

Qatar's Soft Power Gamble: The FIFA World Cup 2022

Written by Paul Michael Brannagan and Jonathan Grix

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In December 2010, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) astounded the world when it awarded the small Persian Gulf State of Qatar the prestigious opportunity of hosting the 2022 World Cup finals. Such an honour powerfully added to the state's continuous desire to use global sporting forms to achieve wider socio-political objectives. The purpose of this piece is to briefly clarify what the Gulf State seeks to achieve through hosting the first Middle Eastern World Cup, and, more specifically, how the state is drawing on the significance of the tournament in fulfilling its long-term objectives. In doing so, we focus on two of the principle motives behind Qatar's soft power strategy (cf. Nye 2004; 2008): distancing Qatar from the Middle East and putting Qatar on the international map

Distancing Qatar from the Middle East

The first key motive behind Qatar's hosting of the inaugural Middle East World Cup centres on the state's wish to distance itself from some of the region's wider socio-political issues. Such a desire fits in with Qatar's wider tourism ambitions – one of the central objectives of the state's 2030 National Vision (Qatar General Secretariat, 2008).

To Qatari authorities, global sport in general, and large mega-events in particular, are seen as one of the most suitable vehicles to initially roll out their expansionist tourism plans (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014). Indeed, in hosting the World Cup finals, Qatar authorities believe they have been presented with the kind of opportunity that only major sporting mega-events can deliver, both in terms of football's popularity, and its subsequent and unrivalled ability to showcase the tiny state to billions of spectators across the world. In fact, to Qatar authorities, the winning of the 2022 bid alone has catapulted them at least 100 years in terms of people knowing where Qatar is on the map (Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee, Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014).

However, raising a state's profile is one thing; managing it is clearly another. For Qatari authorities, the goal here is not simply to raise the international profile of the state, but to directly manage and address how this profile is portrayed and understood internationally (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014). Most significantly, one of Qatar's fundamental motives behind acquiring the 2022 World Cup is to distance the state from some of the socio-political issues the wider Middle East region has encountered over its recent past. Most worryingly for those involved in Qatar's tourist development plans is the belief that many potential holiday makers cannot and do not differentiate between the kind of socio-political environment associated with Bagdad or Gaza compared with, for example, Doha or Abu Dhabi.

Consequently, Qatari authorities look to use the international significance of hosting the first ever Middle Eastern finals to correct any negative aspects of their international image by showcasing itself as a sport-loving and peaceful state. Such 'image leveraging' (Grix, 2013) has been used to great effect in Germany (The Local, 2013) and to some extent in South Africa (Cornelissen, 2008), whereby the key competition of the world's most popular sport has offered a chance to recalibrate a state's less-than-good international image.

Putting Qatar on the International Map

The hosting of sports mega-events brings with it an unprecedented global media attention: this alone is enough to put

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the host's state on the map. However, the problem with the global media is – especially given the technological advances of recent times – that it is impossible to 'manage'. The trend away from hosting sports mega-events in more 'traditional' advanced capitalist states toward 'emerging' and non-traditional democratic states has brought with it a new set of issues: states seen to have democratic deficits, human rights issues, difficult histories or skeletons in the cupboard are put under unparalleled media scrutiny. Witness, for example, Delhi's hosting of the Commonwealth Games in 2010; South Africa's hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2010 and Ukraine's (joint) hosting of the European football championships in 2012. All of these hosts learnt the hard way about the Janus-faced nature of sports mega-events.

Recent media reports of Qatar's construction sector, frantically building the infrastructure for the World Cup, have been the opposite to what the Qatar authorities want: very negative. A recent Guardian report on the working conditions of the labour force in the construction industry – often compared to a 'slave' trade in the media – undoes a great deal of good achieved by winning the right to host the World Cup in the first place (see: Pattison, 2013; Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014).

Closing Comment

We have located here Qatar's desire to use the 2022 FIFA World Cup to satisfy two significant state-led objectives. Consequently, as we strongly argue elsewhere (see: Brannagan and Giulianotti, in Grix, 2014), Qatar provides a highly relevant example for students and scholars alike who are interested in the socio-political aspects of sports mega-events and their subsequent role for national authorities in the twenty-first century.

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