

# Football in the Pursuit of Soft Power

*The oil-rich nation of Qatar has become increasingly isolated over its support of religious extremism and treatment of migrant workers. By hosting the next FIFA World Cup, Qatar hopes to draw tourists, attract foreign investment, and score diplomatic points around the world.*

Qatari football has long been seen as a bastion of international mercenaries who have virtually no ties to the country. The claim is not unreasonable: There are only a handful of homegrown players on the country's football team, and they are children of immigrants who were naturalized over time. The majority of the players who don the Qatari jersey are foreign recruits earning a lucrative paycheck. Yet Qatar now finds itself at the threshold of hosting football's most premier event, the 2022 FIFA World Cup. It's the first time a Middle Eastern nation will host the competition since it began in 1930.

The World Cup in Qatar is hardly about football, however. It is the tiny kingdom's big bet on sports diplomacy and projection of soft power, which in this context implies the strategic use of sports to enhance nation branding, commerce, and global diplomacy.

The notion of soft power is particularly poignant in the Qatari context. While not lacking in economic prosperity owing to its vast natural gas reserves, Qatar has emerged as a pariah in the context of its Gulf Cooperation Council neighbors, especially the other oil-rich states of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Kingdom's long patronage of the Muslim Brotherhood and Sunni extremism led to it being completely ostracized both diplomatically and economically by five of its Arab neighbors in 2017 as well as strained relations with the United States and NATO. Relations have somewhat normalized lately, but by no means can be considered harmonious. In addition to this relatively acrimonious political environment, Qatar also finds itself trailing Saudi Arabia and the UAE in aggressive socioeconomic reform programs launched by these nations to diversify their economies away from fossil fuels and attract foreign direct investments (FDI) over the next two decades.

The Qatari polity hopes that a successful football World Cup would manifest into enhanced FDI, tourism, and overall prestige for the country. However, as the window

to the World Cup approaches and Qatar finds itself increasingly under the world's magnifying glass, significant issues remain to be addressed that can severely impact the kingdom's pursuit of soft power. Key among these are the treatment of migrant labor in the country, as well as the clash between the social norms of the World Cup versus the conservative, Islamic principles of the Qatari state.

## World-cup Building Spree

In preparation for the World Cup, Qatar has spent the last decade in aggressive infrastructure building and expects this initial investment to translate into making the country a more attractive investment proposition in the Middle East and bring about FDI.

The nation has awarded projects worth up to \$200 billion between 2011–2020, with much of the focus on development of infrastructure related to the World Cup. This makes the 2022 competition the most expensive World Cup in history. Its commitment to its sustainable development goals known as National Vision 2030, and its ambition to host the Asian Games in 2030, are two more ways Qatar is trying to make an imprint on the international scene.

The lists of infrastructure projects include eight stadiums, the Qatar Integrated Railway project (\$40 billion), the Ashghal expressway program (\$20 billion), Ashghal local roads and drainage program (\$14.6 billion), Hamad International Airport expansion, a major port renovation, and several natural resources development projects. Qatar is also looking to boost tourism with the construction of 50 traditional hotels and 16 new floating hotels created specifically to serve World Cup visitors.

Most of the expenses of the World Cup are being undertaken by the government; however, Qatar has recently turned its attention towards the private sector as a potential partner in developing infrastructure. To help achieve the objectives of encouraging wider commercial

participation in developing Qatar's economy, the government has adopted a public-private partnership (PPP) program for infrastructure projects. This exercise in nation-building is centered around the adage that money begets money. Qatar hopes that successfully hosting the World Cup will help bring in more FDI into the country to help increase its GDP growth rate.

The current state of FDI into Qatar is abysmal. Following the kingdom's isolation and blockade, FDI plummeted sharply. Inflows fell from \$986 million in 2017 to negative \$2.8 billion in 2019 – essentially implying massive amounts of divestments from the country. However, Qatari Secretary General Hassan Al Thawadi said he expects the World Cup will bring in over \$20 billion to the economy in the short term. This figure is equivalent to 11% of the country's GDP in 2019.

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## **Rolling Out the Welcome Mat**

A key aspect of Qatar's pursuit of soft power is to utilize the World Cup to transform its tourism landscape.

Despite being the smallest country to host the FIFA World Cup, Qatar is gearing up for a big influx of tourists in 2022. More specifically, two hotels have been added into Qatar's tourism leisure offering for the soccer tournament: Hilton Salwa Beach Resort and Villas and Zilla Wellness Resort. Hilton also has partnered with Qatar Airways to bring a more integrated tourism experience for traveling fans. Qatar Tourism plans to add 105 new hotels and serviced apartments in Doha. Additionally, international hotel chains are launching or planning to open their brands in Doha, including Pullman, JW Marriott and Banyan Tree, a five-star luxury property. Qatar Tourism established a partnership with Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) UK & Ireland to broaden the country's appeal to tourists and achieve its vision to welcome 6 million tourists a year by 2030.

In a precursor to the World Cup, Qatar hosted the FIFA Arab Cup from Nov. 30 to Dec. 18, 2021. The competition was an important event for the tourism department to test its offerings and services and make the necessary adjustments for the World Cup. A statement released by Qatar Tourism's social media account ahead of the Arab Cup stated that they want tourists to explore their "excellent dining, pristine beaches, nature reserves and diverse water sports."

## **Mistreatment of Migrants**

Qatar's aggressive building spree has not only drawn attention to its role as host for the World Cup, it has also caused the world to focus more closely on the country's flagrant abuse of migrant labor, leading to increasing pressure for reforms.

According to the 2021 Human Rights Watch report, Qatar uses the Kafala system to control the more than 2 million migrant workers who make up approximately 95% of the total labor force. Kafala is a controversial legal system in which the government delegates the oversight and responsibility of the migrant workers to private citizens and employers, called "sponsors." For example, without prior permission from the sponsor, workers cannot change jobs, quit jobs, or even leave the country. Additionally, sponsors have the power to cancel the worker's permit anytime, which automatically makes the worker an illegal resident in the country. The legal restrictions are so severe that some nongovernmental organizations, as cited by the *Independent*, have likened the system to modern-day slavery.

Qatar has also received harsh criticism for the working conditions of migrant workers. Statista compiled multiple reports that suggest almost 1,200 workers died in the construction of the new stadiums. The International Trade Union Confederation even concluded that "migrant workers have reported finding themselves in exploitative situations, such as being paid far lower than promised wages, experiencing numerous unspecified deductions from wages, not being paid at all for months, and living in abysmal living conditions with dozens of co-workers crammed into small unventilated shelters without proper plumbing, water, and electricity." These labor issues are not new in the country; however, the World Cup has brought them to light and accentuated the problems.

Since the award of the World Cup, the number of migrants under the Kafala system increased by an estimate half-million to 1 million.

The publicity surrounding the World Cup has created some momentum for labor reforms in Qatar. There are numerous legal actions against the nation to reform its labor laws, Article 26 is one of the most critical legal interventions. In June 2014, delegates from 10 countries submitted a complaint to the International Labor Conference (ILC), arguing that the Qatari government failed to maintain the necessary legal framework to protect the rights of migrant workers consistent with international law. Thus far, the Qatari government has been cooperative and responsive with the ILC to ensure compliance with international standards. For example, in 2017, Qatar identified the immediate objectives as "wage protection, labor inspection and occupational safety and health, and employment contractual system replacing the Kafala system, forced labor, and promotion of workers' voice."

The decision to award Qatar the World Cup has been a controversial one from the onset; nevertheless, the associated humanitarian labor crisis has spurred a reaction from the global community and forced Qatar to institute long overdue reforms, albeit in a limited way. The scrutiny around labor issues is only going to increase as the World Cup inches closer, and Qatar's labor reforms will play a pivotal role in the country's quest for enhancing the national brand.

## Culture Clash

In some senses, it seems counterintuitive to award a raucous, global event such as the World Cup to a conservative nation adhering to a stringent, conservative interpretation of Islam.

From that lens, awarding the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, FIFA has shown shockingly progressive thinking regarding the globalization of sports. To Qatar, this has presented an opportunity to challenge the colonial narrative portraying Arabs and Muslims as uncivilized and backwards. It has opened the door to potential ways in which Qatar could defy stereotypes and create a platform that showcases its universal values. Nevertheless, the decision has been met with widespread concern due to allegations regarding the disconnect between FIFA's values and Qatar's image.

One of the main concerns revolves around women's rights. Most of the public's concern surrounds Qatari laws that require women to cover their shoulders and wear modest clothing in public spaces. While Qatar has witnessed some cultural change in the recent years on this aspect, with women now being represented in sport with a women's national football team and a domestic league, it remains to be seen how the kingdom balances the overall "no restraint" environment of the World Cup, enhanced by the thousands pouring in to watch the games, with its continued adherence to a conservative model of social behavior.

Another challenge comes with homosexuality, which remains illegal in Qatar and could lead to the imprisonment of foreigners and expats for up to seven years. Chad Griffin, president of the Human Rights Campaign, wrote in 2014, "This is disturbing news for LGBT people who want to attend the World Cup in 2022, as well as for the coaches and players who would participate in the tournament."

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Secretary General Al Thawadi has gone on record to announce that Qatar is prepared to welcome people from all over the globe, regardless of any differences. He said, "The World Cup is an opportunity for celebration and we want everybody who comes to our country to feel comfortable. That's the assurance we want to give people. We are an open society and everybody's welcome."

Yet another challenge is the issue of alcohol consumption, which is forbidden in Islam but part of the FIFA match tradition. Alcoholic beverages are to be banned in public during the tournament, including in the stadium, the streets, and public spaces. Under Qatar's current alcohol policies, those caught breaking the law face fines, imprisonment, and deportation. In 2014, when Brazil attempted to ban alcohol in its World Cup stadiums, then-FIFA General Secretary Jerome Valcke refused to negotiate and said, "Alcoholic drinks are part of the FIFA World Cup, so we're going to have them." As consolation, Qatar plans

to heavily expand entertainment alternatives for visitors to consume alcohol in licensed hotel bars and restaurants.

It is evident that as Qatar is approaching the final months before the World Cup, the official position on a number of social aspects remains ambiguous and potentially contradictory. To create synergies between Qatar and the World Cup, Qatar can extend a policy of forbearance on some of the most obvious social challenges during the

World Cup, then revert back to its more conservative model of society when the World Cup finishes. Above all, Qatar can introduce changes in its social sphere to allow for the World Cup to act as a pivotal transitional event with a lasting impact on the country.

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