**FIFA WC Qatar 2022; A Showcase of Soft Power**

[Saher Liaqat](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/saher-liaqat/)

December 24, 2022

As a bellwether tournament of the most popular global sport, the FIFA World Cup holds an unprecedented global reach. Starting on November 20, FIFA World Cup 2022, a multibillion-dollar extravaganza was the first tournament hosted by a conservative Muslim state of the Gulf Region, Qatar.

The choice of Qatar to host the 2022 edition of the men’s FIFA World Cup, announced in 2010, was increasingly surprising for the speculators, as the country, in terms of its population and geography, is the smallest-ever country to host such a mega event. Furthermore, the country faces the scorching heat in the summer, with an average temperature of around 45 C in the usual hosting months of June and July, which has led the tournament this year to take place in November/December to protect the athletes and the attendees from the extreme summer heat.

Since 2010, the media attention has been highly focused on the country’s conservative customs and traditions, which are integral to its culture, and there have been widespread controversies on the human rights violations of workers and the unacceptance of LGBTQ freedoms by the Qatari government. However, despite such tumults, Qatar has sustained its strategic policy of utilizing such a major sport to recuperate its global impression and reputation, particularly by showcasing Arab hospitality and its technological progressions.

What’s interesting to observe in this World Cup is the remarkable manifestation of the religious values of conservative Qatar.

The 32 national football teams and the swarms of a million fans from all over the globe descended the country’s capital, Doha, to cheer for the tournament. Qatar, an international volunteer event organizer, found an incredible opportunity in the 2022 FIFA World Cup to exchange the local culture and enhance people-to-people interaction. Moreover, it projected its soft power, i.e., a long-standing legacy of Arab tradition, its virtues, customs, identity, culture, and religion, and edifice new conduits of understanding.

What’s interesting to observe in this World Cup is the remarkable manifestation of the religious values of conservative Qatar. Whether it be the opening ceremony of the FIFA World Cup 2022 at Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor, which started with the recitation of the Holy Quran or the invitation of renowned Islamic scholars, including Zakir Naik, to deliver religious lectures throughout the tournament, Qatar actively took up this opportunity to reach out to millions of visitors to introduce them to Islam and to prevent the misconceptions about its linkages to radicalism as many in West view it.

Besides demonstrating religion, the World Cup was also a fascinating portrayal of Arab Culture. This was evident from the tournament’s official symbol, La’eeb, an Arabic word meaning super-skilled, accompanied by the flags of 32 partaking countries waving on the field. Also, the artistic outlook of the World Cup that signified the traditional headbands in the Gulf Region is reflective of it.

One of the underlying aims of the FIFA World Cup 2022 for Qatar was that it acted as a catalyst for the country’s attainment of the long-term development goals being envisaged in the National Development Strategy 2018-2022 and the Qatar National Vision 2030. Under the Second National Development Strategy 2018-2022, Qatar purports to create and implement the structures that would help safeguard and progress its cultural heritage. It aims to encourage cultural programs that would endorse national values, aid cultural dialogue, and launch and objectify a plan that underpins knowledge of migrant means of interaction and their culture. FIFA World Cup 2022 had been a chief driver in implementing the vision of these initiatives of the Qatari government.

Qatar, with a net wealth of $450 billion, has one of the world’s highest GDPs per capita. With more than $4 billion of foreign inflows, in the country, in the starting ten months, Qatar’s stock market is expected to grow in the long run even after the tournament, and the World Cup alone is estimated to generate $17 billion for Qatar’s economy.

Since winning the bid in 2010, Qatar has spent a generous amount of $220bn on World Cup preparation. The infrastructure development includes the construction of seven new stadiums, revamping one older stadium, a new metro line linking these venues, the upgradation of an airport and various parts of the country’s road network, and the construction of hundreds of hotels. With more than a million visitors filling up these structures, an imminent boom will be provided to the country’s economy.

Tourism is another aspect that would add an unprecedented boom to the country’s economy. With extraordinary global media coverage of a host destination, Qatar has also been able to reach out to new international markets. It has attracted football fans to a destination that may never have been their priority if not for the World Cup. Qatar expects a surge in annual tourists from 2 million in 2019 to 6 million visitors by 2030, leading to its economic growth.

The FIFA World Cup 2022 also promised to uplift Qatar’s position as the key sporting hub of the Middle East, making it a formidable power in the sport’s business globally. Despite being barely known as a sports performer, Qatar has brought the sports world to its doors. The magnificent Aspire City receives international tournaments and teams recurrently, whereas the 3-2-1 Olympic and Sports Museum exhibits iconic crafts from the global sport. Undeniably, sport is also anticipated to be a vital element of the economic future of Qatar, in addition to its oil and gas reserves.

Moreover, given the 2017 diplomatic rift between Qatar and the GCC member states, their sour relations may become more relaxed, bolstering regional ties as these neighbours profit from the Cup. UAE, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia are experiencing a rise in the number of tourists, and hotel stays due to the FIFA World Cup hosted in neighbouring Qatar.

Ironically, FIFA World Cup has provided Qatar with a remarkable opportunity for its soft power projection and to improve Qatar’s global reputation among the targeted audience. It is a powerful agent in rebranding Qatar’s image leaving behind a legacy for Qatar even after the World Cup. Qatar used this imagery to showcase the Arab Culture and soft power elements, such as technological advancement, increased people-to-people interaction, tourism, and cultural manifestations.

*The writer works with China-Pakistan Study Centre at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad. She also writes for different media outlets and can be reached at saherLiaqat2000@gmail.com.*