



# THE QATAR SQUABBLE

## FIFA WORLD CUP 2022

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“O, people! We created you from a male and a female, and We made you races and tribes: so that you may come to know one another. The best among you before Allah is the most righteous.” This is a verse from Noble Quran, delivered by the young Qatari Ghanem Al-Muftah, accompanied by the American artist Morgan Freeman, on the eve of FIFA World Cup opening ceremony in Doha. Known as the shining jewel of Qatar, the city sits on the east coast lapped by the warm waters of the Persian Gulf.

This was a unique beginning with the message of peace, love and co-existence. Unfortunately, a smoke screen of controversy was created to conceal the positives Qatar offered to the passionate fans pouring in to witness the FIFA World Cup for the first ever time in the Arabian Peninsula – hosted by a Muslim country. A sea of criticism was unleashed upon Qatar, the severity which can be gauged by the fact that the British media outlet BBC chose against broadcasting the opening ceremony – something that invited a fair bit of backlash to the publication. This was the first time BBC did not broadcast an international event of this magnitude.

The brutal opprobrium was not recent. It started in 2010 when Qatar was officially declared to host the World Cup, picking pace and intensity as the event drew closer. Bans on alcohol, LGBTQ+ symbols/slogans, and public display of

intimacy within stadiums were a few of the issues deliberately granted media spotlight. Even more severe, however, was the humanitarian issue of migrant labourers in Qatar – commonly known to live a precarious life in the country, laden with racism and exploitation.

These issues, however, were blown out of proportion in Western media. Qatari measures against PDA are not against individuals belong to the LGBTQ+ community, but are rather universal and applicable to everyone regardless of their sexual orientations. Within Arab Culture in particular and Muslim Culture in general, expressions of love are an exceedingly private phenomenon and considered indecent to be displayed publicly. The values, beliefs, and cultures of particular societies naturally ought to be respected – something Western countries are also firm on in their dealings with immigrants.

It is worth pointing out here that Western media, while criticizing Qatar, forgets that in many developed Western states, things like nudity, kissing, etc. are also prohibited in public spaces – rules that are defended on the basis of ‘values, civilization and culture’. When a Muslim country imposes restrictions, however, it is immediately deemed backward, conservative and orthodox. These double standards cannot be missed: and indeed ought to be highlighted.

Rather than imposing European on Western values in an Arab nation, purely for the purpose of easing the tensions of their traveling supporters, the Western media would do well to shed light on the various things that had to come together – in terms of planning and execution – for the World Cup to be made possible in Qatar within such short period of time. It is not even just Arab nations being victims of the Western gaze: back in 2008 during the Beijing Olympics, similar controversies were observed i.e. sharp criticism due to certain restrictions and the death of construction workers.

These are generally the same voices that considered the Hijab (headscarf) as a threat to French culture, a culture generally perceived as tremendously open, accepting, and tolerant. Except, of course, when it comes to the free expression of Muslim women. These same people call for universal values and global space when in Doha, however. This selective criticism of state policies is lethal for a pluralistic world where all can hope to strive for a shared future.

Following Morocco's win over Portugal in the World Cup, which legions of people around the world celebrated, a Syrian woman was attacked by Spanish police in Ceuta while expressing her elation. No news of this was seen in Western media, however – unfortunately it was not deemed particularly barbaric. No human rights were exploited here!

The humanitarian agenda to demoralize Qatar does not stop there. Western media stated time and again that somewhere between 6,500 to 15,000 migrant labour workers died while preparing for the World Cup. These are not legally documented figures: the actual number is 40 - in which 3 are work-related<sup>1</sup>. Here Arabs are criticized by the very people who capitalized on slave trade and colonialism and built empires from the blood of African slaves. Orientalism “as a western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over orient”<sup>2</sup> was once again at play, with Arabs being depicted as exotic, suppressed and inferior creatures who can only be governed by (problematic) Western knowledge.

The hypocrisy was captured by Gianni Infantino (president of FIFA) beautifully saying, “I think for what we Europeans have been doing in the last 3,000 years, around the world, we should be apologizing for the next 3,000 years before starting to give moral lessons to people.”

Was not the FIFA World Cup in 1934 hosted by Italy during the reign of Mussolini problematic? Was it not an eyebrow raiser when the Olympics of 1936 took place under Hitler's regime? No one said that they exerted power through their unjust, fascist ideologies through gaming events back then. The FIFA World Cup is being hosted by North America in 2026: does it merit a similar reaction to 2022's? One of the countries in question, after all, is the United States of America. Would Western nations boycott the USA for waging scores of wars across the globe, destabilizing the Middle East, casually bombing and droning as if it were a sport, decimating generations of Afghans who have been forced to quite literally sell their children due to hunger and disease, and for the brutal slave trade of yesteryears?

For the West, events of this magnitude have become platforms to push outmoded imperial ideologies and set a standard of superiority for the rest of the world.

The Western media did not highlight how an Arab nation was capable of spending \$220 billion to host the event or how fans/visitors from around the globe had plenty of options in terms of comfortable and safe accommodation – which included specific fan villages and over-the-top transparency, cooperation and guidance from stadium management. The cumulative stadium attendance surpassed 2.45 million spectators. That equals an average of 96% occupancy and is higher than the corresponding 2.17 million figure for the 2018 edition. This means it was the highest attendance in the history of the FIFA World Cup since 1994.

The number of visitors, smoothness of operations, fans enjoying Arab songs and culture with people from other parts of the world, minimum harassment cases if at all, no hooliganism, Japanese fans cleaning stadiums after matches, etc. are just some of the many positives seen at this World Cup.

History was also made by Stéphanie Frappart, who not only became the first woman to officiate a FIFA World Cup match, but also, together with Neuza Back and Karen Díaz Medina, formed the first all-female trio to take charge. Qatar should be embraced as an emerging competitive economy enriched with religious and cultural inclusivity, not as an inhumane and marginalized society. This Western propaganda is nothing but stereotypical generalizations through various political, social and economic tools.

For Pakistani fans, let it be known that Pakistan had a fair share of offerings to this mega event. Although it did qualify, it made two significant contributions. The country was responsible for roughly one-third of the overall quantity of footballs (named Al Rihla) used in matches – which a company by the name of Forward Sports, located in Sialkot, had manufactured. Moreover, Pakistan sent 4,500 troops to Doha for purposed of security. The deployment was made on the special request of the Qatari government in the context of cordial relations of trust, brotherhood and friendship between the two countries.

Islamabad and Doha joining hands for the FIFA World Cup of 2022 also had an intrinsic message that the world of competition has to leave and a new world of cooperation has to emerge. As Russian philosopher, historian and revolutionary by the name of Peter Kropotkin said, “Competition is the law of the jungle, but cooperation is the law of civilization”.

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<sup>1</sup>Fact check: How many people died for the Qatar World Cup? <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-how-many-people-have-died-for-the-qatar-world-cup/a-63763713>

<sup>2</sup>Burney, S. (2012). CHAPTER ONE: Orientalism: The Making of the Other. Counterpoints, 417, 23–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981698>