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Post-World Cup 2022: What Potential Legacies Qatar Can Build On

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“The world seems so distant and divided. How can so many countries, languages and cultures come together if only one way is accepted?” Hollywood legend Morgan Freeman asked while performing during the opening ceremony of the FIFA World Cup 2022 hosted by Qatar. Ghanim Al-Muftah, a young Qatari, responded with a Quranic verse: “O humanity! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you.” (Quran, 49:13)

The show by Freeman and Al-Muftah that narrated the opening ceremony was the first of its kind in the history of the World Cup. According to scholars, the opening and closing ceremonies of such mega sport events provide the host with the opportunity to present the “cultural ideas, cultural identity, and cultural products” which act as a condensed cultural show of the host nation. Qatar, a small peninsular country in the Gulf with big ambitions, made history for being the first Arab and Muslim country to host the world’s biggest sporting event in the Middle East. Through the opening ceremony, Qatar wanted to introduce Islam to the world with the aim of encouraging an interfaith understanding of it.

Hosting mega sport events, such as FIFA World Cup, have increasingly become a powerful tool for image enhancement, providing exceptional branding opportunities for a nation to

boost citizen pride, attract tourists, and display local heritage, culture and identity.

In the words of Joseph Nye, an American political scientist who coined the term “soft power” back in the 1990s, “soft power is the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion.” In the past two decades, Qatar has heavily invested in cultivating its “soft power” tools and focused on its international visibility (nation branding), which has emerged as a central practice of today’s international politics.

Hosting World Cup > Public Relations Campaign

States no longer consider sports solely as a niche entertainment activity, but rather a vastly crucial soft power tool for public diplomacy and nation branding. For Qatar, “football was never just football”, and through hosting the World Cup, it wanted to achieve something that even great public relations campaigns cannot.

Not only Qatar, but also Brazil, China, Russia and many other host states utilized sports as a soft power tool to improve their international image in a positive way. For instance, FIFA World Cup 2006 provided Germany with the opportunity to change the established stereotypes about it, such as being an ‘unfriendly’ nation. In regards to World Cup’s impact on creation of a positive perception of Germany, Oliver Zöllner argues, “no PR campaign could have garnered such an outcome.”

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Qatar's desire to host the 2022 World Cup was closely linked to the goal to challenge Orientalist stereotypes surrounding the Gulf nation in particular and Arab world in general. Qatar aimed to create a new identity against the negative preconceived perceptions about it, such as 'backward', 'not developed', 'just a desert', and 'unwelcoming country'. In other words, the goal was to close the gap between reality and perception regarding the people living in this part of the world.

Perception Vs Reality

Throughout the tournament, Qatar tried to reflect the local Arab culture and Islamic civilization. In this regard, several symbols were used. Let us start with the tournament's official mascot, "[La'eeb](#)". La'eeb is an Arabic word meaning 'super-skilled player', in anticipation of the hundreds of footballers about to land in the country. It was inspired by the ghutra, also known as keffiyeh, which is a traditional headdress worn by Gulf men. Qatar's official mascot choice that reflected the Gulf culture brings to mind Kuwait's choice of its official mascot in the 1982 World Cup and proves that, despite decades, Western perception of Arabs have not seen much change.

Back in October 1981, Kuwait was playing a World Cup qualifying match in Oakland, New Zealand where the Kiwi fans had signs reading "Go Back to your Camels!" which they were waving as the Kuwaiti team came onto the field. During the summer of 1982, just a few weeks before the start of the actual World Cup, a Spanish newspaper [mocked](#) that the Kuwait National Team would be late to the tournament since they would be

"traveling on the backs of their camels!" In response, the charismatic Godfather of Kuwaiti sport; the late Sheikh Fahad Al Ahmad Al Sabah, who was the President of the Kuwaiti Football Association, had defiantly decided to use a camel, which they named "Haydoo," as their mascot. This was a very smart way to react to the West's orientalist stereotypes about the Arabs, while strongly embracing their culture, tradition and history.

Four decades later, like Kuwait, Qatar was also heavily [criticized](#) by the Western media particularly when the Argentinian player, Lionel Messi, whose team won the tournament, was draped with a traditional 'bisht' by the Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani during the World Cup closing ceremony. A Bisht is a traditional Arab cloak that is given to a guest as a sign of great honor, appreciation and respect in the Arab culture. Very interestingly, the Western media's coverage was backlashed after several Argentina fans [flocked](#) to the famous Souq Wakif to buy bishts. Even throughout the month-long tournament, it was common to see fans from around the world [wearing](#) dishdasha (a traditional basic thobe that Gulf men wear daily) with the colors of their country's flags.

Political Leverage

The past few decades have seen that mega sport events have become more politicized, as host states consider it as a huge opportunity to increase their political leverage on the international arena. Hosting mega sport events does not only benefit the nation's brand, but if sport diplomacy is employed, it can help in mending ties between nations. For instance, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Egyptian President

Abdel Fattah El-Sisi [met](#) and had an enthusiastic handshake on the sidelines of the opening ceremony in a rare sign of the thawing ties between the two countries. The jovial photo of the two leaders was clearly the outcome of the mediation conducted by Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani.

Through sports diplomacy, Qatar used the World Cup as an opportunity to act as a friendship broker between the Turkish and Egyptian leaders. Mediation has been a soft power tool in Qatar's diplomatic inventory for years now. The tournament has also served to significantly consolidate Gulf unity and solidarity. Sheikh Tamim [waving](#) Saudi and Moroccan flags during the matches of those nations were among the most important scenes of the World Cup.

Potential Legacies

While FIFA World Cup 2022 provided Qatar a unique opportunity to develop and narrate its 'story' to the world, it also brought with it some potential social, economic and infrastructural legacies.

Economic: World Cup significantly affects the hosting nations' economy and tourism. However, in Qatar's case, it is early to project or measure quantitatively the long-term economic impact of hosting FIFA World Cup 2022, mostly because many of the benefits are apparently in terms of soft power and international prestige. Time will show whether the new commercial opportunities linked to these areas will come to effect.

Infrastructural: Qatar has [designed](#) the stadium infrastructure by integrating its identity characteristics and heritage; but also committing to sustainable construction. For instance, Stadium 974 not only refers to the

international calling code for Qatar and symbolizes the number of shipping containers that were used in building the stadium, but also provides a positive infrastructure legacy. This stadium is the first in the world that was easily [dismantled](#), demonstrating Qatar's commitment to sustainable construction. The other stadiums also had architectural designs depicting a traditional dhow boat, traditional hat, the city's maritime history, and art pieces. One such venue, Al-Bayt Stadium, where the opening ceremony and the opening match took place, was built in the form of a huge nomadic desert tent to cover it entirely. The stadium derived its name from the tent inhabited by the people of the desert in Qatar and the Gulf region throughout history.

Social: In addition, throughout the tournament, mosques in the country have [welcomed](#) hundreds of non-Muslim visitors daily to introduce Islam. For instance, in the Ottoman-style Katara Mosque, which is just a short drive away from the largest tournament venue Lusail Stadium, visitors were able to pick up leaflets on a range of topics in their preferred language. They can also scan one of the dozens of QR codes displayed outside the mosque to listen to a variety of topics in Islam and the Quran in their language of preference. Through displaying its historical and cultural sites, Qatar aims to receive tourists in the post-World Cup era. One of the ways to achieve this goal is to continue hosting mega events. Qatar hosting the Upcoming AFC Asian Cup is likely to help the country in this regard.

What now?

A recent BBC Sport poll, looking back at the six World Cup competitions staged this century, sees the

recent Qatar 2022 tournament dominating the leaderboard by 78% being hailed as ‘the best of the century’.

After 12 years of material and mental preparations, Qatar achieved what it wanted, but what now? Qatar's strategy was not only to invest in the nation's image, but also to ensure its future. While Qatar portrayed a strategic vision for how it would like to be perceived internationally, the image that it created needs to be consistently reinforced by actions that should be aligned with the positive image it gained. Time will show whether Qatar will be able to build on the potential legacies that it gained from this mega event and sustain its impact in the long-term.

About the authors

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About the Gulf Insights series:

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