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## Reports

# Learning the “Rules of the Game”: Qatar and the FIFA 2022 World Cup

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(Getty)

This paper is part of a research project that compares and contrasts local and international perceptions of Qatar since its successful bid to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup. It is a summary of a larger academic article with a threefold aim: first, to survey perceptions of Qatar's winning the bid to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup, with special reference to the English-language Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet Daily News* between 2013 and 2016. Second, the article critically assesses the discourse in these articles, highlighting consistent Qatari responsiveness to international challenges with respect to climate concerns, human rights, and corruption allegations. Third, in so doing, the article puts forth an analysis suggesting a process of context-specific institutional "learning". After seven years of challenges, Qatar is still poised in early 2018 to be the first Arab and Muslim country to host the international tournament. The first paper "Self-Other Perceptions: "Worlding" in the World Cup" was published January 15, 2018: <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/01/perceptions-worlding-world-cup-180115093732638.html>

## The Echo of the Local in the Global

After FIFA's decision awarding Qatar hosting rights to the 2022 World Cup, Qatar has undergone a flurry of large-scale building projects: football stadiums, highways, hotels, a new airport. Alongside the infrastructural enhancements, it has also embarked on a parallel institutional trajectory, tackling labor regulations and even corruption allegations as it interacts with various international bodies. Yet skeptics question Qatar's readiness for FIFA 2022. International media outlets have closely covered its trials and achievements over the past few years. The English-language Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet Daily News* has been one such close monitor.

By identifying the diversity of constructs of the country as future FIFA World Cup host, the study examines contextual attitudes to explore identity narratives and trajectories of socio-political change, “read” both locally and internationally. This paper adopts qualitative content analysis (QCA) as a methodology suitable for uncovering and understanding hidden meanings and interpreting perceptions for both “how” and especially “why” questions(2). It analyzes articles from Hurriyyet Daily News between 2013-2016, seeking to ascertain Turkish perceptions of Qatar in the lead-up to the Gulf country’s hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

### **Institutionalism, International Norms, and “Local” Specificity**

Institutionalism can provide a useful framework through which to consider the origins and impact of formal and informal rules, procedures, and organizational forms that regulate behavior in a given set of social interactions. Instead of a ‘clash,’ sociological institutionalists see a convergence of civilizations, positing the proliferation of a ‘world culture’ emphasizing norms of rationality, progress, citizenship, and liberal conceptions of human rights to explain global similarities in organizational forms including states, bureaucracies, and markets(3). State participation and involvement in multilateral or international organizations may also propagate liberal norms(4).

Yet theories assuming and facilitating a “top-down” international dissemination of norms may be insensitive to local context. Larbi Sadiki highlights the Arab agency embodied in the Arab Spring popular uprisings(5). He thus complicates the conclusion that citizens’ expectations and demands for human rights, equality, and justice simply represent the smooth, forward global march of Western norms. Instead, he sees a “rene[wal of] the ethos of exchange” historically characterizing the Arab Middle East. Here Arabs “partne[r] voluntarily with the rest of the world on the basis of mutuality, reciprocity and equality” as they seek to reshape existing political systems in ways that safeguard human freedom and dignity(6). Ideational flows feature prominently in an open-ended, “didactic” process whereby Arab publics and elites pursue and enact political change as local and global, Arab-Islamic and Western, knowledge systems, traditions, imaginaries, and practices continually interact(7).

Analysts can better assess the significance of pre and post-2011 Arab legal reforms regulating political parties, for instance, by paying attention to local context in ways that Western “Third Wave democratization” paradigms neglect(8). A different picture may emerge from the model where Western norms filter down to developing Arab countries. Institutional approaches are not without problems, especially when applied to Arab contexts where institutions are in varying degrees still under construction. As a category, institutionalism poses problems not only of measurement but also of specificity. The view taken here is that institutionalism is a continuous process and one that is context-specific.

For instance, rational choice(9) would face difficulties in explaining institutionalism in government in a region where structures and government itself pose diverse peculiarities. Comparative political theory leaves much to be desired in this regard. Applying abstract theories in total deference to the practicalities and peculiarities of the governance in Arab contexts calls for realistic testing of institutionalism.

Thus, a “learning” perspective accounting for variation in the direction, pace, scope, and impact of institutionalized norm change between local and international actors and structures can be infinitely useful. This approach is extended here to Qatar’s novel entry into the international world of football—replete with international organizations and actors (FIFA, the ILO, human rights groups, international labor advocates). Qatar has mastered how to address criticism responsively, rather than defensively, and has continued to put in place legal reforms, cooperating with the inquiries fielded by FIFA and relevant international bodies. Qatar has shown skill and resilience in not relinquishing the World Cup despite repeated threats of being deprived of its host status. The result is success in winning the bid, against powerful competitors such as England and Australia, then being ahead of the learning curve by initiating reforms, either already implemented or under way, and then hanging on to its historic win to host the World Cup in 2022.(10)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ET5gadtxcA>

## **Qatar Takes the Heat**

Qatar’s successful bid to host the FIFA World Cup feeds into the country’s “soft power [that] is vested in sports and particularly football,” according to James Dorsey writing in Hurriyet Daily News(11). Yet, being crowned host has subjected it to extensive “international scrutiny” and made it “vulnerable” to human rights allegations in criticism that may be partly attributed to “anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice”. Qatar’s responsiveness to international criticisms is thus significant, and Dorsey is cautiously optimistic. While posing challenges to a sport-centered soft power strategy, controversies surrounding the World Cup may become a “straightjacket for inevitable social reforms”(12). The numerous complaints and criticisms have included “technical issues” such as Qatar’s extreme summer heat(13). Of note here is that Qatar may be able to transform international challenges to its own benefit by implementing various legal and institutional changes.

The prospect of moving the FIFA games from winter to summer created another international hubbub, however. In another article, Dorsey recognizes that the onslaught of criticisms and legal challenges to Qatar have been obstacles to its goal of generating “reputational dividends” through hosting the World Cup(14). Yet the Gulf country has responded to criticisms through diplomatic platforms and infrastructural planning, including the development of new stadium thermal cooling technologies(15). But, it has never been just about the weather. Repeated expressions of concern about “extreme

temperatures” have been interwoven with other allegations regarding corruption and working conditions(16). This negative publicity has been without pause for Qatar, despite its noteworthy “engage[ment] with its critics” over the years(17). Three years in, it has “so far been unable” to sway public opinion and international perceptions(18). The implication here is that Qatar continues to learn the rules of this international game: it has not yet exhausted its repertoire of responses to legal, normative, and public relations challenges.

## **“Norming” Labor Rights**

In addition to complaints about its desert heat, more trenchant and sustained criticism has stressed laborers’ rights in Qatar. Following reports of workers’ deaths and injuries, attention turned to the working conditions of laborers building stadium infrastructure(19). Yet, Dorsey stresses that Qatar has “responded to international criticism of its labor conditions by seeking to improve working and living conditions”(20). Further, the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee overseeing World Cup preparations was conducting an investigation of working conditions. It issued a workers’ charter “that pledged to meet international standards” with the exception of bargaining rights and union organizing; a comparable charter by Qatar Foundation was in the works(21). Here, Dorsey highlights the various steps Qatar is taking to address a matter of international norm-based concern by outside actors.

Yet the issue of labor standards and conditions continually carries with it difficult lessons for Qatar. As Dorsey comments, negative attention surrounding the World Cup has turned out to be a “public relations fiasco”(22). As FIFA moved to consider withdrawing hosting rights from the Gulf country, Qataris are “learning the hard way that their failure to engage amounted to surrender of the battlefield to their opponents”(23). Even sensitive issues such as workers’ demands must be addressed publicly on the international stage. *More* international engagement with critics, not less, may be a strategy to hanging on to the World Cup. Qatar has moved beyond the rhetorical to produce the substantive, continues Dorsey. “It has gone beyond issuing lofty statements of principle in a bid to address material concerns” of laborers and their advocates in a series of significant policy reforms(24). None of this has been enough, it seems, to counteract dogged criticisms leveraged against the country. Learning can be negative as positive: hard lessons serve as the errors that necessitate further trials.

In another article, Dorsey suggests attitudes to be consequential, if implicit, features of complaints against Qatar. He notes that “a perceived lack of real progress” in improving labor conditions has continued to create a “public relations beating for Qatar” as human rights groups, international trade unions, and even newspapers such as *The Guardian* continue to run with the story(25). This persistence is noteworthy, given that Qatari steps allowing inspections of working conditions are “widely viewed as meeting international

standards”(26). Dorsey briefly considers the “silver lining” that the unending turmoil has: FIFA itself has been spurred to address the issue of workers’ rights in the World Cup(27). It has learned lessons from the Qatari experience in this two-way interaction between an Arab, Muslim state and an international body dominated by larger, stronger (Western) powers.

Impatience has characterized attacks on Qatar’s labor situation, perhaps obscuring international recognition that “Qatar’s engagement [with criticisms of its labor policies] constituted a sharp break with past practice”(28). For instance, the Qatari government pledged it would “ensure the report was included in an inquiry it has already launched into the alleged abuses” of construction workers catalogued in a harsh 2013 Amnesty International report(29). Dorsey quotes an official from the 2022 Supreme Committee who, while pledging Qatar’s “commitment” to improving workers’ conditions, cautions that doing so “cannot be done overnight,” even as FIFA has served as a “catalyst for improvements in this regard”(30). Here is recognition by Qatar that external linkages may precipitate policy liberalization—but it may be unreasonable to entirely dictate the speed and substance of change. Yet, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) remains “dismissive” of reforms that stop short of organizing and bargaining rights(31).

Ultimately, promises must meet the “test” of policy enactment, as demands by international trade unions for Qatar to freeze its kafala system actually pose an opportunity for Qatar(32). “Embracing the ITUC’s call on the grounds of compassion would earn Qatar significant brownie points in a crucial battle” in a maneuver through which it can extricate itself from its so far “defensive” posture(33). Expressing a willingness to reform the widely maligned *kafala* system, a “younger generation of Western-educated” Qataris at the forefront of this fight issue a “plea for more time” to make the deeper changes human rights advocates and trade advocates demand(34). The challenge for Qatar which has been “under fire” since named as World Cup host thus involves issues of policy (translating international standards into national legislation), international image (sports-centered soft power) and identity and culture (where demography looms large). Institutional change and the adoption of international norms is not a matter of simple transplantation: local context mediates the pace and substance of reform.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ds5HYJTSb20>

## **The Battle of “Corruption” Allegations**

Concurrent with charges against Qatar’s labor environment have been allegations that Qatar won its World Cup bid through bribery or unsavory methods. Even though “revelations of alleged bribery have yet to produce a smoking gun,” these charges plagued Qatar for years(35). Their persistence demonstrates for Dorsey Qatar’s challenges in winning over international public opinion, an obstacle that greater transparency with respect to its bid budget might begin to allay(36). He remarks that media disclosures of



new connections between Qatari and FIFA-connected officials have yet to establish actual bribery evidence.

Still, Dorsey describes Qatar's responses here as "generic" and "bland," inadequate to dissipate the ongoing controversy and hindering Qatar's attempts to "engender empathy(37)". More openness and more public disclosure of information may generate soft power, he suggests.

Purely political motivations are easily spotted in some critics' objections to Qatar. "Israel appears to be mobilizing a grassroots campaign against Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup," even as most football fans around the world had stayed out of the sparring over the Gulf country's FIFA plans(38). Lambasting Qatar for its support of Hamas and "terrorism," Dorsey notes the protests in front of the Qatari Embassy in London are far from an isolated incident. They come after a "host of attacks on Qatar by Israeli politicians, officials, and academics in recent months," entreaties in The New York Times, and lobbying of US officials to pressure Qatar to cut off support for the Palestinian group Hamas by threatening to strip it of its World Cup host status(39). Sports, meet international politics.

Still, Qatari officials have persistently cooperated with allegations and inquiries into what critics frame as a corruption-tainted World Cup bid. Reporting on FIFA head Blatter's decision to step down, *Hurriyet Daily News* quotes the President of the Qatari Football Association urging his English counterpart to "let the legal process take its course" and focus on his own football turf(40). Qatar would not give up its hosting rights, and would "continue to cooperate with investigations into the bidding process," including those by Switzerland and the United States(41). Qatar's weathering of the onslaught of criticisms has thus involved a responsiveness to bilateral and international legal proceedings and inquiries.

Language Used	Significance	Dynamics of Change: How Qatar "Learns"
controversies as "straightjacket for inevitable social reforms"(42)	FIFA preparations spurring liberalization	Local changes facilitated by global interactions
Workers' charter "pledged to meet international standards"(43)	New guidelines for protecting workers' rights	Adopting international human rights norms through policy innovation
"learning the hard way that failure to engage amounted to surrender of the battlefield" (44)	Critics demand specific and complete responses to charges of laborers' abuse	Trial and error
"It has gone beyond issuing lofty statements of principle in a bid to address material concerns"(45)	New policies regarding workers' rights	From discourse to policy
"widely viewed as meeting international standards"(46)	Qatar allows inspectors to monitor implementation of labor regulations	Joining 'world culture' of international norms

"silver lining"(47)	Qatar controversies push FIFA to pay attention to labor practices	Local-global direction of norm evolution
"a sharp break with past practice"(48)	Qatar's responsiveness regarding labor reforms	Ongoing FIFA trial as "critical juncture"
"cannot be done overnight"	Reforming kafala system requires time	Local context mediates pace of change
"let the legal process take its course" (50)	Qatar's cooperation with investigation into allegations of corruption	Institution-building via local and international legal channels

## Conclusion

The analysis employed here indicates a consistent offensive against Qatar by a range of international actors challenging its bid to host the prestigious football tournament. Criticisms have ranged from severe temperatures, inadequate infrastructure, poor working conditions for laborers, allegations of corruption, and even political positions deemed unpalatable to some regional counterparts. In response, Qatar has demonstrated a willingness and capacity to learn the "rules of the game." Cooperating with inquests, developing and testing cooling technologies, countering allegations of corruption, and enacting a series of labor reforms are some examples of Qatar's institution-building. Best viewed from a "learning" perspective, the Gulf state's jockeying stands as a recent and relevant example of locally-rooted, internationally-receptive norm enactment and gradual policy change. At the outset of 2018, Qatar remains claimant to hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Critical analysis of media discourse can thus untangle the interwoven worlds of politics and sports. Of note in the media discourse examined above has been the multi-pronged nature of the criticisms. The content changes, but the critics' conclusions have remained consistent: Qatar should not host the World Cup. Perhaps ironically, the politicization of sport preliminarily uncovered here can facilitate and spur international "dialoguing" into liberalizing reforms and institution-building. Local agency is key to the local-global negotiations that may ease countries in the developing world into the Western-dominated "liberal norms club." Recent reports point to, for instance, Qatar's adoption of new labor regulations for foreign domestic workers(51). As researchers learn about regional and global perceptions, states and societies, too, keep on "learning."

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