

## James Dorsey



### **Abstract:**

#### The 2022 World Cup: Putting Qatar's Best Foot Forward

2022 was Qatar's year to put its best foot forward. A major producer of natural gas, the tiny Gulf state was under the magnifying glass as it entered the final phase of hosting the 2022 World Cup and emerged as a potential part of efforts to reduce European dependence on Russian energy. On balance, Qatar looked like it has already succeeded, as much on its own steam as with the help of its erstwhile detractors in the Gulf and elsewhere in the Arab world, including the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Over the past decade, much of the attention has focused on labour rights in the Gulf state as a result of world governing soccer body FIFA's awarding of the 2022 World Cup hosting rights to Qatar in 2010. Qatar remains a target of criticism by human rights groups, despite implementing far-reaching reforms of its kafala or labour sponsorship system that long put workers at the mercy of their employers.

The criticism is rooted in the Gulf state's weak implementation of the reforms; a problematic judicial system; a top-down, centralised decision-making process; and poor handling of World Cup and sports-related incidents. Perceived as the underdog confronted with demands that would have de facto deprived it of its independence, Qatar was lauded for its resilience and steadfastness that ultimately persuaded the UAE and Saudi Arabia to end the boycott in January 2021.

Since then, Qatar was awarded for its key role in assisting the United States in its bungled withdrawal from Afghanistan with the US nominating it as a 'Major Non-NATO Ally.'

Qatar is one of handful of Muslim states to enjoy that status. It ranks Qatar among the United States' closest allies alongside Australia and Japan and opens the door to more joint military exercises and potential arms sales. The nomination took on added significance at a time that Gulf states worried about United States efforts to rejigger and reduce its security commitments in the region and strike a deal with Iran on reviving the 2015 nuclear agreement that curbed the Islamic republic's nuclear program.

The deal would lift many US sanctions against Iran and return it to the international fold without addressing Iran's ballistic missiles program and support for militias in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen – issues that are major concerns for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel.

Meanwhile, Qatar has earned brownie points in the Ukraine crisis despite keeping its lines open to Moscow and refraining from adopting US and European sanctions against Russia.

In contrast to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which refused US requests to increase oil production to stop prices from spiralling out of control, Qatar has started talks with Germany, France, Belgium, and Italy about long-term liquified natural gas supplies that would help Europe reduce its dependence on Russian energy.

All in all, Qatar has, in many ways, already put its best foot forward. Nevertheless, human rights groups view the final stretch to the World Cup as an opportunity to increase pressure on the Gulf state to address their remaining concerns. The final stretch is not only an opportunity for activists. It also is an opportunity for Qatar to put its best foot forward on labour issues that it already acknowledges, has made significant strides in addressing, but has yet work to do.

**Bio:**

Dr. James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and scholar, an Adjunct Senior Fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, and the author of the syndicated column and blog, [The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer](#).