

QATAR'S HOSTING OF THE FIFA MEN'S WORLD CUP

The Issues and Challenges Ahead

Simon Chadwick

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SKEMA PUBLIKA

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INTRODUCTION

Staging of the impending FIFA men's World Cup in Qatar will be the culmination of unprecedented tournament preparation. The period over which this World Cup has been organised, the scale of infrastructural developments needed to enable the event's hosting, the controversies that have seemingly dogged Qatar and FIFA at every turn, as well as the geopolitical sensitivities connected to the competition, have all been striking and beyond parallel.

In this report, the background to Qatar's hosting of the men's World Cup is examined, as are the country's preparedness to host the tournament, the event's management, and the mega-event's legacies for the country. The report concludes by highlighting some of the things to look out for at perhaps one of the biggest, but certainly one of the most controversial, sport mega-events ever staged.

TOURNAMENT BACKGROUND

When the FIFA men's World Cup begins in Qatar, it will be almost twelve years to the day since the small Gulf nation was awarded the right to host national team football's biggest tournament. Many observers were surprised by this decision, though the Qatari government had gambled on winning the bid, particularly because the country's national development plan was intertwined with staging sport mega-events. Subsequently, discourse and narrative about Qatar's success, especially in the Global North, were built around issues of corruption and governance. Indeed, the double-hosting announcement (Russia's staging of the 2018 tournament was also revealed at the same time) was arguably the tipping point that resulted in the arrests and resignations of several FIFA officials. For Qatar itself, the deployment of World Cup hosting as a means through which to nation build posed the immediate challenges of strategy, organisation, and delivery. The country not only needed eight stadiums of the required FIFA standard, but also the transport and civic infrastructure to support them.

A massive, \$240 billion building programme has therefore been underway, which has attracted the attention of rights and activist groups that have questioned Qatar’s treatment of migrant workers. Whilst Qatari government officials continue to claim the World Cup has helped prompt positive labour market changes, the likes of Amnesty International disagree hence debate about migrant workers is likely to continue throughout the tournament. There have been some significant disruptions during preparations, most obviously Covid which still looms as a potential threat to the World Cup’s successful staging. However, a diplomatic boycott against Qatar, instigated in 2017 by Saudi Arabia, to an extent isolated the country and undermined Doha’s attempts to position the event as being a regional one. Though now resolved (at least for now), Qatar’s relationships with its near neighbours and international partners continue to form an important backdrop to the tournament. For instance, it is significant that Turkey’s security services will be providing extensive support to Qatar throughout the tournament. Turkey has long been a supporter of Qatar.



Political Map of the Arabian Peninsula – Source: Nations Online Project.

Qatar will also be relying on other countries to help secure food and water supplies during the World Cup, both of which constitute a major challenge for government in Doha. Similarly, in anticipation of the event starting, there are other concerns about demands that will be made on critical infrastructure, such as roads and at Qatar’s main airport. This has resulted in measures being introduced to regulate the number of people in the country during the tournament. At the same time, Qatar has been forced to address what these people do and how they behave. The World Cup has become an important part of Qatar’s tourism strategy, which is in turn linked to the

construction of major infrastructural projects such as the National Museum. Yet attention has also been required pertaining to matters including the consumption of alcohol, the public display of symbols such as rainbow flags, and how hooliganism might be dealt with. As the one-month long tournament unfolds, it seems likely that Qatari organisers and FIFA itself will face multiple challenges.

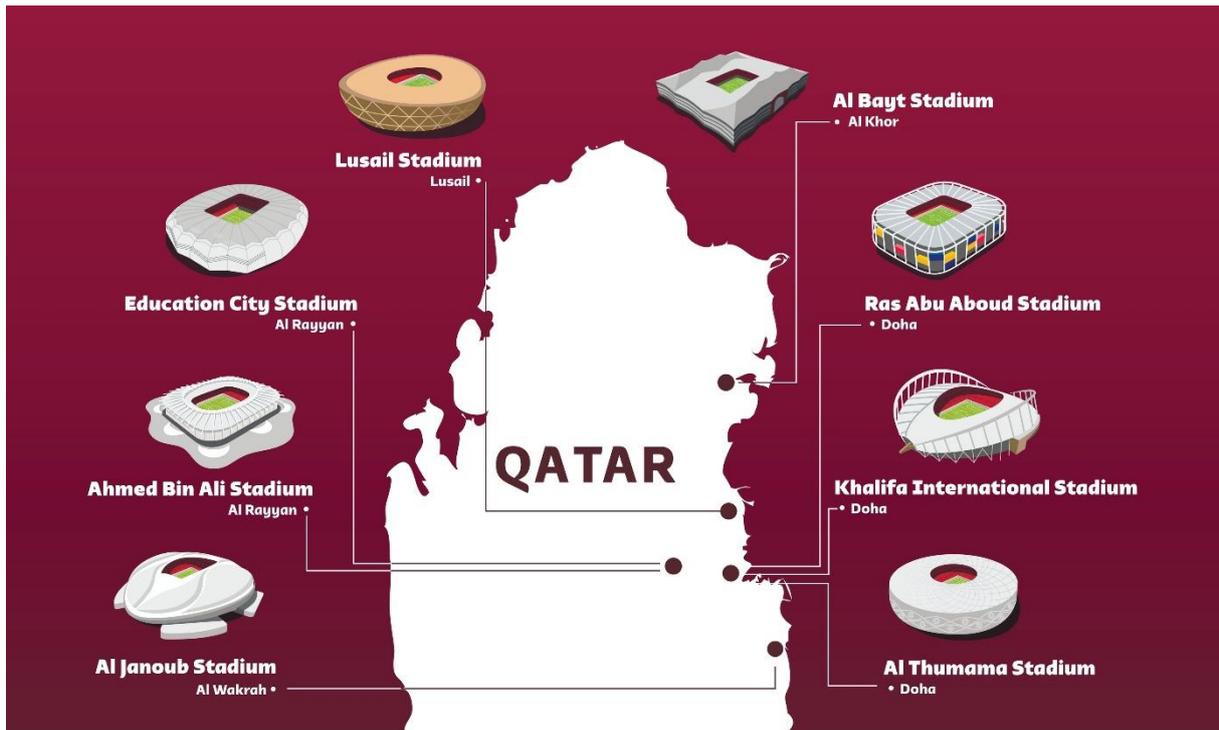
In these terms, the 2022 World Cup was always going to be a unique, perhaps unusual mega-event. However, changes and emerging challenges over the last twelve years mean that the tournament will be of an even more distinctive and uncertain nature. Though the global Covid pandemic appears to be dissipating, a Northern hemisphere winter resurgence of the virus could still disrupt the event. At the same time, security concerns will remain at the forefront of organisers' minds, who have been mindful of wider regional instabilities and the impact they could have on the World Cup's staging. Yet there remain some issues following the Gulf blockade. Indeed the Qataris are mindful of the potential for cyber-attacks of the type that characterised the diplomatic feud with its neighbours. Relations with Israel remain poor, inflamed by the killing in Palestine earlier this year of an Al Jazeera journalist. During recent months, government officials in Doha have rejected a request from Jerusalem that it be allowed to establish a consulate office in Qatar to manage relations with travelling Israeli football fans.

The war in Ukraine also poses some challenges, not least because of Qatar's frosty relations with Russia. Recently, the country's emir met with Vladimir Putin and thanked him for Russia's support in organising the event. This may have been as much a plea not to disrupt the tournament as it was a statement of gratitude. Following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's team was banned from taking part in qualification for the World Cup, the country itself also being suspended from its FIFA membership. In the meantime, Qatar has willingly filled gaps in global gas supplies left by the sanctioning of Russia. It remains to be seen what, if any, covert operations that Russia might engage in during the World Cup, though the government in Doha would be foolish not to contemplate the threats that a wounded Russia might pose. Though the geopolitics do not end there; for instance, on 29th November Iran will play the United States at the Al Thumama stadium. Qatar has good relations with both countries – it shares access rights with Iran to the South Pars/North Dome Gas-Condensate field beneath the Persian Gulf (the largest such natural gas field in the world). Meanwhile, the Al Thumama venue is only 40 kilometres from the Al Udeid airbase, the United States' largest current facility in the Middle East. Despite the Qataris and FIFA no doubt seeking to efficiently manage the World Cup's delivery, there are likely to be multiple subplots that erupt as we progress through November into December.

PREPAREDNESS AND EVENT MANAGEMENT

Qatar's staging of the World Cup is central to the country's pursuit of its 2030 National Vision and therefore an intrinsic part of its national development plan. The construction of a new international airport, a national road network, a metro system, commercial and residential real estate developments, and civic buildings and spaces (especially those in which sport can be played or practised), have all been given impetus or licence by the staging of football's biggest national team competition. Such has been the importance of these infrastructural projects that in essence Qatar has successfully completed the most important parts of its World Cup project. All eight football stadiums have staged test events; Doha's Hamad International Airport opened in 2014; the country's metro system has been running since 2019; and construction companies are putting the finishing touches to Lusail, a new city established to the north of Doha, where the Iconic Stadium will host the World Cup on 18th December. Challenges remain, however.

For each of the stadiums being used for the World Cup, test events have already taken place – in some cases, several times. However, during a recent match at the Lusail Iconic Stadium, several significant problems became apparent including access to it and the shortage of water within the venue. This was essentially the first and last test event at Lusail, which suggests that organisers still have some work to do before the tournament begins. Meanwhile, it has been determined that Hamad International Airport – which is intended to ultimately position Doha as a major global transit hub – is not big enough to handle the expected volume of passenger traffic into the World Cup. As a result, Qatar's older, former international airport will reopen for the event's duration.



The eight football stadiums for the 2022 World Cup.

Capacity issues elsewhere have also become a pressing matter for Qatar. Given that the country imports most of its food, ensuring the resilience of supplies is important. Estimates suggest that upwards of one million people will enter the country during the World Cup, at which point it is worth noting that Qatar's total population is normally less than three million people. Water security may also be an issue, as the country effectively relies upon a large desalination plant and imported bottled water to sustain its needs. In other forms of transport, despite there being a new metro network in Doha, World Cup organisers are putting into special service 700 electric buses. Furthermore, general concerns about congestion and the demands placed on physical infrastructure have resulted in instructions being issued to work from home during the tournament. In addition, schools, colleges, and universities will be shut for its duration, whilst cars will be banned from entering the centre of Doha on Friday afternoons and evenings. At the time of writing, new sewage pipes were still being installed in downtown Doha amid concerns whether the city's existing infrastructure can cope with the large number of visitors.

All mega-events must address the likelihood of some form of attack, be that in either a physical or a digital form. In early 2022, a Houthi drone attack on oil installations close to the Saudi Arabian Formula 1 Grand Prix circuit in Jeddah almost resulted in the event being cancelled. As a close neighbour, Qatar will therefore have undertaken an assessment of such risks, which helps to explain the significant security presence in the country of Turkish, American, British, French and Moroccan police and military personnel. Government in Doha has a somewhat different relationship with Iran and has taken a different approach to engaging with the conflict in Yemen compared to Saudi Arabia. It therefore seems likely that the threat of physical attacks on Qatar during the World Cup is not substantial. Instead, concerns in Doha about digital and cyber-attacks are causing more concerns. The likes of air traffic control, electricity supplies and ticketing may become the focus for such attacks, whilst the possibility of activist groups targeting the country given criticisms of its human rights record should not be discounting. Sometimes fractious relations with Israel, Russia and the United Arab Emirates may also become problematic. For instance, the latter used a campaign of disinformation and fake news during the Gulf feud in attempts to destabilise Qatar. In one case, a volley of social media posts was used to spread fears that a military coup was underway in Doha. Observers should remain mindful about a recurrence of such tactics.

Given Qatar’s population size and the anticipated volume of visitors, this immediately raises capacity issues, not just in terms of available landing slots at Doha Airport, but also in terms of the flow management of crowds into and out of Qatar, around the country and in the vicinity of World Cup venues. These issues have already been partly addressed elsewhere in this document, though the challenges they pose are likely to be compounded by the nature and availability of accommodation, the social programme that will accompany the tournament, and the norms of behaviour commonly witnessed at football matches around the world. The potential acuteness of accommodation problems has been dealt with through the provision of rooms on cruise ships and tents in the desert, though the high cost of rooms in hotels is often raised as a concern. One way in which fans are addressing accommodation and subsistence concerns in Qatar is by staying in and flying from Dubai. Whilst this may solve a problem for some, it does raise questions about how a ‘commuter World Cup’ will impact upon FIFA’s and Qatar’s claims about the event’s environmental credentials.

With large volumes of fans travelling from Doha’s Hamad International Airport across the capital (within in a relatively confined space), as well as from tents in the desert and ships in distant harbours, this suggests that issues of congestion and delay, the provision of food and beverage services, and hooliganism may become evident. Qatar and its security services have been preparing themselves for disruptive, perhaps even violent crowds. However, the country and its police force have little regular experience of dealing with football fans engaged in such behaviours. Furthermore, given the multinational nature of Qatar’s security services and the hierarchical chain of command normally evident within its state organisations, questions should be asked ahead of the tournament about the speed and efficiency with which the police and others might be able to respond to crowd problems. With alcohol set to be available for sale up to nineteen hours a day, the toxic mix of untested security officials, drunken football fans, and congested social spaces, could make for some significant problems. This may be further exacerbated by boredom, a common complaint that some expatriates express about living in Qatar. Despite having spent billions of dollars on state-of-the-art museums, art galleries and shopping malls, the extent to which these will appeal to an average football fan remains to be seen.



Khalifa International Stadium, Doha (top left), Al Bayt Stadium, Al Khor (top right) and Al Janoub Stadium, Al Wakrah (bottom).

LEGACIES

Under normal circumstances, analysts would now be trying to establish what the economic impact of the Qatar World Cup will be. However, this is a sport mega-event like no other – it has not been conventional either in terms of its conception, organisation nor intended outcomes. There are some planned economic outcomes, of which establishing Hamad International Airport as a global transit hub and promoting inward tourism numbers are two elements. Both also form part of assertions that the World Cup will help drive economic diversification, something which will presumably be reflected in later visitors, output and national income statistics. Qatar has historically faced the challenges of a big state presence in its economy, as well as a deficit of entrepreneurship created by the population's dependence upon the state. The World Cup is supposed to have helped in addressing these challenges through, for example, the World Cup Challenge 22 enterprise competition. Whether or not these politico-economic and cultural shifts have been achieved should form a basis for evaluating the tournament and its legacies.

However, it should be remembered that the intended outcomes of staging the World Cup have never been of a nature that might lend themselves to conventional analyses of impact and legacy. Its geographic position means that Qatar is strategically vulnerable, a challenge which its government has sought to address partly through sport. In becoming an event destination, Qatar has sought to embed itself in the global sport ecosystem. The intention of this has been to build legitimacy, credibility and trustworthiness that warrants international partners taking a stake in the country in order to maintain its security. In this respect, there is already evidence that Qatar has been successful in its pursuits. The Al Udeid airbase is one instance, though the deployment to Qatar of Turkish drones, Italian frigates, British jet fighters and French cyber security specialists also signifies that the World Cup has helped government in Doha to legitimise and secure the country.

As a nation-building exercise, it has already been identified elsewhere in this document that Qatar has made major infrastructural advances, spurred on by its hosting of the World Cup. Alongside this, it has been the country's intention to infuse the nation with an identity and a set of values – more commonly referred to as nation branding. It remains to be seen how global audiences will engage with Brand Qatar during the World Cup, and what the longevity will be its newly achieved brand status. Slogans such as 'Qatar deserves the best' and 'Expect Amazing' have been widely deployed across communications campaigns; indeed it is a common sight in Doha to see public displays of them. Furthermore, the deployment of other country assets, such as Qatar Airways, is intended to position the country's brand, accentuate its core proposition, and drive Qatar's politico-economic ambitions. How this manifests itself during the tournament and how long it sustains them once the tournament concludes demand scrutiny and analysis.

A related notion is of Qatar deploying the World Cup as an instrument of soft power, a means through which to boost the country's attractiveness and convince key target audiences that the country shares similar values and aspirations to them. This quest for soft power is evident in the social and cultural programme that will accompany the tournament's staging. Globally famous musicians such as Maroon 5 and Robbie Williams will be appearing in Doha, performing in infrastructure normally used at Britain's Glastonbury music festival. In between matches, football fans will be able to eat and drink at box-park facilities of the kind that are normally found in fashionable parts of London. At the same time, Qatar has been reaching out to smaller countries including Rwanda and across the Caribbean, promoting sport for development and peace projects. This form of soft power has been closely linked to the country's diplomacy efforts, which are intended to endure beyond the World Cup's staging.

Qatar's legacy agenda has not just been externally focused indeed the intention has also been to effect positive internal sociocultural changes. Whether or not labour market changes are a planned or an incidental change remains to be seen; similarly, how long labour market reforms will endure beyond the tournament's end warrants ongoing scrutiny of Qatar. Yet the promotion of healthier lifestyles and the promotion of female participation in sport are intended outcomes. Qatar has one of the world's highest rates of diabetes, particularly amongst young people. Staging of the World Cup is one of several policy instruments intended to prompt physical activity in a way that helps address Qatar's looming public health crises. Similarly, stimulating female participation in physical activities as well as boosting their representation in leadership and management roles

is an intended feature of Qatar’s World Cup hosting. Once the tournament is over, Qatari women’s football is being offered a new headquarters at the Education City World Cup stadium. Longitudinally gathering and analysing data in each of these spheres will be necessary in helping to demonstrate the tangible effects the mega-event may have had upon people’s attitudes and behaviours.



Workers at Qatar National Museum, Doha.



Doha Skyline.

TEN THINGS TO OBSERVE DURING THE TOURNAMENT

Prior to the staging of any sport mega-event, it can sometimes be difficult to predict issues and challenges that might emerge during it. Some can be foreseen hence there are often contingency plans in place to account for their potential emergence and effects. However, as we have seen during other tournaments, there can be episodes that are neither envisaged nor accounted for in contingency plans. In this context, the following are highlighted as areas in which there could be issues for Qatari and FIFA World Cup organisers to contend with (N.B. this does not constitute a ranking or order of importance):

1. **Overt, provocative displays of activism from players, fans and others** who may be seeking to communicate messages challenging Qatar and its organisation of the tournament;
2. **Threat of attacks, which may be physical, though are more likely to be digital** and could include hacking (perhaps of ticketing systems) and coordinated campaigns against Qatar on social media;
3. **Ambush marketing being employed by brands that are rivals to those officially associated with the tournament**, with the use of Arab and Middle Eastern stereotypes being used as part of any such activities;
4. With concessions having been made towards both FIFA's alcohol sponsor and those demanding a conventional tournament experience, **the outcomes of drinking and drunkenness (such as hooliganism)** may pose challenges;
5. Given the likely demands on critical infrastructure – as well as on food, water and other imported goods – **the resilience of provision and supply, allied to contingency measures**, could be tested;
6. Bold claims have been made by both FIFA and the Qatari organisers about the tournament's **environmental credentials**, though with significant numbers of people 'commuting' to Doha by plane, doubts exist about the veracity of these claims;
7. As the Qataris have deployed the World Cup as a policy instrument for effecting positive sociocultural changes, how **this impacts upon worker rights and labour markets, changes in the health and well-being of its population, and improves social cohesion and the sense of national identity**, should be assessed;
8. Qatar's World Cup staging has supposedly been an exercise in **nation building, nation branding, soft power projection and the promotion of positive international relations**, how and to what extent these have been achieved (or not) should be assessed;
9. **The role that social and digital media will play during the tournament** will be significant, given the ascent of TikTok since the last World Cup in 2018, the emergence of the metaverse, and the way in which social networks engage with the tournament, all pose interesting questions for observers;
10. Though there is some evidence that Qatar intends to continue staging sport mega-events, it needs to be asked: a) **What have been the returns on investment for Qatar of staging the World Cup?** And b) **Strategically, especially within the sphere of sport, what happens next for Qatar?**

AUTHOR

This report was written by **Simon Chadwick, Professor of Sport and Geopolitical Economy at SKEMA Business School.**



Simon Chadwick is a researcher, writer, academic, consultant and speaker with more than 25 years' experience in the global sport industry. His work focuses on the geopolitical economy of sport. He co-founded and co-directs the China Soccer Observatory (University of Nottingham, UK). He is Founding Editor of GeoSport, a digital sports platform created with the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs. Chadwick previously founded and directed the University of London's Birkbeck Sports Business Centre, and Coventry University's Centre for the International Business of Sport. In addition, he has worked at several of the world's most prestigious business schools, such as IESE in Spain, Otto Beisheim in Germany, Tsinghua in China, COPPEAD in Brazil and Waseda in Japan.

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