



COMMENTARY

No.242

Wednesday, 12 November 2014

Sponsorship of FIFA: A New Front in Gulf Political Rivalry

James M. Dorsey

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Lurking in the background of world soccer body FIFA's talks with Qatar Airways to replace its Dubai rival Emirates as a sponsor is the escalating hostility between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates as a result of their divergent attitudes towards political Islam.

Officially, Emirates' decision to end its US\$ 200 million relationship with FIFA is a result of its announcement three years ago that the airline is restructuring its sponsorships, which also include soccer clubs Arsenal, Real Madrid, Paris Saint Germaine (PSG) and Hamburger SV.

The announcement came a year after Emirates emerged as the most vocal of the soccer body's sponsors in expressing concern about FIFA's mushrooming corruption scandals involving disgraced FIFA executive committee member and then Asian Football Confederation (AFC) president Mohammed Bin Hammam, a Qatari national, and question marks about the integrity of the successful Russian and Qatari bids to host the 2018 and 2022 World Cups.

Emirates said at the time that it was "disappointed." Emirates was however uncharacteristically silent when in the last year various sponsors expressed concern about the negative publicity FIFA was generating as a result of mass protests in Brazil in the run-up to this year's World Cup and the soccer body's unresolved transparency and accountability issues. In a statement, the airline said it was parting ways with FIFA because the soccer body's proposed contract extending the sponsorship arrangement had not met its expectations.

FIFA's tarnished image is without doubt a major reason why Emirates alongside Sony is seeking to disassociate itself from the soccer body. Yet, it is hard to disassociate state-owned Emirates'

decision from the UAE's deteriorating relations with Qatar that has led to the incarceration in the UAE of Qatari nationals on charges of spying, an environment in which Emiratis are more reluctant to visit Qatar, and UAE's investment of millions of dollars in efforts to undermine its Gulf rival's image and credibility.

In that environment, Emirates is unlikely to want to have appeared as a sponsor when Qatar hosts the World Cup in eight years' time. A litmus test for what Emirates' motives are will be whether Emirates also alters its relationship with PSG, which is owned by Qatar. Emirati officials insist that their country's economic and commercial decisions are not affected by political disputes with partners.

In a statement on its website, Emirates reiterated that "soccer is a truly global sport and consequently has always been an important strand in Emirates' sponsorship portfolio ... Emirates' sponsorship of FIFA is central to its soccer strategy, facilitating connection with football fans across the world."

The rift between the UAE and Qatar runs deep. The UAE alongside Saudi Arabia and Bahrain withdrew its ambassador from Doha in March in a so far failed effort to force Qatar to halt its support for the Muslim Brotherhood. That failure appears to have prompted the UAE to step up pressure on Qatar as part of its more activist foreign policy aimed at countering political Islam

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, despite publicly backing Qatar against calls that it be deprived of its right to host the 2022 World Cup because of alleged wrongdoing in its successful bid and the sub-standard working and living conditions of foreign workers, has covertly worked against the Gulf state. Qatar, in September briefly detained two British human rights activists who were investigating human and labour rights in the Gulf state. The detentions exposed a network of apparently Emirati-backed human rights groups in Norway, including the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), 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 a Norway-based group with alleged links to the UAE.

The GNRD's International Human Rights Rank Indicator (IHRRI) 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.

The New York Times and The Intercept have since 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 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 US\$ 400,000 a month.

UAE's opposition to Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood dates back to 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/2014/11/sponsorship-of-fifa-new-front-in-gulf.html>

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer. Email: jmdorsey@questfze.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views

expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**