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2022

Dorsey, J. M. (2022). The Qatar World Cup: footballing for soft power. *RSIS Commentaries*, 104-22.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/162718>

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The Qatar World Cup: Footballing for Soft Power

By James M. Dorsey

SYNOPSIS

As a small state in the global system, Qatar has embarked on a huge undertaking to garner soft power and reputational capital in hosting the 2022 soccer World Cup. The stakes are high, and it has been heavy ploughing so far by the Qataris as they try to harvest the international community's empathy which is at the core of the natural gas-rich Gulf state's national security strategy.

COMMENTARY

Former Qatari emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the father of the Gulf state's current ruler, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, learnt a lesson from the 1990 invasion of Kuwait. A US-led military coalition liberated Kuwait while many conservative Kuwaitis fled to Saudi Arabia. Less conservative Kuwaiti nationals sat the war out in the casino of the Cairo Hilton hotel.

Al Thani recognized that, like Kuwait, his country with a citizenry of 300,000 sandwiched between two regional behemoths, Iran and Saudi Arabia, would never be able to fend off a conventional military attack on its territory, no matter how much and how sophisticated the weaponry is that it acquires.

Garnering Empathy

To ensure that Qatar was relevant to the international community and would have the necessary public empathy to support intervention on the Gulf state's behalf in a time of need, Al Thani concluded that Qatar's defence strategy would have to focus on soft rather than hard power.

In the more than 30 years since, Qatar, one of the world's top gas producers, has

developed a highly sophisticated, multi-pronged soft power policy. It involves ensuring a diversified customer base for its gas; a fast-paced, mediation-driven foreign policy; and the Al Jazeera television network that competes with the likes of the BBC and CNN.

Qatar's creation of an air transport hub with an award-winning airline and airport, the opening of world-class museums, and high-profile investments in real estate in world capitals and blue-chip companies were also part of the strategy.

Sports Sparks Controversies

But none of these building blocks attracted more attention and more controversy than the sports leg of the Qatari strategy, with next month's World Cup at the top of the list.

The positioning of sports as part of a defence strategy, shines a different light on controversies over the integrity of the Qatari bid, conditions of predominantly Asian migrant labour that built World Cup-related infrastructure, and potential risks for members of the LGBT community visiting a country where same-sex relationships constitute criminal violations of the law.

As a result, the stakes for Qatar, against the odds, in endearing itself to soccer fans, are high.

No Options

From a Qatari and Kuwaiti perspective, the stark reality is that little has changed in their defence posture in the more than 30 years since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

"Unfortunately, as Gulf countries, we do not have options. Our capabilities do not deter Iran, do not deter other powers... We do not have other practical solutions," Kuwaiti international relations scholar Abdullah al-Shaji told a recent conference in Doha.

Speaking against the backdrop of the worst crisis in US-Saudi and potentially US-UAE relations since the 1973 Arab oil boycott, Al-Shaji noted, "Russia is not going to be here, neither China. They do not have the intention or the capability. The US knows that the US is the only kid in town. Take it or leave it."

Enter the Soccer Fans

This is where Qatar's image among soccer fans takes on national security and geopolitical significance.

How Qatar handles issues such as activists seeking to capitalize on the opportunity to make a point, potential fan rowdiness, and culturally sensitive issues such as intoxication, public expressions of affection, and sexual diversity will shape how fans perceive and remember the 2022 World Cup, the most controversial in the history of world soccer body FIFA.

In a world of rising nationalism and populism, in which Americans are war-weary after two decades of fighting in the greater Middle East, fan attitudes could make or

break public support if Qatar ever needed the international community to come to its aid.

World Cup Defines Qatar's Image

An analysis by social media and mis-and disinformation expert Marc Owen Jones illustrated the centrality of the World Cup in reporting on Qatar in British media in the 12-year period between Qatar's winning of its hosting rights in 2010 and the tournament itself in 2022.

Forty per cent of 1,735 Qatar-related headlines in newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Daily Express*, *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph*, and *Metro UK* referred to the World Cup. Of the approximately 685 World Cup-related articles, 454 or 66 per cent were critical, 201 or 29 per cent were neutral and 33 or five per cent were positive. A majority of the negative articles focused on human rights.

By contrast, at most three per cent of articles about Russia in the period between Russia's winning of its hosting rights alongside Qatar in 2010 and the Russian World Cup in 2018 focused on the tournament. In Russia's case, media coverage was dominated by Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea.

Losing the Battle

If public opinion surveys are anything to go by, Qatar has lost the battle for the hearts and minds of fans in the United States and Europe, despite having enacted far-reaching reforms of its erstwhile labour system that puts workers at the mercy of their employers and seeking to assure fans and activists that all irrespective of sexual orientation or marital status would be welcome. (Qatar bans pre-marital sex as well as same-sex relationships.)

It could also have a mixed reputation in labour-supplying nations, although there is a dearth of data available from those countries. Equally, there is a lack of data on fan attitudes toward Qatar in much of Africa and a large swath of Asia.

However, a recent US survey in 2022 suggested that 41 percent of Americans, 51 percent of American sports fans, and 61 percent of avid fans said Qatari human rights violations reduced their interest in the World Cup.

In addition, a YouGov poll commissioned by Amnesty International found that 67 per cent of the 17,477 participants in the survey in Europe, Central and Latin America, the United States, and Kenya wanted their national soccer associations to speak out publicly about human rights issues associated with the Qatar World Cup.

Reforms Constitute a Litmus Test

In the final analysis, the litmus test of Qatar's sports strategy will be whether the World Cup helps Qatar reproduce its geopolitical success, achieved as much on its own steam as with the unintended help of its erstwhile detractors, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia when it defeated a 3.5-year-long economic and diplomatic boycott. The UAE and Saudi Arabia lifted the embargo in early 2021.

To ultimately fully benefit from the tournament's reputational value, Qatar will, post-World Cup, have to push forward with social, economic, and political reform, even if activist attention moves on and focuses on countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt that are likely to bid for forthcoming sports megaevents such as the 2027 Asian Cup and the 2030 World Cup.

It is Qatar's ability and willingness to move ahead with reforms post-World Cup that may make the difference on how the tournament is remembered, particularly in the United States and Europe that are likely to be crucial to the Gulf state's military defence when the chips are down.

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