

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **Gulf States and Their US Critics Seek to Shape US Perceptions on the Soccer Pitch**

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**G**ulf states seeking to polish images tarnished by allegations of violations of human rights and their critics are employing soccer in an effort to shape American perceptions. At stake for countries like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates is more than just reputation; it is the ability to invest in strategic US assets without being challenged on their trustworthiness as investors and allies, and the ability to wield soft power as a defence strategy in the absence of real hard power.

Both Qatar and the UAE have been in the firing line for their treatment of foreign workers who constitute a majority of their populations but operate under a sponsorship or kafala system that puts them at the mercy of their employers. The two states, and particularly the UAE, have also been taken to task on issues such as freedom of expression, torture and due legal process in court cases against political dissidents. They have further learnt been tarred by the derailing on security grounds eight years ago by the US Congress of Dubai's effort to take over management of six major American ports.

In trying to fend off criticism, Qatar is fighting a tougher battle than the UAE because of its hosting of the 2022 World Cup, support for Hamas, strategic relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, and aid to Islamist groups in Syria even though the Gulf state played a key role in recent weeks mediating ceasefire talks between the Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip and the Obama administration.

In the latest round of Congressional criticism of Qatar, Pennsylvania Democratic Senator Robert Casey called on world soccer governing body FIFA president Sepp Blatter in a 23 June letter to deprive Qatar of its right to host the World Cup and award it instead to the United States. “It is clear that allowing the World Cup and the infrastructure projects leading up to it to take place in Qatar is no longer acceptable in the face of allegations of bribery and labour rights abuses,” Casey said.

A month later, Illinois Republican Pete Roskam, who co-chairs the House Republican Israel Caucus, expressed “grave concern” about the US relationship with Qatar. “I am deeply concerned that your close work with Qatar in pursuit of a Gaza cease-fire rewards, bolsters, and legitimizes Qatar’s longstanding sponsorship of the terrorist organization Hamas. The severity of the current conflict and possibility for even greater escalation underscores why we must hold Qatar and all those who sponsor terrorism accountable rather than look the other way as Doha enables terrorism against Israel,” Roskam wrote in a 31 July letter to US Secretary of State John Kerry and Treasury Secretary Jack Lew.

While Qatar is playing defence with its critics using its soccer soft power strategy against it, the UAE is playing offense exploiting soccer in a bid to fend off criticism of its kafala system in advance of Dubai’s hosting of the 2020 World Exhibition. It also hopes that soccer will help it fend off campaigns attacking alleged poor labour conditions for foreign workers building a Guggenheim Museum and a campus of New York University in Abu Dhabi.

The exploitation of soccer is part of a US\$ 5 million a year UAE investment in public relations and public affairs in the US, a hefty amount compared to the US\$ 1.48 million in 2011 and US\$ 332,000 in 2013 Qatar has shelved out. Rather than spending money on big ticket public relations and lobbying companies, Qatar opted to attempt to win hearts and minds with establishment of Al Jazeera America, part of its global television network, and the expansion in the US of its beIN sports television franchise.

If Qatar is reaching out to spectators, the UAE is targeting American families. A video produced by the UAE embassy in Washington shows young kids, boys and girls, from multiple ethnic backgrounds at the opening of the state-of-the-art Marie Reed Elementary School community soccer pitch in the city’s Adams Morgan district inaugurated by UAE ambassador Yousef al Oteiba, a Georgetown University graduate who speaks a native American’s English. Oteiba has inaugurated similar soccer pitches in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami and earlier this month in Dallas in UAE-owned English Premier League club Manchester City.

The UAE hopes that its soccer strategy will not only enhance UAE recognition in multiple segments of American society across the country but will also endear itself to them in a bid to ensure that as the country is targeted for its human and labour rights record, voters may persuade members of Congress to adopt a softer line. It also hopes that like in the case of the Iraqi

invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the strategy would garner public support should the UAE ever need the international community to come to its assistance.

Qatar harbours similar aspirations. With its alternative strategy, Al Jazeera America today reaches 48 million homes while beIN is positioning itself as a major American sports channels with broadcast rights to foreign leagues like those in Latin America, which appeals to the United States' politically significant Hispanic community.

While there is no doubt that soccer opens doors to communities and levels of American society that countries like Qatar and the UAE would otherwise find difficult to tap into. The jury is out on whether the strategy, and if so which of the two approaches, will ensure national and international public empathy in the absence, at least so far, of a fundamental tackling of the human rights and labour issues for which Qatar and the UAE finds themselves in the dock.

**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:

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