

2022 FIFA World Cup: Exposing Qatar and the West

Commercialization of Sport

Sports are good for mental and physical health. Team sports are even better as they also teach team-work. Football, also called soccer, is among those few team sports where almost every player gets an equal chance to play their role throughout the game and exert themselves to their fullest. But sports and the commercialization thereof are two totally different things. The former is a healthy activity that contributes positively towards society, the latter is more akin to the entertainment industry with players celebrated as performers and the only role the masses 'play' is to remain glued to their stadium seats or drawing room sofas. Players and clubs are bought, broadcasting rights are auctioned and merchandise, sponsorships as well as tickets are sold. So much so that many of these sports are collectively termed as spectator sports¹ due to the large number of crowds they pull in globally and the resulting revenue that is generated, which runs in the billions of dollars².

Commercialization of Football

Football is leading this commercialization of sports both in terms of market share and revenue with roughly half of the world's population (over 3.5 billion) reportedly its fans³. Though Qatar is not one of the better-known soccer-playing nations, they entered the 2022 bid with high hopes and deep pockets and already secured a win in 2010, when under mysterious circumstances, two World Cups were awarded at once⁴. The tiny nation surprised the World by its winning bid but not without controversy, as talks of heavy bribes to FIFA officials were rife⁵, mainly because of its unsuitability to host such a mega-event. It has no footballing heritage and tradition, unlike other Middle Eastern nations: Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia all of whom were more deserving hosts according to former FIFA President Sepp Blatter, who was in charge of FIFA when Qatar was awarded the World Cup, and who was accused of corruption throughout his time as head of FIFA. Although Qatar has denied all these allegations, 11 out of the 22 FIFA executive committee members have either been suspended, fined, banned for life or prosecuted for corruption. Qatar surprised the World again by spending an exorbitant US\$229 billion⁶ on World Cup infrastructure. This was by far the highest amount spent by any nation on a World Cup and to put that in context, the most expensive World Cups previously were the 2014 tournament in Brazil and the 2018 edition in Russia, which both cost less than \$15 billion⁷.

"Sportwashing"

Overspending on infrastructure and stadiums has led to some hosts being in massive debt and left with constructions that serve little use after the FIFA World Cup comes to a close⁸. This was clearly an attempt by Qatar at sportswashing⁹, a term used to describe individuals, organizations or governments trying to improve their reputations tarnished by

¹ <https://www.thebusinessresearchcompany.com/report/spectator-sports-global-market-report>

² <https://www.statista.com/topics/1595/soccer/#dossierKeyfigures>

³ <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-are-the-most-popular-sports-in-the-world.html>

⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/the-world-cup-is-officially-underway-in-qatar-heres-why-its-so-controversial>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/sports/soccer/qatar-and-russia-bribery-world-cup-fifa.html>

⁶ <https://www.sportingnews.com/in/football/news/cost-world-cup-qatar-how-much-paid-fifa-most-expensive-2022/i69pi7uree5ctahcjyuzd9fn>

⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/qatar-world-cup-will-be-the-most-expensive-of-all-time/a-63681083>

⁸ <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/11/10/why-hosting-the-world-cup-can-be-a-bad-idea-for-some-countries.html>

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sportswashing>

wrongdoings. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman is a champion at sportswashing and has taken it to new heights¹⁰.

Apart from international PR stunts, such excesses serve these regimes well domestically too by positioning nationalism, spurred by sports, rather than Islam as a core element of their identity. Moreover, these mega-events serve as perfect weapons of mass distraction¹¹, the actual purpose according to some historians and philosophers for holding Olympic games in ancient times as well¹². Rulers, but particularly tyrants, autocrats and kings world over would want their subjects to be busy counting goals and wins rather than asking questions about their rulers' legitimacy and corruption. Other than this, hosting World Cups isn't a lucrative enterprise for the host country as studies show, with mostly no financial return at all on the huge investment¹³. Unlike the hosts, it's very profitable for the governing body, FIFA, which has reached an unprecedented US\$7.5 billion revenue, US\$1 billion more than the previous World Cup¹⁴.

Two Sides of the Coin

Now that the backdrop in which the Qatar World Cup is happening is clear, let's look at the two sides of the coin. On one hand you have Westerners who are shaming Qatar and FIFA for letting Qatar host the World Cup and on the other hand you have Muslims lauding Qatar for presenting the true face of Islam to Westerners. In my opinion if we think a bit deeper about either side, we will realize their hypocrisy quite easily. Let's begin to do that.

Western shaming of Qatar exposed:

Qatar has faced a barrage of criticism, from being too small a country to host the World Cup¹⁵, to working conditions at tournament-related construction sites¹⁶, to state-backed discrimination against LGBTQ people¹⁷, to alcohol bans in and around stadiums¹⁸. Western nations, asserting themselves as champions of human rights today, are all guilty of using Gulf oil extracted with cheap labour working in worse conditions than those of the Qatari construction sites, to grease their economic hubs and control the world order.

These same Western nations were mum during the FIFA World Cup in Russia or were Putin's human rights records¹⁹ hidden from them? Why did they look the other way during the 2008 Olympics in China where textbooks still teach homosexuality to be a mental disorder²⁰ and same-sex marriages are illegal²¹? Haven't the Uighur community's cries reached their deaf ears yet²²? The German team, Die Mannschaft, placed their hands over their mouths during a team photo ahead of their game against Japan to protest FIFA's threat of sanctions over the "OneLove" armband but they didn't protest when their star player, Mesut Ozil was removed from several games by the Chinese for his criticism of their treatment of Muslim

¹⁰ <https://www.theglobalist.com/uk-premier-league-soccer-sport-newcastle-united-saudi-arabia-mohammed-bin-salman-soft-power/>

¹¹ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/abs/beijing-olympics-as-a-campaign-of-mass-distraction/F6C9F285432857EC4B1B5A18503D4BF0>

¹² <http://www.idcommunism.com/2016/08/olympic-games-and-fascism-olympic.html>

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2022/11/17/do-host-countries-make-money-from-the-world-cup>

¹⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-20/fifa-revenue-hits-7-5bn-for-qatar-world-cup-period>

¹⁵ <https://www.espn.in/football/fifa-world-cup/story/4797079/sepp-blatters-comments-on-qatar-2022-world-cup-too-late>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/nov/19/qatar-working-conditions-world-cup-guardian-reporting>

¹⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/19/football/qatar-world-cup-2022-lgbtq-rights-spt-intl/index.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/18/sports/soccer/world-cup-beer-qatar.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/russian-federation/report-russian-federation/>

²⁰ <https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/gender-diversity/article/3123549/homosexuality-can-be-called-mental-disorder>

²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/world/asia/china-lgbt-rights-education-trial.html>

²² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22278037>

Uighurs in Xinjiang²³. Or was that because he is of Turkish origin and therefore dispensable? Football fans from some European countries have created a ruckus at the entrance of stadiums over their insistence to wear rainbow-colored hats and dresses²⁴. These are the same countries which have been banning and penalizing Muslim women from their choice of the Islamic dress²⁵ and are now complaining to FIFA²⁶ for this alleged Qatari highhandedness²⁷. Countries which have set up special zones for smokers and which prohibit operating any kind of machinery while under the influence of alcohol are decrying being restricted to designated fan parks and other licensed venues around Doha for beer consumption²⁸. Scores of celebrities declined to perform at the opening ceremony using the same broken record of human rights abuses²⁹. Media houses like BBC flat out ignored the opening ceremony and instead used the airtime to criticise Qatar³⁰. Can there be a better event to expose Western double standards and disrespect for others' laws and traditions?

Qatar's Islamic card exposed:

Another interesting and talked about thing is the Islamic touch that Qatar tried to give to the event, particularly the opening ceremony. In this age of social media, even the fiercest of tyrants fear for their throne and therefore exploit such opportunities to appease their subjects. In order to understand the hollowness of their depicted love for Islam consider the following. In 1916, Qatar became a British protectorate under the leadership of Abdullah Al-Thani after rebelling against the Ottoman caliphate³¹. The Al-Thani family has since ruled the small kingdom and has been supporting the West against Muslims on different occasions. The Al-Udeid Air Base, the largest US military base in the Middle East, is a good example³². It was built by Qatar in 1996 at the cost of more than US\$1 billion, and it permanently houses 11,000 U.S. and U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition forces and over 100 operational aircrafts. It was used by the US military to knock the Taliban out of power in 2001 killing hundreds of thousands of people during the war that stretched over two decades. The base has also been the launching pad for the British Royal Air Force and the Royal Australian Air Force for their share of sorties in Afghanistan and Iraq. Currently, Al-Udeid and other facilities in Qatar serve as logistics, command, and basing hubs for the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) for U.S. operations in countries, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria³³. Similarly, Qatar was amongst the first Arab nations to establish trade relations with the State of "Israel" in 1996. They have used football diplomacy to normalize their ties further by announcing direct flights for "Israeli" fans from Tel Aviv³⁴. Their people however are not on the same page on this issue too, as shown by the heckling and shunning of "Israeli" media in Qatar for the World Cup³⁵. The internal power struggle is perhaps another reason for sportswashing and so is the extravagant lifestyle of the Al-Thani family³⁶. Their excesses are particularly infamous

²³ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/sportsnews/article-7805497/Arsenal-star-Mesut-Ozil-removed-Pro-Evolution-Soccer-game-China.html>

²⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2022/11/22/rainbow-flag-fifa-soccer-qatar/>

²⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/24/muslim-women-struggle-with-germanys-hijab-ban-in-workplaces>

²⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/23/sports/soccer/german-player-protest-armbands-world-cup.html>

²⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-22/fifa-world-cup-qatar-rainbow-clothing-one-love-armband/101681732>

²⁸ <https://www.coventrytelegraph.net/news/uk-world-news/anger-sale-alcohol-fans-qatar-25548640>

²⁹ <https://time.com/6234015/celebrities-boycotting-qatar-world-cup/>

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/nov/20/bbc-ignores-world-cup-opening-ceremony-in-favour-of-qatar-criticism>

³¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Al_Wajbah

³² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Udeid_Air_Base

³³ <https://militarybases.com/overseas/qatar/al-udeid/>

³⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/direct-tel-aviv-doha-flights-operate-during-world-cup-fifa-2022-11-10/>

³⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/arabs-shun-israeli-media-qatar-world-cup-dashing-hopes-warming-2022-11-21/>

³⁶ <https://www.therichest.com/luxury/a-peek-inside-the-extravagant-335-billion-life-of-the-qatari-royal-family/>

amongst Pakistanis who are used to hearing about their special houbara hunting permits and the resulting outrage by locals³⁷. The well-choreographed opening ceremony through the display of Islamic culture and recitations of the Holy Quran and presence of Islamic preachers and influencers in Qatar are attempts of the rulers trying to appear to love Islam and the Ummah, whereas their actions speak far louder than their hollow words. Qatar's rulers can't actually claim the credit of the alcohol and promiscuity restrictions, which many innocent Muslims are praising highly. They originally ceded to the demands of FIFA and had agreed to sell alcohol inside the stadiums during matches only to later reverse it fearing resentment from inside³⁸. Same holds true for LGBT rights, for which Qatari authorities have given assurances that the so-called "morality" laws will essentially not be enforced during the World Cup. Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Emir of Qatar, told the United Nations General Assembly that his nation would be "opening our doors ... without discrimination"³⁹. Similarly, the Qatari government has even distanced itself officially from the presence of Dr. Zakir Naik, saying that he is not officially invited⁴⁰.

The Ummah will not be fooled by words anymore. Nor will it engage in counting goals and wins while their rulers collude with Western powers in looting their wealth and further enslaving them. The only sources of Qatar's income (and that of most other GCC countries) are the abundant fossil fuels that Allah (swt) has granted these Muslim lands. It is very clear to the Muslims that these natural resources belong to the Ummah collectively⁴¹ and are not personal wealth to be wasted on hosting such events. Moreover, such tournaments only harden Muslims in their fake, nationalistic identities⁴² which are a legacy of their colonial masters. Western powers have always resorted to the battlefield to defend their interests but want us to outplay them in the football field. They want us to be content by providing the footballs⁴³ needed for these games while they amass⁴⁴ and supply⁴⁵ the World with various kinds of weapons of mass destruction. Instead of turning our anger towards hooliganism, we need to use Islam as our standard.

Conclusion

To conclude on a positive note, the silver lining of this World Cup is that the World has witnessed that restrictions on alcohol and promiscuity are doable and hell won't break loose once a strong Islamic state implements such restrictions in future, InSha'Allah.

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³⁷ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1296854/qatar-royal-hunting-rare-houbara-bustard-attacked-balochistan>

³⁸ <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/world-cup/qatar-alcohol-stadium-ban-b2227933.html>

³⁹ <https://sports.yahoo.com/at-qatars-world-cup-lgbtq-fans-are-supposedly-welcome-but-still-afraid-163049856.html>

⁴⁰ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/issue-zakir-naik-being-wanted-raised-with-qatar-mea-arindam-bagchi-8287907/>

⁴¹ The Messenger of Allah (saw) said: "Muslims are partners (associates) in three things: in water, pastures and fire." [Narrated by Ibn 'Abbas and reported by Abu Dawud]

⁴² The Messenger of Allah (saw) said: "He is not one of us who calls to tribalism/nationalism. He is not one of us who fights for the sake of tribalism/nationalism. He is not one of us who dies following the way of tribalism/nationalism." [Narrated by Jubayr ibn Mut'im and reported by Abu Dawud]

⁴³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2022-world-cup-soccer-ball-adidas-al-rihla-sialkot>

⁴⁴ <https://ourworldindata.org/military-spending>

⁴⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/267131/market-share-of-the-leading-exporters-of-conventional-weapons/>