

## SPORTS AND SOFT POWER IN MOROCCO: STRATEGIES, SUCCESSES, AND CHALLENGES TOWARDS 2030

*ESPORTES E SOFT POWER EM MARROCOS: ESTRATÉGIAS, SUCESSOS E  
DESAFIOS ATÉ 2030*

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### ABSTRACT

The 21st century is one of globalized sports, a phenomenon whose implications go far beyond physical activity. Today, sport has transformed into a strategic arena where nations engage in peaceful and regular confrontations. It has become the clearest way to wave a flag, assert oneself on the international stage, and position oneself on the world map. At a time when globalization tends to blur national identities, sport emerges as the most effective way to reunite a nation around a common goal, whether it's a sporting victory or a memorable achievement, the magnitude of which varies according to historical contexts and expectations. In this context, sport is not limited to mere physical competition but becomes a key diplomatic and political tool. It represents an essential element of a state's soft power, offering a powerful platform to influence and attract international attention. As Pascale Boniface points out in "Géopolitique du Sport" (2014), sport has become a global media showcase where every major sporting event and every notable performance contribute to strengthening a country's reputation and influence on the international stage. Today, major sporting events are no longer limited to on-field competitions but have become theaters where significant political and soft power stakes are played out. The meticulous organization of these events mobilizes not only the media but also high-ranking political leaders and public figures, highlighting the strategic importance given to sport in the context of international politics. This paper aims to explore the growing role of sport as a tool of soft power, with a particular focus on football, and to uncover the mystery behind this simple ball that has become a symbol of power and soft influence. It also proposes to examine the specific initiatives taken by Morocco to shine in this field, relying on a solid theoretical foundation and experts in the matter.

**Keywords:** Sport Diplomacy, Soft Power, Globalization, Geopolitics, National Identity.

## RESUMO

O século XXI é um século de esportes globalizados, um fenômeno cujas implicações vão muito além da atividade física. Hoje, o esporte se transformou em uma arena estratégica onde as nações se envolvem em confrontos pacíficos e regulares. Ele se tornou a maneira mais clara de agitar uma bandeira, afirmar-se no cenário internacional e posicionar-se no mapa mundial. Em uma época em que a globalização tende a confundir as identidades nacionais, o esporte surge como a maneira mais eficaz de reunir uma nação em torno de um objetivo comum, seja uma vitória esportiva ou uma conquista memorável, cuja magnitude varia de acordo com os contextos históricos e as expectativas. Nesse contexto, o esporte não se limita à mera competição física, mas torna-se uma ferramenta diplomática e política fundamental. Ele representa um elemento essencial do poder brando de um Estado, oferecendo uma plataforma poderosa para influenciar e atrair a atenção internacional. Como Pascale Boniface aponta em "Géopolitique du Sport" (2014), o esporte se tornou uma vitrine da mídia global, onde cada grande evento esportivo e cada desempenho notável contribuem para fortalecer a reputação e a influência de um país no cenário internacional. Hoje em dia, os grandes eventos esportivos não se limitam mais às competições em campo, mas se tornaram teatros onde são jogadas importantes apostas políticas e de soft power. A organização meticulosa desses eventos mobiliza não apenas a mídia, mas também líderes políticos de alto escalão e figuras públicas, destacando a importância estratégica que é dada a esses eventos. Este artigo tem como objetivo explorar o papel crescente do esporte como ferramenta de poder brando, com foco especial no futebol, e desvendar o mistério por trás dessa simples bola que se tornou um símbolo de poder e influência branda. Ele também se propõe a examinar as iniciativas específicas tomadas pelo Marrocos para brilhar nesse campo, apoiando-se em uma base teórica sólida e em especialistas no assunto.

**Palavras-chave:** Diplomacia esportiva, Soft Power, Globalização, Geopolítica, Identidade nacional.

## **Introduction**

Beyond its simple dimension of competition and entertainment, sport has evolved into a strategic element in contemporary international relations. As a soft power tool, it enables nations to exert subtle yet significant influence on the global stage. The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, is defined by a country's ability to attract and persuade through its cultural values, policies, and institutions, rather than through coercion or military force (Nye, 1990). In this context, sport has proven to be a powerful instrument of influence, capable of transcending borders and enhancing a nation's image internationally.

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a notable shift in global power paradigms towards more subtle forms of influence. Sport, and particularly football, has come to play a central role in this dynamic (Gomez, 2021). The universal appeal of football makes it an especially effective vector of soft power, allowing states to project a positive image and establish diplomatic ties through major sporting events (Boniface, 2014).

Morocco exemplifies this strategy. Over the past few decades, the Kingdom has strategically integrated sports, particularly football, into its cultural diplomacy. Initiatives such as the Mohammed VI Football Academy and the Museum of Moroccan Soccer reflect Morocco's dual aim of enhancing its sports performance while strengthening its image on the international stage. These efforts underscore Morocco's ambition to position itself as a leader in African sport, leveraging football to promote its cultural and political values globally (FRMF, 2022).

Furthermore, the globalization of sport and the proliferation of media have amplified its role as a tool of soft power. Events like the World Cup have become global platforms where nations showcase their cultural values, principles, and influence. The widespread media coverage of these events transforms competitions into global spectacles, where countries seek to promote their image and values (Ferez & Terral, 2023). The synergy between sports and media has not only expanded the audience for sports but has also solidified its function as an instrument of power in international relations.

As a member of FIFA since 1956 (FRMF, 2022), Morocco has capitalized on these dynamics to enhance its presence on the global stage. The country has participated in numerous international competitions, representing not only its national interests but also those of the African continent. Football has thus become a key lever for Morocco, allowing the Kingdom to project an image of power, modernity, and openness (Boniface, 2014).

Looking forward, Morocco's role as a co-host of the 2030 FIFA World Cup, alongside Spain and Portugal, as well as its ambitions to host the African Cup of Nations, highlight the strategic use of sport as a tool of soft power (FIFA, 2023). These events present unprecedented opportunities for Morocco to further assert its influence on the global stage, showcasing its cultural heritage, modern infrastructure, and commitment to sport.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine to what extent sport, and more specifically football, constitutes an effective tool of soft power for Morocco. By analyzing the successes and challenges that Morocco has encountered in its sports strategy, this research aims to provide new insights into how nations can harness

sport to positively influence international relations and promote effective cultural diplomacy.

## **Methodology**

In the context of our approach, after a theoretical overview demonstrating the coherence between sport and soft power, we opted for a qualitative research method. This choice naturally imposed itself, given the complexity and subjective nature of the phenomenon studied. Indeed, sports soft power is a multidimensional concept that is not limited to quantitative data. It is about exploring the perceptions, meanings, and representations that key actors in Moroccan sport associate with this concept. To do this, we conducted semi-structured interviews with several individuals and institutions, addressing three different angles: a "political" axis with Abdelhafid Oualalou, political scientist and vice-president of the Moroccan Institute of International Relations (IMRI), a "sports" axis with Nawal El Moutawakil, sports legend, Olympic champion, and member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (CIO, 1998), and a "media" axis with Mourad Moutaouakil, sports journalist and press relations officer for the national football team.

After collecting the results of the interview, it turned out that our three interlocutors highlighted sports initiatives such as the Mohammed VI Football Academy and the Moroccan Football Museum. Therefore, we illustrate our visits, by videos that show the different spaces and conducted interviews with officials of each institution. For example, we talked with AMF coach Tarik, MFM co-founder Zaid Ouakrim, and Ouamaima Oualid, the MFM assistant coach. These exchanges and visits have enabled us to explore in depth the specificities of sports soft power in the Moroccan context.

Before conducting interviews with our sample, we undertook a thorough reflection to carefully select our study corpus, with the objective of generating relevant and significant results. Our corpus comprises key figures in the Moroccan sports landscape, providing a diverse range of perspectives on soft power and sport.

Table 1 – Study sample

	Name	Position
1	Abddelhafid Oualalou	Political Scientist and Vice-President of the Moroccan Institute of International Relations
2	Nawal Elmoutaouakil	Moroccan Athlete and Member of the International Olympic Committee
3	Mourad Moutaouakil	Sports Journalist and Press Relations Officer for the National Football Team
4	Tarik Elkahzri	Recruitment Manager at the Mohammed VI Football Academy and Physical Trainer for U19 Team
5	Zaid Ouakrim	Curator of the Moroccan Football Museum
6	Oumaima Oualid	Deputy Curator of the Moroccan Football Museum

Finally, our corpus consists of key actors in the Moroccan sports landscape, offering a diversity of perspectives on soft power and sport. Even though the sample is small, it is representative of the key players involved in the development of the sports landscape in Morocco. The diversity of these profiles allowed us to collect rich and varied data, providing precise answers to our research question.

The interviews were structured around targeted questions on soft power and sport within the Moroccan context, guided by a carefully designed interview framework [1]. This approach ensured that the questions were clear, concise, and effectively addressed our research objectives, while also ensuring the comfort of the interviewees.

Subsequently, we also conducted a complete visit to the Mohammed VI Football Academy, documented through a day of filming and visiting the facilities with Coach Tarik. This immersion allowed us to gather detailed information on the activities and initiatives of the academy, presented in a video.

Despite access limitations, our visit to the Moroccan Football Museum provided valuable insights into its role in promoting Morocco's image, captured in a

video. Interviews with Oumaima Oualid and Zaid Ouakrim further enriched our understanding of the institution's significance.

The qualitative approach allowed us to thoroughly examine the information obtained through interviews with experts and field visits to effectively address our specific research questions. We transcribed the interviews and documented observations from the AMF and MFM visits. Through theme analysis, we identified recurring themes that deepened our understanding of Moroccan sports soft power, assessing how these findings support our hypotheses on sport as a tool of foreign policy and cultural influence.

In summary, our work methodology was crucial in exploring the qualitative data collected in depth, providing a methodical structure to effectively address the research objectives on Moroccan sports soft power.

Table 2 – Interviews

Inter view	Question	Theme	Keywords
1	How do you interpret soft power in Morocco's sports sector?	National team's success boosts Moroccan soft power.	Soft Power – Football – Qatar 2022
	What initiatives has Morocco undertaken to enhance its image in football?	AMF's partnerships strengthen Morocco's FIFA and CAF standings; MFM highlights Moroccan sports history.	Soft Power – AMF – FIFA – CAF – MFM – 1970 World Cup
	Do these initiatives contribute to enhancing Morocco's international image?	Moroccan sports soft power enhances the country's global image.	Soft Power – Morocco's global image
	Do sports soft power and its tools influence the geopolitical landscape?	Africa sees Morocco as a leader through Win-Win and South-South partnerships; athletes' success boosts national image.	Soft Power – Africa – Win-Win – South-South – Morocco's image – International landscape
	Concluding remarks	Soft power uses sport as a political tool to enhance a country's brand image.	Soft Power – National image – Sport as a political lever
2	How do you interpret soft power in Morocco's sports sector?	Sports and cultural achievements strengthen Moroccan soft power and influence.	Soft Power – National image – Influence – Sports diplomacy – Nawal Moutaouakil – Power – Qatar 2022 – Values – Ambassador
	What initiatives has Morocco undertaken to enhance its image in football?	AMF serves as a strategic entity, producing international athletes and boosting Morocco's diplomatic image.	AMF – Strategic entity – Royal vision – Ambassador – National

**Results:**

Following the qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted, several key themes emerged that illustrate the role of sports in Morocco's soft power strategy. The responses from various stakeholders, as detailed in the previous section, provide valuable insights into how sports, particularly football, serve as a tool for enhancing Morocco's international image, fostering diplomatic relations, and addressing the challenges associated with maintaining and expanding this influence. The results are organized thematically to reflect the core areas identified during the interviews.

**1. *Impact of Sports on Morocco's International Image:***

National Team's Success and International Influence: The interviews revealed that the success of the national football team during the 2022 Qatar World Cup had a significant impact on Morocco's international image. This success not only enhanced the country's global recognition but also boosted tourism and sports partnerships, confirming football's effectiveness as a lever of soft power—a recurring theme in interviews with Abdelhafid Oualalou and Nawal El Moutawakel.

**2. *Sports as a Strategic Tool for Moroccan Diplomacy:***

Role of AMF and MFM: The Mohammed VI Football Academy (AMF) and the Moroccan Football Museum (MFM) are identified as key institutions in Morocco's soft power strategy. The AMF, through talent development and sports excellence, plays a central role in projecting an image of modernity and dynamism. Meanwhile, the MFM reinforces national identity by showcasing the history of Moroccan sports, particularly through exhibitions that serve as a vector of cultural diplomacy.

**3. *Specific Initiatives and Regional Impact:***

Regional Influence and Sports Diplomacy: Morocco's initiatives, such as those led by the AMF and MFM, extend beyond national borders to exert influence across Africa. The AMF is seen as a model by other African nations, thereby strengthening Morocco's influence on the continent. Testimonies from Coach Tarik highlight that these initiatives increase Morocco's visibility and reinforce its leadership role in Africa.

**4. *Challenges and Resource Management:***

Sustaining Performance and Managing Resources: A recurring theme is the challenge of maintaining exemplary sports performance while effectively managing limited resources. Mourad Moutaouakil emphasized the importance of increased Moroccan representation in international sports organizations to protect the country's interests and strengthen its influence.



### **5. *Evolving Strategies in Sports Diplomacy:***

Participation in International Events: Morocco has adopted an integrated strategy by organizing international events, promoting talent through the AMF, and developing initiatives like the MFM. Participation in events such as the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and other major sports competitions is viewed as an opportunity to enhance Moroccan soft power. These actions reflect an evolving dynamic in Moroccan sports diplomacy, with constant adaptation to opportunities and challenges in the current geopolitical landscape.

### **Conclusion of the Analysis**

This thematic analysis demonstrates that sports, particularly football, are essential strategic tools for Morocco, not only to improve its international image but also to strengthen diplomatic relations and promote economic development. Initiatives like the AMF and MFM play a crucial role in this strategy, despite ongoing challenges related to resource management and the need to maintain an adequate international presence.

### **Discussion**

The previous section presented the results obtained from the study sample. This part of the article discusses the implications of these results in the context of Moroccan sports soft power. We analyze how these results compare to the existing literature, interpret the theoretical significance of our findings, identify the study's limitations, and propose practical recommendations for policymakers, sports actors, and researchers. This research reveals that sport plays a strategic role in strengthening Morocco's soft power. The interviews conducted show that sporting successes, such as the national team during the Qatar 2022 World Cup, have significantly contributed to improving Morocco's international image. The AMF, by training high-level footballers, and the MFM, by preserving and promoting the national football history, play complementary roles in this strategy. This framework

not only illustrates the importance of sport, and particularly football, as a vehicle for diplomacy but also as a pillar for Morocco's cultural and identity development.

The results obtained align with the theories of soft power formulated by Joseph Nye, who defines soft power as a country's ability to influence others through culture, values, and policies. The impact of sport on Morocco's international image conforms to the observations made by other studies on the use of sport in cultural diplomacy. For example, Pascale Boniface's analyses in "Geopolitics of sport" (2014) show how sporting successes can serve as an instrument of soft power to enhance a country's visibility and influence on the international stage. Our study also highlights a Moroccan specificity: the strategic integration of sport into national and international development policies, as illustrated by the initiatives of the AMF and MFM. These results confirm that Morocco uses sport not only as an international showcase but also as a lever to achieve broader foreign policy objectives.

The results indicate that the success of the Moroccan national team acted as a catalyst for strengthening the country's soft power. This dynamic can be explained by the fact that sporting successes create moments of national and international pride, thus increasing the country's visibility and influence. Abdelhafid Oualalou points out that these successes are perceived as vectors of cooperation and partnerships, illustrating the effectiveness of sport as a tool of diplomacy. Furthermore, the success of the national team not only attracted international attention but also promoted local initiatives such as the AMF and MFM, which enhance Morocco's positive image as a dynamic sporting and cultural nation. This synergy between sporting successes and cultural initiatives shows that Morocco has successfully harnessed the potential of sport to strengthen its influence on the global stage.

**Based on the results obtained, several recommendations can be made:**

1. **Development of Communication Strategies:** Policymakers should continue to promote sporting successes as assets for soft power. Targeted communication campaigns could further strengthen Morocco's international image. For example, creating media content around the successes of the AMF could attract international media attention and promote Morocco as a sports leader in Africa.

2. **Strengthening International Partnerships:** The AMF and MFM could expand their collaborations with international sports institutions to maximize their impact on sports diplomacy. These partnerships could include talent exchanges, joint training programs, and traveling exhibitions that highlight Morocco's sports history and achievements.

3. **Expanding Studies on Sports Soft Power:** Researchers are encouraged to explore in more detail the mechanisms by which sporting successes influence diplomacy and national image, including comparative studies with other countries using sport as a tool of soft power. This could include

quantitative analyses to measure the direct impact of sporting successes on diplomatic relations and international perceptions.

4. **Investing in Youth Training:** Investments in training centers like the Mohammed VI Academy should be strengthened to continue producing high-level footballers and maintain Morocco's position as a leader in sports in Africa. Additionally, educational programs aimed at training young people in the diplomatic aspects of sport could be established to develop a new generation of Moroccan sports leaders.

The future prospects of Moroccan sports soft power are promising but require continuous strategy and adaptation to new international dynamics. An important step in this direction is FIFA's confirmation of Morocco as a co-host of the 2030 World Cup alongside Spain and Portugal. This event represents an opportunity for Morocco to enhance its soft power by showcasing its cultural heritage, modern infrastructure, and commitment to sport. The 2030 World Cup could serve as a springboard to position Morocco as a sports leader on the African continent and

beyond, attracting international attention and forging new diplomatic alliances. Moreover, hosting relevant sports competitions such as the Africa Cup of Nations or other global events will reinforce this dynamic, contributing to cementing Morocco's reputation as a nation capable of managing large-scale international events.

However, to maximize the impact of these opportunities, Morocco will need to continue monitoring the evolving relationship between sport and politics, adapting to the constantly changing global geopolitical contexts. This includes managing international perceptions, engaging with global sports communities, and strategically using sporting events to promote a positive and coherent image of Morocco on the international stage.

This study presents several limitations that must be considered to assess the scope of its conclusions. First, the sample used in this research is relatively small due to time and resource constraints. This limits the lack of results, as a larger sample could have offered a more diverse perspective on the impact of sport as a tool of soft power. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from this study cannot be generalized to the entire Moroccan sports landscape. Second, access to some information was limited, which restricted the integration of quantitative data into the analysis. Additionally, the qualitative nature of this research, which heavily relies on interviews, introduces a certain degree of subjectivity. The results are influenced by the individual perceptions of the participants, which can introduce biases in the interpretation of the data. Although these perspectives are valuable for understanding the dynamics of Moroccan sports soft power, they cannot provide a completely objective overview. To overcome these limitations, future research could adopt a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, a study that would integrate statistical analyses of sports performance, public opinion surveys, and evaluations of diplomatic outcomes could offer a more comprehensive view of the impact of sports as a tool of soft power. Moreover, expanding the sample to include a greater diversity of actors, including those from other sectors related to sport and culture, would enrich the conclusions and better understand the mechanisms at play in this soft power strategy.

In summary, this study demonstrates that sport, particularly international successes, is a powerful tool of soft power for Morocco. The growing influence of Moroccan sport on the global stage illustrates how sporting successes can transform a country's image and strengthen its international relations. Initiatives such as the Mohammed VI Academy and the Moroccan Football Museum play a crucial role in supporting and amplifying these successes, contributing to Morocco's overall soft power strategy. By continuing this momentum and implementing the proposed recommendations, Morocco can continue to use sport as a strategic lever to strengthen its global influence and promote its cultural values.

Future research could deepen the understanding of the long-term impact of these strategies by examining how sport can continue to shape international perceptions and diplomatic relations. In sum, this study underscores the importance of sport not only as a recreational activity but also as a fundamental element in cultural diplomacy and national development.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the central and strategic role that sport, particularly football, plays in Morocco's cultural diplomacy. By focusing on emblematic initiatives such as the Mohammed VI Football Academy and the Moroccan Football Museum, the analysis revealed how these institutions transcend their primary function to become pillars of Moroccan soft power. They not only promote sporting excellence but also disseminate Morocco's cultural values and build a strong international relationship.

The success of the national team during the Qatar 2022 World Cup vividly illustrated the potential of sport to act as a catalyst for cultural diplomacy. This event not only strengthened Morocco's image on a global scale but also served as a platform to consolidate international partnerships and draw attention to the country's organizational and cultural capabilities. These achievements show that Morocco has successfully developed an integrated strategy where sports

performance is closely linked to the promotion of its cultural heritage and its presence on the international stage.

However, to maintain and amplify this positive dynamic, it is essential that Morocco continues to invest in its sports and cultural infrastructure while adapting its strategies to the rapidly changing global geopolitical context. Morocco's future role as co-host of the 2030 World Cup represents an unprecedented opportunity to further enhance its influence. This relevant event will not only demonstrate Morocco's ability to host large-scale events but also reinforce its image as a leader in sports diplomacy in Africa and beyond.

Looking ahead, Morocco must not only capitalize on its past successes but also anticipate future challenges and opportunities that the international scene may present. The ability to innovate in sports diplomacy, to maintain and develop its international relations through sport, and to inspire other nations by its example is key to sustainably strengthening its soft power. In this way, Morocco can hope not only to consolidate its current position but also to set new standards in the use of sport as a tool of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century.

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