

Qatar 2022 and After: A Credible Threat for the FIFA Empire?

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The paper focuses on the FIFA World Cup organized in Qatar at the end of 2022, which has been the subject of multiple controversies since the decision was taken in December 2010. If it is nowadays admitted that Qatar invests in the world of high-level sports in order to consolidate its soft power, the holding of the most important sports competition in the world poses many problems, both societal and environmental. The objective of the paper is to recall the main controversies related to the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which are expected to continue during the tournament itself, and to underline that it could threaten the FIFA empire financially, in case of withdrawal of powerful sponsors, as it happened in the recent past.

Keywords: controversy, credible threat, FIFA World Cup, soccer, Qatar 2022, sponsorship

INTRODUCTION

The 2022 FIFA World Cup, which will be held in Qatar from November 20 to December 18, 2022, is the subject of many controversies (Dorsey, 2014). Of course, this is not the first soccer competition to be contested. The oldest among us remember the 1978 FIFA World Cup held in Argentina, then under the dictatorship of General Jorge Videla (Arbena, 1990). While the matches were being played, the basement of the *Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada* –the infamous Navy Superior Mechanics School– was used as a torture chamber for political opponents, in conditions of indescribable atrocity, both for men and women. For two years, General Jorge Videla has been waging a “dirty war” against Marxist subversion, in the same vein as General Augusto Pinochet in Chile, which has not prevented FIFA from maintaining the world competition in Argentina. This was a godsend for General Jorge Videla, whose national team’s victory on June 25, 1978, with a clever use of the print media (Smith, 2002), would make his regime shine until the resounding Falkland Islands war of April 1982 and the end of the dictatorship one year after.

Certainly, the 2022 FIFA World Cup is nothing like what was a shame for soccer and its fans in Argentina. Qatar has built a strong bid, pledging to do more for a “green” World Cup, and highlighting its desire to impulse new territories for soccer in the Middle East. However, the 2022 FIFA World Cup is the object of sharp criticism from different political, economic and even sporting backgrounds (Brannagan & Reiche, 2022), especially in Europe. In a nutshell, it is possible to mention the controversies that appeared before the tournament, as soon as the competition was awarded in December 2010, and the controversies that are foreseeable during the tournament itself. These controversies raise the question of the relevance of a mega-event whose financial dimension has largely taken precedence over the festive dimension. In the post-Covid-19 world, subject to dramatic climate change consequences, will there still be a place for FIFA World Cups tomorrow?

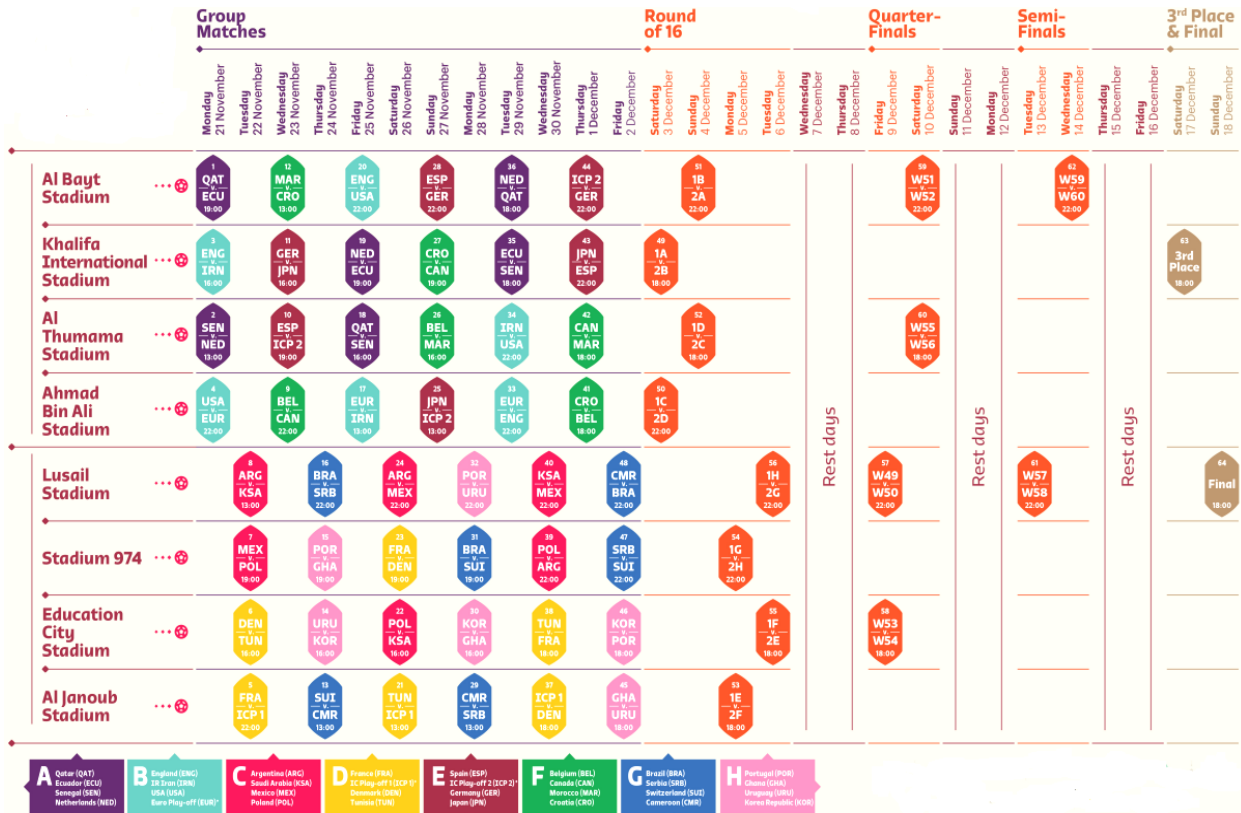
The paper aims to provide some food for thought to answer this question in the context of future research that may be undertaken on the governance of professional soccer. To this end, it is organized in three sections. In the first section, the three main controversies around the 2022 FIFA World Cup are presented: recurrent suspicions of corruption of several members of the FIFA executive committee; the enormous environmental cost of air conditioning the stadiums, the only way to allow the matches to take place in acceptable conditions; and the way migrant workers were mistreated during the construction and renovation of the 8 stadiums. In the second section, there is evidence that the tournament remains under pressure from new controversies related to the reception of fans, which Qatar's subtle communication seeks to downplay. In the third section, the implications of these various controversies in terms of reputational impact for FIFA are discussed, with the risk of fans turning away from their passion, potentially leading to the defection of powerful sponsors as a "credible threat".

THREE MAIN CONTROVERSIES

The controversies caused by the awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar are of three kinds. The first controversy is related to the suspicion of corruption: Qatar would have "bought" the competition. However, there is still no evidence in 2022 that Qatar was awarded the FIFA World Cup in violation of FIFA's bidding rules. Legally, no trial has been held and no convictions have been handed down, although investigations have been launched in several countries to try to shed light on the December 2010 voting (14 votes for Qatar, 8 votes for the United States). In an indictment published in March 2020, the federal prosecutor in Brooklyn noted that several voting members of the FIFA executive committee had been bribed, but the procedure did not go any further, given the death of several people involved. Researchers have confirmed in recent years that the soft power policy initiated by Qatar (Antwi-Boateng, 2014), using especially soccer (Paris-Saint-Germain in France is under Qatari control), does not make it possible to exclude the possibility of corruption. It should be recalled here that the term soft power was introduced by Nye Jr (1990) to describe a form of influence of an organization or a State on another by non-coercive means, of a cognitive and cultural nature. Qatar has chosen to distinguish itself mainly in the field of sports, media and diplomacy, unlike Abu Dhabi, which has chosen culture by inaugurating in 2017 a new Louvre-museum, which aims to be the first *universal museum* in the Arab world (Gombault & Selles, 2018).

The second controversy concerns the massive environmental cost of a FIFA World Cup held in a region of the world with extreme weather conditions. Traditionally, the various FIFA World Cups are scheduled every four years at the end of the European and South American championship seasons, between June and July. The minimum outdoor temperature in Qatar is 30° C, but it can reach 45° C or more. FIFA has therefore imposed a move of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to November and December, when temperatures are "only" 25 to 30° C. Nevertheless, it became clear very quickly that an expensive air-conditioning system for each of the stadiums would be necessary to prevent the players from suffocating on the field, especially for the matches played between 10 AM and 6 PM at local time (40 matches, or two-thirds of all matches) (see Figure 1). It is thus a set of eight stadiums with cooled atmospheres that Qatar had to build or renovate to meet the requirements of FIFA, regardless of any environmental consideration. An original thermal modeling by Sofotasiou *et al.* (2015) indicates that a load of 115 MW h per match will need to be consumed to provide satisfactory comfort conditions inside the stadiums. But isn't the country already the undisputed champion of massive CO₂ emissions (Paché, 2020)? According to the World Bank, it is the country that emits the most CO₂ per capita into the atmosphere, about 32.5 tons per capita in 2019, while the world average is 4.5 tons per capita.

FIGURE 1
MATCH SCHEDULE FOR THE 2022 FIFA WORLD CUP IN QATAR



Source: FIFA

The third controversy concerns the human cost associated with the construction and renovation of sports facilities. Although the figure can never be verified, according to a survey conducted by *The Guardian* in February 2021, 6,500 migrant workers are dead since 2011. The data was collected from the countries of origin of these workers, namely India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, which probably leads to an underestimation since many workers also come from other countries (Philippines, Kenya, among others) (Pattison *et al.*, 2021). Mortality on construction sites is due to the extreme heat in Qatar, which causes heart attacks, and to falls on the sites, which reflect the harsh working conditions. Until the end of August 2020, foreign workers were subject to Kafala, a form of modern slavery, as they were deprived of passports and could only travel or move with the employer's consent. Under international pressure, Qatar agreed to the installation of an International Labor Organization (ILO) office in 2017, before officially ending Kafala, although in practice, passport confiscation remains common in 2022. Garrett (2020) also questions the reality of the "end of Kafala", which would involve allowing migrant workers to enter and leave the country, change jobs, and obtain residence permits freely. More broadly, it would be necessary to "decriminalize" those who leave their jobs before the end of their contracts, which is not yet the case.

A TOURNAMENT ALREADY UNDER PRESSURE

As the countdown to the 2022 FIFA World Cup begins, and the match schedule is published, as if it were agreed that the three previous controversies were a relic of the past to be forgotten as soon as possible, the competition continues to generate controversy. 1.4 million fans are expected to attend the tournament, mostly from Europe, but also from South America and Asia. The authorities estimate that around 200,000 people will pass through Doha's two international airports each day. If the numbers are not

exceptional compared to other comparable events (Olympic Games, other FIFA World Cups, among others), the world has experienced a major disruption since the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia: Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic has confronted us with the health consequences of a massive mixing of populations, with the most serious pandemic –over 6 million deaths worldwide– ever known since the Spanish flu. In addition, awareness of the environmental cost of fan travel in terms of carbon footprint is now a reality in a world where resource scarcity is becoming a major social issue, as confirmed by the simulation of Pereira *et al.* (2020) on the carbon footprint by night related to the accommodation of each fan in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Chile, which officially submitted their joint bid in early August 2022 to host the 2030 FIFA World Cup (see Table 1). The move to a 48-team competition, from 32 teams, will mechanically increase the number of nights of accommodation, and therefore the total carbon footprint.

TABLE 1
CARBON FOOTPRINT INDICES IN KG CO₂-EQ (PER NIGHT/ACCOMMODATION)

<i>Types of accommodation used</i>	<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Uruguay/Paraguay</i>	<i>Chile</i>
Hotel, flat or lodge	52.8	14.9	40.4
House of friends and relatives	27.4	7.7	21.0
Rented house	10.5	3.0	8.0
Camping or hostel	11.5	3.3	8.8
Own home	10.5	3.0	8.0
Resort	60.3	17.0	46.1
Other types	17.3	4.8	13.0

Source: Adapted from Pereira *et al.* (2020).

It is therefore possible to question the relevance of holding the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and even if the “damage is done”, it is essential to reflect on the trajectory to follow: should we continue in the direction of these mega-events? Ironically, Qatar provides unexpected arguments to the detractors of soccer –like Brohm & Perelman (2006) who compare it to a true “*emotional plague*”– and of the overbidding that FIFA is at the origin of. Indeed, the conditions of reception of the foreign fans will be drastic, and largely in opposition with the Western humanistic values. On the one hand, the prohibition of sexual relations outside of marriage, of signs of affection or tenderness in public, such as kissing or hugging in the street, and of visible homosexual relations are recalled; even if prison sanctions are not applied, especially for tourists, the risk of an immediate expulsion from Qatar remains credible. On the other hand, the consumption of alcohol is prohibited in public, except for beer from one of the tournament sponsors, but only in the fan zones around the eight stadiums and in their luxury boxes (but not in the other sections).

But it is probably the strong recommendations for female fans’ dress code that are the most surprising. As we know, soccer has been feminized for three decades, both through high-level competitions reserved for women, such as World Cups (the last edition took place in France in 2019, and was won by the United States), and the increasingly massive presence of women in the stadiums of the various championships, including “Latin” countries (Pfister & Pope, 2018). However, the Qatari authorities have reminded that the dress code of female fans will be strictly controlled during the 2022 FIFA World Cup: no skirts above the knee, no shorts, no bare shoulders or deep necklines, no tight and suggestive clothes. In short, the cultural codes of Qatar prevail over the universalism of the values conveyed by soccer, even if the level of temperatures during the FIFA World Cup would suggest the wearing of very light clothes, including for medical reasons. The unofficial –but well informed– website Qatar World Cup 2022 (<https://www.qatarwc2022.com/>, Accessed July 6, 2022) is clear on this point: “*The Qataris would like to preserve the Qatari culture and prevent their children from being exposed to so much exposure*”.

It is difficult to feign surprise given the situation of women in Qatar, known for a long time by FIFA. In a report published at the end of March 2021, Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/world->

[report/2021/country-chapters/qatar#d91ede](#), Accessed July 6, 2022) denounced the very vague measures of “guardianship” that require women to obtain a man’s permission even in their daily activities. As Cundiff (2017) notes, this system is also extremely active in Saudi Arabia, where the control system is even stricter than in Qatar. Depending on their age, Qatari women still need the consent of a guardian –a father, brother, uncle or cousin– to travel and study abroad, have access to contraception and marry. According to official sources, some institutions and families do not apply the existing laws, since the Qatari constitution provides for equal opportunities for all citizens, but their own interpretation of ancestral customs. Male guardianship limits the ability of Qatari women to lead fulfilling and independent lives, while fueling recurring domestic violence, according to Human Rights Watch. However, progress in empowerment is being made, for example, with more women than men graduating from higher education, and a high proportion of women doctors and lawyers. The last frontier to be conquered will be the increased leadership of women in the corporate board of large companies, as is the case in other cultural contexts (Roberts & Brown, 2019).

DISCUSSION

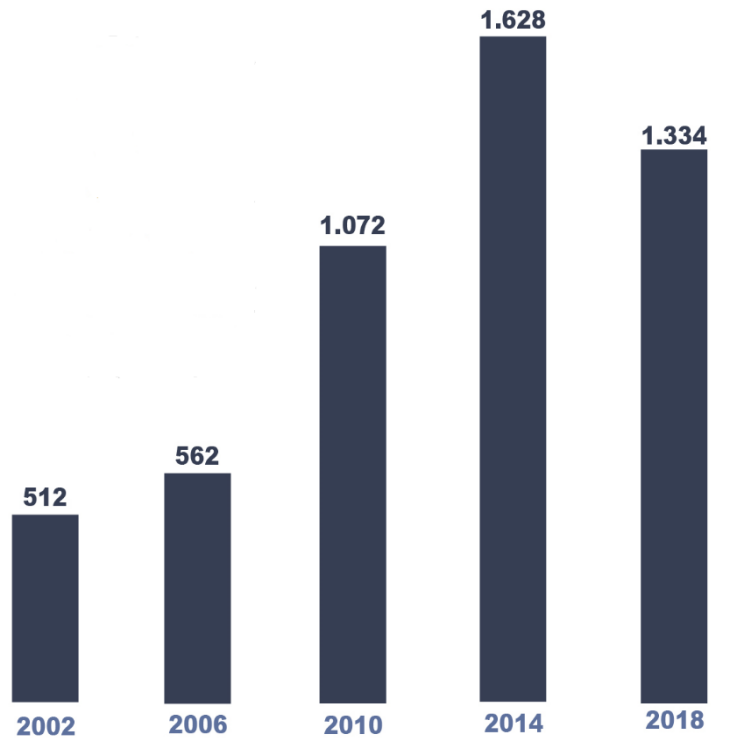
Since December 2010 and the awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, many observers have noted that something was wrong on the “soccer planet”. Indeed, a country with no soccer culture, no real sports infrastructure, which has a national championship –the Qatar Stars League– attracting barely 4,000 spectators per match, and which will nevertheless host the most media-savvy sports competition in the world, is quite surprising. Once the surprise was over, the controversies kept multiplying, and even the most die-hard soccer fans ended up asking many questions about a very (too) specific FIFA World Cup. By wanting to consider soccer as a cash machine, and being extremely permeable to multiple political influences, FIFA risks to end up burning its wings, by diverting the enthusiasts from their long-time passion. This could have dramatic economic consequences considering the revenues that soccer generates: the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia brought in 14.6 billion US dollars to FIFA, and 12.5 billion euros to Russia. A financial manna that a “enough is enough” reaction could threaten to collapse, notably through a strong activism on social networks, even if the impact on FIFA’s legitimacy is still debated (Hölzen & Meier, 2019).

FIFA is indeed a financial empire comparable to many multinational companies like Coca-Cola or Unilever. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, it is on track to exceed its projected revenue target of 6.44 billion US dollars for the 2019-2022 period, approaching 7 billion US dollars. FIFA’s financial position is so strong that it has spent more than one billion US dollars on measures to combat the effects of pandemic on professional soccer, while increasing its cash reserves by 21% to 5.49 billion US dollars. Most of the revenue comes from television and marketing, with new records expected in 2023. FIFA has made significant efforts to broaden its sponsorship base, for example by bringing in sponsors from countries where governance standards and levels of control are somewhat different from those in Europe. This presents a significant reputational risk for FIFA if sponsors behave unethically, for example by using child labor or highly polluting industrial and logistical systems. But the risk is at least as significant if FIFA blindly endorses a highly controversial FIFA World Cup. The most serious issue is the potential disaffection of soccer fans, with major impacts on the behavior of some sponsors.

Sponsors invest heavily in soccer because its media coverage is exceptional, and that it offers potentially high returns in terms of future cash flows (Hundt & Horsch, 2019). As an example, during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, the number of people who watched at least one minute on their TV at home was 3.262 billion, to which must be added 309.7 million people on digital platforms, in public broadcasting spaces or in bars and restaurants. As for the final of the competition, 884.37 million people watched it on their TV and 231.82 million people outside their homes or on digital platforms, which is more than one billion people on the planet. This audience creates the value of the “soccer product”, and if it were to gradually erode, it is highly likely that FIFA’s sponsorship revenues would experience a significant decline. Indeed, between 2014 and 2018, this decline was seen following the withdrawal of Castrol, Johnson & Johnson and Continental, among others (see Figure 2), from being associated with the corruption scandals in which FIFA has been involved (Boudreaux *et al.*, 2016). The threat of revenue loss to FIFA is therefore

credible. In other words, following conventional game-theoretic framework (Romp, 1997), we face a *credible threat* because the payoff in the next games (the next FIFA World Cups) could sharply decrease as result of the reputational consequences of the current game (the 2022 FIFA World Cup).

FIGURE 2
FIFA WORLD CUPS SPONSORSHIP REVENUE (2002-2018)



Source: FIFA

The effectiveness of a threat to withdraw a sponsor depends on its credibility, i.e., the credibility of the commitment on which it is implicitly based. The commitment is of two kinds: on the one hand, will the sponsor really punish FIFA for not complying with the threat; on the other hand, will the sponsor really stick to what it promises (continued sponsorship) if FIFA complies with the threat? For a threat to be effective, therefore, the sponsor must persuade FIFA that there will be retaliation if FIFA does not comply, and that there will be no retaliation if FIFA does comply. From this perspective, the credibility of the commitment underlying the threat depends directly on two complementary factors. The first factor refers to the sponsor's reputation for carrying out or not carrying out threats: when a sponsor has demonstrated in the past that it is able of moving from *words to deeds*, i.e., of demonstrating consistency between its discourse and its action, this will undoubtedly make FIFA more willing to comply with the threat. The second factor relates to the social status of the sponsor: the more uncompromising the sponsor is perceived to be on societal issues, for example by using CSR approaches to position itself in its markets, the more credible the threat of its withdrawal will be following unethical behavior in a FIFA World Cup. This is certainly an essential research avenue for the coming years.

CONCLUSION

In June 2022, as part of the World Environment Day initiated by the United Nations, the FIFA President posted a message on social networks in which he displays "a green card for the planet". He calls on all

soccer fans to participate in this project by creating and showing their own green card and encouraging their friends and family to follow their example. The FIFA President took the opportunity to remind that the 2022 FIFA World Cup will be neutral in terms of carbon footprint, without any proof to this claim. In November 2021, during the COP26 in Scotland, FIFA also published its strategy for the climate and recalled with vigor its commitment to a sport at the service of climate action, with a reduction of 50% of CO₂ emissions by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2040, despite the increase to 48 national teams in competition. With the operation “a green card for the planet”, some analysts speak of a pathetic greenwashing operation on the part of FIFA (Lecot, 2022). Without launching a sterile polemic, it must be admitted that, for decades, FIFA has often placed itself above the law, playing on multiple systems of influence to consolidate the financial power of its empire. From this point of view, its sudden passion for the climate change seems to be an additional way to protect itself and to prosper.

The awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup to Qatar was a surprise for many observers, who remain particularly critical of this choice. For others, on the contrary, they are unfounded accusations concerning the FIFA behaviors. As Boussois (2022) notes, by choosing Qatar, FIFA has sent a message of hope to regions where the organization of major competitions is less expected and could allow some countries to accelerate their development in many areas. Thus, rather than excluding the entire Middle East from soccer on principle, it is better to accompany these countries in their desire to open up. While the argument of Boussois (2022) is not without interest, it tends to overlook a proven fact: soccer is a subtle weapon of soft power that Qatar knows how to handle perfectly, and which has nothing to envy to other forms of power in the framework of international relations (Grecu & Chiriac, 2020). On the other hand, soccer fans can only agree with the idea of FIFA’s total support to the poorest countries, for example by organizing a FIFA World Cup in the Maghreb or in African countries, where the soccer culture is very strong. It is important to remember that Morocco has had five unsuccessful attempts in 1994, 1998, 2006, 2010 and 2026, and that the country hopes to win the bid for the 2030 FIFA World Cup. So much so that the best European leagues see dozens of African stars playing there, dreaming of one day participating in a FIFA World Cup in their continent of birth.

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