning teaching and the training of instructors, or in the field of the concept and installation of infrastructures” (“The president,” 1981, p. 282). The points two and three represented the “ambition” of the royal family in turned Qatar into a “Olympic and sport centre” for the region; a way of differentiating Qatar within the “brothers” of region, to express autonomy and build a national identity. And the last point, to create a possibility for national representation, giving to the country athletes an opportunity to compete in a low-level sport event but at the same time become “Olympic champions”.

## Conclusion

This paper sheds a light on the historical relation of the Qatari royal family (the *Hamad Al-Thani* lineage) power consolidation within the local society and modern-sports. The participation at sporting related events as well as the hosting of them were an opportunity to display national sovereignty, acting as a conduit for nationalism. Therefore, to take part of the “Western-sport



world”, getting recognition by International Sport Bodies (International Federations, International Olympic Committee, etc.) was necessary and also an important symbolic move for national-building after the independency and Sheikh Khalifa’s *coup*, since socio-political stability or economic reconstruction are more difficult to achieve rather than have a national team competing a global stage.

Therefore, this study brings an understanding that the sport governance system in Qatar did not change its decision-making practical terms – based on the traditional family-tribal procedures of an Al-Thani “supreme leadership” – when faced the Olympic (Western-sport) system. Taking advantage of the civil and military sport institutions, the Qatari royal family understood that affiliation of the local sport federations to their respective International Federations was a step into ‘modernity’ and a tool to unity the population around their national plan. It also can be considered the beginning of an ‘internationalization’ process for the Qatari sport people. Not only as national athletes, sport authorities, members and staff of the National Federations had a chance to be selected as “nation representatives”; a public distinction in the Qatari society because it represents to be an Al-Thani allied and an opportunity for social ascension.

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