

COMMENTARY

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Amnesty International Report Undermines Qatar's soft Power Defence Strategy

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Qatar's failure to confront with a sense of immediacy and urgency appalling working and living conditions of its foreign workers, who constitute a majority of the population, and its reluctance to communicate steps it is taking, is undermining the very purpose of its staging of the 2022 World Cup: the creation of the kind of soft power needed to compensate for its lack of the military hard power necessary to defend itself.

Instead of being perceived and feted as a cutting edge 21st century nation to whose defence the international community would want to come in a time of need, Qatar's image as a feudal state that tolerates forced labour and abuse of fundamental rights is being cemented by a series of reports that unambiguously document the exploitation suffered by foreign workers who account for up to 80 per cent of the population and 94 per cent of the labour market. Qatar's image problem feeds into mounting criticism of FIFA's awarding of the 2022 World Cup that potentially could lead to the Gulf state being deprived of becoming the first Middle Eastern nation to host one of the world's foremost sporting events.

A damning 150-page report by Amnesty International entitled 'The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar's construction sector ahead of the World Cup' that details with case studies much of the abuse reported on this blog over the past 2.5 years is the latest to reinforce an image of Qatar that authorities have been working hard to avoid if not reverse. The report includes recommendations for a series of interim and longer term steps to address the situation and calls on world soccer governing body FIFA in the words of Amnesty secretary general Salil Shetty to "not tolerate human rights abuses on construction projects related to the World Cup."

While Qatar has a self-interest in urgently addressing a situation that the world was aware of but did not care about until Qatar won its World Cup hosting rights, addressing the issue involves far more than simply revising an onerous labour system: reform touches on the country's existentialist demographic problem of a citizen minority fearful of losing control of its country to a majority population of foreigners and the autocratic nature of its political system.

Qatar has set itself apart from other Gulf States like the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in making sports a cornerstone of its foreign, defence and security policy by pinpointing sports as part of its national identity and building a comprehensive sports industry from scratch. Qatar's latest building block is the creation of the Middle East and North Africa's first dedicated sports legal practice.

Qatar's soft power sports strategy is grounded in lessons the Gulf state learnt from the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Lesson number one was that no matter what sophisticated weaponry it acquires and irrespective of how many foreigners it enlists in its armed and security forces, it will never have the hard power to independently defend itself. Lesson number two was that soft power enabled Kuwait, like Qatar a tiny country with a majority population of foreigners, to marshal the international community to come to its help and expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait. Lesson number three was that the Saudi defence umbrella on which Qatar relied was not worth the paper on which it was written.

The US defence umbrella that replaced the Saudi one and also serves to protect the kingdom proved its worth in Kuwait. But since then doubts have arisen about its reliability with the United States struggling to put a severe economic crisis behind it, becoming war weary in the wake of a decade of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, US reluctance to proactively support anti-government rebels in Syria, and US talk of a pivot away from the Middle East and North Africa towards Asia. All this enhances the importance Qatar attributes to soft power.

In developing its soft power strategy with sports as one of its pillars, Qataris failed to realize that soft power is a two-way road: it empowers the holder of that power but also puts it on the world stage enabling critics and activists to hold it up to standards of universal human rights and international labour rights. Qataris also failed to understand that communications are a key ingredient of soft power.

While Qataris have quietly worked in recent years to address at least criticism of the material working and living conditions of foreign workers, they have by and large endured the criticism without publicly detailing progress made. To be sure, Qatari officials have more recently acknowledged that implementation and enforcement of changes in rules and regulations have been lagging. A senior Qatari official recently admitted the Gulf state's failure to engage publicly, arguing that it was rooted in a cultural trait which perceives beating one's chest about achievements as bragging.

That may well be so, but equally important is the fact that addressing the material and living conditions is as much about deflecting criticism of Qatar's World Cup hosting rights and projection of soft power as it is about repelling more political demands like the right to form free and independent trade unions and to collectively bargain that would call into question the Al Thani clan's autocratic rule and open the Pandora Box of the viability of the country's demography.

To be fair, to progressive Qataris the World Cup constitutes the straight jacket the country needs to enact reform much like European Union membership is and was the straightjacket that pushed significant reform in Turkey over the last decade. Barely three years after winning World Cup hosting rights labour rights have become an issue of public discussion in Qatar with the government on the defensive and under pressure to demonstrate reform.

Qatar has also taken a number of steps such as introducing a soccer league for foreign workers that hitherto would have been unthinkable for fear that they would give foreigners the kind of stake in society that would make them reluctant to leave once their contracts expire. It has further sparked discussion in the region on the viability of states in the region whose citizenry constitute a minority of the overall population.

None of this is likely to satisfy the mounting international clamour for change that has put Qatar between a rock and a hard place that will force it to make a difficult and painful choice: embrace fundamental change that could alter the nature of its society or potentially risk suffering a lethal body blow to its crucial soft power strategy.

The Amnesty report's recommendations offer Qatar a roadmap that if it adopts quickly could help it regain some of the moral high ground. These recommendations include lifting the requirement for workers to obtain their current employer's permission to change jobs or leave the country; including domestic workers in the protections provided by Qatari labour law; ensuring that workers who leave their employment because of abuse and exploitation are not penalized; enforcing the ban on confiscation of workers' passports; and streamlining and easing the judicial process for workers seeking to recover lost wages and compensation and leave their countries if their employers become insolvent.

Addressing these issues is not a panacea for resolving Qatar's fundamental and existential issues. International trade unions and human rights activists would continue to clamour for workers' political rights such as the right to form free trade unions and the right to collective bargaining.

Achievement of those rights would however have to be embedded in greater political reforms which are unlikely with few Qataris irrespective of how critical of their government they may be demanding greater freedoms and democracy. It also does not offer a solution to Qatar's

existential demographic problem to which there may be no solution that at this point that would be acceptable to a majority of Qataris as well as Qatar's fellow Gulf states.

“The awarding of the 2022 World Cup has brought increased global prominence to Qatar, but also intensified scrutiny,” Amnesty said in its report. How Qatar responds to that scrutiny is likely to determine the success of its soft power strategy and its effectiveness in ensuring the country's defence and security.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. **Web link:**

<http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2013/11/amnesty-international-report-undermines.html>

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