

Dorsey's Column

Qatar's Soft Power efforts: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

James M. Dorsey

Qatar's efforts to leverage its 2022 World Cup hosting rights, so as to create the soft power status the Gulf state needs for its own stability and credibility abroad, it also needs to punch above its weight and ensure a sympathetic hearing in the international community during times of emergency in the entire Middle East. But to this date, Qatar's efforts in this regard almost unavoidably has to operate on the Leninist principle of two steps forward, one step back.

Take the events in November 2016 as an example.

On the plus side, Qatar's ambition to host not only the World Cup but also an Olympic Games was boosted with a declaration by Thomas Bach, the President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), that he was open to a renewed Qatari bid. Qatar's last bid failed in part due to criticism of its controversial labour sponsorship or *kafala* system that restricts workers' rights and puts them at the mercy of their employers.

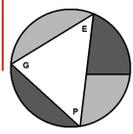
Mr. Bach's statement may well reflect the emergence of a world in which human and other rights count for less with the rise of President-elect Donald J. Trump in the United States and of illiberal, if not authoritarian leaders elsewhere, in countries ranging from Russia, China and Turkey to those in Eastern Europe.

Mr. Bach could nonetheless come to regret his remark if predictions by Trump insiders prove correct that the new President, reluctant to confront Saudi Arabia head on, is likely to pick on Qatar as a state that plays both ends with its close alliance with the West and hosting of a major US military base, while at the same time allegedly supporting militant Islamist and jihadist forces.

Also on the plus side, in a significant gesture to human rights groups and trade unions in a part of the world that refuses to engage with its critics, Qatar's 2022 World Cup organizing committee and a major international trade union, Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI), agreed to launch unprecedented joint inspections of the working and living conditions of migrant workers involved in World Cup-related projects.

The latter agreement is intended to demonstrate Qatari sincerity in reforming the *kafala* system at a time that it is under fire for moving too slowly. Human rights and trade union activists have charged that Qatar is going through the motions rather than embarking on truly substantive reform.

Yet, activists are unlikely to be satisfied even if the inspections prove that living and working conditions of World Cup-related migrant workers have substantially changed and improved. The activists are demanding that far-reaching change be incorporated in national legislation



applicable to all workers in the Gulf state—and effectively enforced. Changes in national law expected by the end of 2016 are likely to fall short of activists' expectations.

A 52-page Amnesty International report published earlier in November 2016 documented what it called “appalling” abuses of the rights of workers employed in the renovation of the Khalifa International Stadium. The Qatari World Cup organizing committee said most of the issues in the report that date back to 2015 have since been addressed.

Finally, Qatar's willingness to entertain whatever degree of change and engage with its critics is prompting limited change and debate of the labour issue elsewhere in the Gulf. Prominent Saudi journalist Khaled Almaena, a regime insider, in an article in early November 2016 denounced the *kafala* system as “slavery and ownership.”

Mr. Almaena was speaking from experience. “I was for 25 years the editor of the *Arab News* and for two years the *Saudi Gazette*, both English language Saudi newspapers. They were the eyes and ears of both Saudis and expatriates, probably more so of the latter. To them, we were a helpline. They wrote to us for advice, assistance, inquiries and support. Most of the letters dealt with working conditions, the breaking of contracts, unfair dismissals and unjust accusations.... There was no recourse to legal aid...” he wrote.

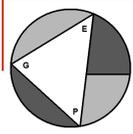
On the minus side for Qatar, the backlash of the rise of illiberal leaders, the decline of concepts of tolerance and human rights, and a wave of conservatism, if not ultra-conservatism, throughout the world are making themselves felt.

Qatar University recently cancelled a lecture on women in Islam by prominent Saudi women's activist Hatoon Al Fassi, a member of the university's faculty as well as that of Saudi Arabia's King Saud, after faculty and students demanded on Twitter that she be sacked for challenging Qatari and Islamic values.

Similarly, the Qatari World Cup committee, in a further indication that Qatar may be backtracking on promises, said that current restrictions on alcohol consumption would be upheld during the World Cup. Qatar had earlier said that venues for alcohol consumption would be expanded from hotel bars to specific locations around the country during the tournament.

Not that alcohol is the litmus test of a successful Qatari World Cup given that the tournament may attract a different demography with far more fans from the Middle East, North Africa and the Muslim world who care less about alcohol than their Western counterparts.

Reinforcing perceptions of wrongdoing in Qatar's World Cup bid, the world soccer body FIFA (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*), banned Saoud al-Mohannadi, the Vice President of Qatar's 2022 committee, for one year for refusing to help in a corruption investigation. The ban dashed Mr. Al-Mohannadi's ambition to become Vice-President of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and ultimately of FIFA's governing council.



Finally, in a bow to Saudi intolerance of any criticism, Qatar recently fired Jaber Salim Al-Harmi, the editor of *Al Sharq* newspaper, for tweeting that “other (Gulf) countries slash their citizens’ salaries, while Qatar increases wages. We thank Allah Almighty first and foremost then we thank our leadership which uses national resources for its people’s welfare.”

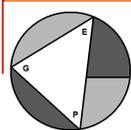
Mr. Al-Harmi’s comment hit at austerity measures across the Gulf, but particularly in Saudi Arabia, that effectively rewrite social contracts under which citizens enjoy state-provided cradle-to-grave welfare in exchange for surrendering political rights.

Saudi Arabia has been particularly hard-hit with stark increases of utility prices and mass layoffs. Qatar has recently promised by contrast that it would raise by up to 100 percent the salaries of government employees, the bulk of the Gulf state’s indigenous labour force.

At the bottom line, Qatar’s massive investment in sports as a soft power tool has yet to withstand a cost-benefit litmus test. Without doubt, Qatar has enacted changes that put it among Gulf states in a class of its own. Yet, it has still to convince many (observers, activists, workers and other concerned citizens) that those changes are only the beginning of a process that will ultimately lead to true reform.

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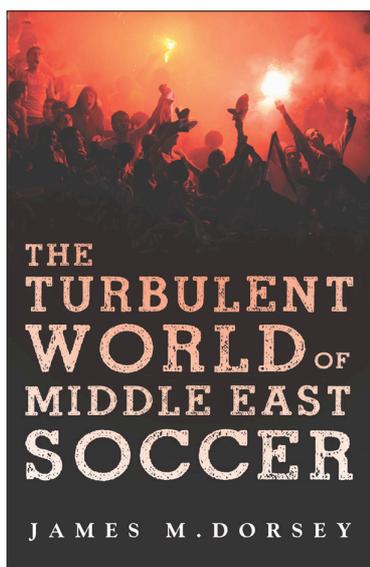
An earlier version of the article appeared at https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2016/11/qatari-soft-power-efforts-two-steps_19.html.



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THE TURBULENT WORLD OF MIDDLE EAST SOCCER

JAMES M. DORSEY

James M. Dorsey introduces the reader to the world of Middle Eastern and North African football — an arena where struggles for political control, protest and resistance, self-respect and gender rights are played out. Politics was the midwife of soccer in the region, with many clubs being formed as pro- or anti-colonial platforms and engines of national identity and social justice. This book uncovers the seldom-told story of a game that evokes deep-seated passions.

Football fans are shown to be a major political force and one of the largest civic groups in Egypt after the Muslim Brotherhood: their demands for transparency, social justice, and an end to corruption sparked vicious street battles that left scores dead and thousands wounded. Discontent in Algeria erupts regularly at matches where fans demand the ouster of

military leaders. A folk-song crooning national goalkeeper leads protests in Homs, Syria's third largest city and scene of some of the worst violence perpetrated by Bashar al-Assad's regime. In a country that bans physical education for girls, Saudi women have established clandestine football clubs and leagues. The book further tells the story of Somali child soldiers turned soccer stars and Iranian women who dress as men to smuggle themselves into stadiums to watch matches.

'A rare combination of scholar and journalist, James Dorsey offers us a fresh lens through which to look at contemporary events in the Middle East and North Africa. Insightful, provocative, and fun to read, this is a welcome addition to the meagre scholarship on sports and politics in this region.'

— Raanan Rein, Tel Aviv University, author of *Fútbol, Jews, and the Making of Argentina*

'This might well be the single most important and informative book on the Arab Spring yet written. A must read for anyone who wants to understand the deeper social and cultural processes underlying the uprisings and counter-revolutionary processes that have shaken the region the last five years.'

— Mark Levine, Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine

Dorsey masterfully conveys the complex machinations of politics and culture through his analyses of the words and actions of real people expressing their passions about their lives through the medium of "the kicking sport." Sports fans and political junkies will greatly enjoy and learn from this fascinating book.'

— Louis W. Goodman, School of International Service, American University

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