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## **Qatar's Activist Foreign Policy and the 2022 World Cup**

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On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, the French football club Paris St. Germain announced the signing of Brazil's superstar footballer Neymar Jr. from FC Barcelona for a world record fee of €222 million (approximately \$262 million). While at face value this was another exorbitant transfer paid by the French club, it is also rooted in the geopolitical strategy of the small gulf emirate of Qatar, whose investment vehicle [Oryx Qatar Sports Investment is the owner of the French club](#). Qatar's football diplomacy—it will host the 2022 World Cup—is an integral part of the nation's diplomatic strategy, aimed at operating an independent foreign policy outside the constraints of its larger neighbor Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies. This independence led to a severe backlash, as the Saudis and their allies the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain moved together with Egypt on June 5<sup>th</sup> to isolate Qatar, pulling their ambassadors and effectively blockading Qatar from the outside world, accusing the Qataris of supporting terrorism and seeking to undermine regional stability, demanding that Doha cease [support for Muslim Brotherhood groups and shutter Al-Jazeera](#). For Qatar, hosting the World Cup is not merely a sporting event, but a symbol of prestige and a desire to show its rise as a regional heavyweight in its own right. The resulting blockade and the Saudi and Emirati efforts to strangle Qatar economically and potentially derail its World Cup demonstrates the larger geopolitical maneuvering between the Gulf States, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE aggressively seeking limit Qatar's independence and bring it back into the GCC fold.

### ***Qatar and Regional Politics and the World Cup***

The competition between the Gulf States and the isolation of Qatar was described by James Dorsey as a battle between small states punching above their weight, looking to rebalance regional and Gulf politics, fighting to proliferate their version of governance throughout the region. Dorsey contrasts these divergent approaches to foreign policy, between Qatar and the UAE. For the Emiratis, the goal has been continuation of their brand “authoritarian stability,” supporting anti-Islamist insurgent groups throughout the Middle East and adopting a vociferous anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance, together with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In contrast, Qatar has sought to contravene the Gulf status-quo and as a result has supported political Islamists and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies throughout the Middle East. The result has been a battle for influence between Qataris and the Saudi/Emiratis throughout the Arab world, for which Qatar is now being punished [under the guise of their support of “terrorism.”](#) This narrative has gained considerable traction, in large part due to the Saudi and Emirati financed press. For example, Faisal Abbas writing in *Arab News*, a Saudi newspaper, recently argued that Qatar’s brand has been irrevocably weakened, especially in the U.S., with a majority of Americans identifying Qatar as a sponsor of terrorism and lambasting the negative influence of [Al-Jazeera as a platform for terrorists and their sympathizers.](#)

Qatar’s place within the Middle Eastern state system and the Gulf sub-system as a small state in the shadow of Saudi Arabia has made it a quixotic operator on the international scene. Unable to project power in traditional ways through coercive “hard power,” Qatar has instead sought to influence policy and spread its influence in more subtle ways. As a result, Qatar has adopted an opportunistic and pragmatic foreign policy, lacking “entrenched ideological positions,”<sup>1</sup> whose goals contravene the rest of its GCC neighbors. In effect, Qatar utilized its economic prowess as one of the world’s largest oil producers and largest producer of liquefied natural

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Graham Boyce, “Qatar’s Foreign Policy,” *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2013): 372.

gas, to maximize its influence in both regional politics and on the wider global stage.<sup>2</sup> Qatar has done this by serving as a conflict mediator, hosting Hamas' overseas leadership, having expansive ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, but also opening the first Israeli trade office in the Gulf during the [Oslo Process](#) in the 1990's. While receiving considerable criticism for these arrangements, the Qataris did not waiver in their pursuit of an independent foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> The Qataris also used the media to promote their agenda. Qatar established the satellite channel *Al-Jazeera* in 1996, which created a platform for popular preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi and amplified the voice of the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring.<sup>4</sup>

Qatar has embarked on an aggressive strategy to raise its international profile through its extensive investment program in world football. In 2010, the Qatar Foundation, the state's charitable arm, secured sponsorship agreements with FC Barcelona, arguably the most recognizable sporting franchise in the world, to the tune of one hundred and twenty-five million pounds, at the time the [most expensive sponsorship deal in history](#). This was followed by a renewal of FC Barcelona's sponsorship deal, this time with Qatar Airways, the state-owned airline. Qatar Sports Investments, headed by Nasser al-Khalifi, and chairman of *beIN Sports*, successor to *Al-Jazeera Sport*, has also become one of the biggest players in club football, serving as the vehicle for the purchase of France's League 1 giant Paris-St. Germain. Qatar also invested heavily in sporting infrastructure, creating the Aspire Academy in Doha, a coaching and training center aimed at nurturing the next generation of footballers. These moves all served as prelude to what the Qatari government has long considered its coming out party, the winning bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

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<sup>2</sup> Lina Khatib, "Qatar's Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism," *International Affairs* 89, no. 1 (March 2013): 419.

<sup>3</sup> Uzi Rabi, "Qatar's Relations with Israel: Challenging Arab and Gulf Norm's," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 449.

<sup>4</sup> Khatib, "Qatar's Foreign Policy: The Limits of Pragmatism," 420.

### *The GCC Crisis and the Qatari Reaction*

While the current crisis between Qatar and its GCC neighbors is implicitly driven by Qatar's independent foreign policy, the World Cup is a significant driver in the economic blockade that has been placed on Qatar. When news of the blockade of Qatar broke in June, FIFA, world football's governing body tried to assure its sponsors that the [World Cup would go on as scheduled](#). However, while FIFA and the Qataris tried to allay fears of any substantial risk, the current impasse has forced Doha to change its strategy while also forcing companies involved in the building [projects to initiate contingency plans](#). Qatar's bid for the World Cup, when it was submitted, was scheduled for the summer of 2022,<sup>5</sup> with eight new stadiums constructed and a FIFA mandated capacity for 60,000 hotel rooms plus the construction of a public transportation infrastructure, including a new subway, costing the Qatari Government in excess of \$500 million dollars per week.

The Qataris have learned from their mistakes. In 2014, the Saudis, Emiratis and Bahrainis withdrew their ambassadors from Doha in protest of Qatar's independent foreign policy, including support for Muslim Brotherhood, the housing of regional dissidents in Doha, and the [perceived pernicious influence of Al-Jazeera](#). In the aftermath of the 2014 crisis, the Qataris realized there could be a possible future confrontation with the Saudis and their allies. The result was an upgrade of Qatar's transport facilities, including an expansion of the Hamad Port which now takes deliveries of large cargo ships, as well as the doubling of the Hamad International Airport in Doha. When the new blockade was initiated in June, the Qataris were in a far better position than 2014. To supplement the loss in their supply chains, most of which were routed through Qatar's only land border with Saudi Arabia, or were transited through the Dubai port at Jebel Ali, the Qataris have looked further afield and as a result, had to pay a significant premium. Qatar shifted materials through ports in Oman before transiting into the

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<sup>5</sup> The competition has since been shifted to the winter of 2022 as the Qatari's proved unable to air-condition all of their stadiums during the blazing desert summer.

Persian Gulf. Freight shipments that were held on the Qatari-Saudi border, were instead rerouted to Oman, [Kuwait or Iran's chief port Bandar Abbas](#). Building materials have also been obtained from new sources, with Malaysian steel replacing Saudi steel, and imports of produce, dairy products and meat delivered from [Turkey, Lebanon and Azerbaijan, in order to meet local demand](#). Even with the added cost of the blockade, Qatar has proved resilient and the blockade has increased nationalist sentiment in favor of the young Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who Qataris see a symbol of independence. The surge of Qatari nationalism has made the World Cup an even more important symbol of national resistance for the Qatari state. As a result, the World Cup is “do or die project for Qatar,” said Abdel Abdel Ghafar, a fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, adding [“it is a matter of prestige and national pride that they are fully invested in, so I don't see the work for the project being stopped.”](#)

### ***Future Prospects for Qatar and the Gulf***

The current impasse between Qatar and the GCC is a battle for influence between the Qataris and the Saudi aligned bloc within the GCC. Qatar views the Saudi and Emirati backed sanctions as a means to degrade their independence, decrease their autonomy, violate their sovereignty, and destroy its brand. The Saudis led by the young Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, embarked on an aggressive regional stance to exert their own hegemony through the GCC to counter growing Iranian influence. The 2022 World Cup is the culmination of “Brand Qatar” as an international business hub and a regional power, a position that Doha will not allow the Saudis to derail. While the Saudis and the Emiratis continue to demand that Qatar stop supporting “international terrorism” and cease broadcasting from *Al-Jazeera*, the conflict will not be solved until there can be an agreement as to what Qatar's role in the Persian Gulf will be. For Doha, this means operating independently outside the orbit of Riyadh. But for the Saudis and the Emiratis, the expectation that Qatar would give in has led to an impasse, and a withdrawal of Saudi and Emirati demands will give the impression of weakness. The Qataris are willing to pay an exorbitant premium to make sure that construction for World Cup continues. While it remains to be seen how long the Qataris can continue to pay such a steep

financial price, national pride and independence in the face of their hostile neighbors have mobilized the Qatari people to make sure that these games will be held without a hitch. With both the Qataris and Saudis and Emiratis at an impasse, a quick resolution of the current crisis is unlikely, but could be resolved through back channel negotiation through a mediator such as the United States or Kuwait, which would allow both parties to save face.

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