

# **COMMENTARY**

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## **Gulf Proxy War: UAE Seeks to further Damage Qatar's already Tarnished Image**

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**T**he United Arab Emirates and Qatar are locked into a propaganda war with public relations agencies and front organizations as proxies that is backfiring on both Gulf states.

Disclosures of the proxy war have hit Qatar at a time that its image as the host of the 2022 World Cup is under renewed fire. In contrast to Qatar, the UAE has sought to counter revelations about its efforts to shore up its image through the creation of a network of human rights groups and negatively influence international media coverage of Qatar by touting the fact that its lead fighter pilot in allied attacks on the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Iraq and Syria, is a woman.

Tension between long-standing rivals Qatar and the UAE has been mounting for more than a year.

The UAE has detained and/or sentenced Qatari nationals on charges of espionage, one of which has been dubbed a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. It also earlier this year withdrew its ambassador to Doha alongside the envoys of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The rupture in diplomatic relations was part of a so far failed effort to force Qatar to halt its support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

The UAE, whose animosity towards Qatar predates the current multiple crises in the Middle East and North Africa, kicked into high gear with the realization that Qatar may make minor concessions but was unlikely to bow to Gulf pressure.

Qatar earlier this month asked several Muslim Brothers to leave the country in a nominal gesture but has not cancelled their residence permits. Moreover, family members of some of the departed Brothers remain resident in Qatar as does Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, one of the world's most prominent Muslim clerics who has close ties to the Brotherhood. Similarly, Qatar has rejected pressure to expel Khalid Misha'al, the leader of Hamas, the Islamist militia with close ties to the Brotherhood that controls the Gaza Strip.

The UAE is waging its proxy war against the backdrop of its adoption of a more activist foreign policy that aims to counter political Islam. The UAE took the lead in recent weeks in confronting the Brotherhood and other Islamists with air attacks on Islamist forces in Libya in cooperation with the Gulf-backed Egyptian government of general-turned-president Abdul Fattah al Sisi. At home, alleged Brothers were sentenced to lengthy prison terms in legal proceedings that have been condemned by human rights groups.

At the same time, the UAE has been touting its image as a forward-looking, progressive Muslim society by emphasizing the fact that a woman, Maj. Mariam al-Mansouri, led the UAE squadron in recent US-led attacks on Islamic State targets in Syria. Photos of Al-Mansouri released by WAM, the state-run Emirati news agency, went viral on social media. They highlighted the fact that the UAE is one of the few Arab states to include women in its military and allow them to rise to prominence.

As with much of its response to widespread international criticism, Qatar's response to the campaign against it has been a combination of too little too late, less willingness than its opponents to engage highly priced public relations agencies and lobbyists, and bungled efforts of its own to influence media coverage. The Qatari effort has been further stymied by the recent designation as international terrorists by the US Treasury of four men with links to the Gulf state accused of fundraising for jihadist groups. Qatari sources say at least two of the men had been arrested prior to their designation.

The weak Qatari counteroffensive got into further hot water with revelations last week by Britain's Channel 4 that Qatar had engaged Portland Communications founded by Tony Allen, a former adviser to Tony Blair when he was prime minister. Channel 4 linked Portland to the creation of a soccer blog that attacked Qatar's detractors by Alistair Campbell, Blair's chief communications advisor at Downing Street Number Ten and a former member of Portland's strategic council.

Channel 4 accused the blog that projected itself as “truly independent” and claimed to represent “a random bunch of football fans, determined to spark debate” of “astro-turfing,” the creation of fake sites that project themselves as grassroots but in effect are operated by corporate interests. Portland admitted that it had helped create the blog but asserted that it was not part of its engagement with Qatar.

The UAE has been waging its propaganda war on multiple levels. In July, the UAE backed the establishment of the Muslim Council of Elders (MCE) in a bid to counter Sheikh Qaradawi’s International Union of Muslim Scholars as well as Qatar’s support for political change in the Middle East and North Africa as long as it does not include the Gulf. The MCE promotes a Sunni Muslim tradition of obedience to the ruler rather than activist elements of the Salafis who propagate a return to 7th century life as it was at the time of the Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors.

The UAE’s efforts to tarnish Qatar’s image contrast starkly with its official support for Qatar’s hosting of the World Cup. The Emirate’s targeting of Qatar’s hosting became evident with this month’s detention in Qatar of two British human rights activists who were investigating human and labour rights in the Gulf state. Their detention also highlighted Emirati efforts to shape international public opinion in response to mounting criticism of the UAE’s own human and labour rights record.

The detentions exposed a network of Emirati-backed human rights groups in Norway and France that seemingly sought to polish the UAE’s image while tarnishing that of Qatar. The Brits of Nepalese origin were acting on behalf of the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), a Norway-based group with alleged links to the UAE.

Established in 2008 "to enhance and support both human rights and development by adopting new strategies and policies for real change," GNRD is funded by anonymous donors to the tune of €3.5 million a year, according to veteran Middle East journalist and author Brian Whitaker.

The group’s International Human Rights Rank Indicator (IHRI) listed the UAE at number 14 as the Arab country most respectful of human rights as opposed to Qatar that it ranked at number 94. The ranking contradicts reports by human rights groups, including the United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR), which earlier this year said it had credible evidence of torture of political prisoners in the UAE and questioned the independence of the country’s judiciary. Egypt’s State Information Service reported in December that GNRD had supported the banning of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and called for an anti-Brotherhood campaign in Europe.

An Emirati human rights activist told Middle East Eye: “They are supported by the UAE government for public relations purposes. The GNRD published a fake human rights index last year that wrongly praised the UAE.”

More recently, The New York Times and The Intercept revealed that the UAE, the world’s largest spender on lobbying in the United States in 2013, had engaged a lobbying firm to plant anti-Qatar stories in American media. The firm, Camstoll Group, is operated by former high-ranking US Treasury officials who had been responsible for relations with Gulf state and Israel as well as countering funding of terrorism.

The successful effort to portray Qatar as a prime backer of jihadist terrorists coincided with a similar campaign by Israel calling for Qatar to be deprived of its right to host the World Cup because of its support for Hamas. The campaign is designed to counter Qatari efforts, according to Palestinian sources, to coax Hamas into accepting full-fledged peace talks with Israel and agreeing to surrender much of its authority in Gaza to the Palestine Authority headed by Hamas rival, President Mahmoud Abbas.

The New York Times reported that Camstoll’s public disclosure forms “filed as a registered foreign agent, showed a pattern of conversations with journalists who subsequently wrote articles critical of Qatar’s role in terrorist fund-raising.” The Intercept asserted that Camstoll was hired less than a week after it was established in late 2012 by Abu Dhabi-owned Outlook Energy Investments, LLC with a retainer of \$400,000 a month.

“The point here is not that Qatar is innocent of supporting extremists... The point is that this coordinated media attack on Qatar – using highly paid former U.S. officials and their media allies – is simply a weapon used by the Emirates, Israel, the Saudis and others to advance their agendas,” The Intercept said.

UAE opposition to Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood dates back at least a decade. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed bin Zayed Al Nahayan warned US diplomats already in 2004 that “we are having a (culture) war with the Muslim Brotherhood in this country,” according to US diplomatic cables disclosed by WikiLeaks. In 2009 Sheikh Mohamed went as far as telling US officials that Qatar is “part of the Muslim Brotherhood.” He suggested that a review of Al Jazeera employees would show that 90 percent were affiliated with the Brotherhood. Other UAE officials privately described Qatar as “public enemy number 3”, after Iran and the Brotherhood.

**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/2014/09/gulf-proxy-war-uae-seeks-to-further.html>

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