

COMMENTARY

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Israel Mobilizes to Deprive Qatar of The World Cup

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One group has been conspicuously absent in the battle for greater transparency of global soccer governance symbolized by multiple corruption scandals and match-fixing: football fans, a key stakeholder with a vested interest in demanding a thorough cleansing of the management of the sport. That however may be changing as Israel appears to be mobilizing a grass root campaign against Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup as part of the Jewish state's effort to isolate Hamas, the Islamist militia that controls the Gaza Strip, and bolster the fortunes of the Palestine Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas.

In the only major manifestation of fan discontent since last year's protests against world soccer body FIFA in Brazil in the walk-up to the World Cup, football supporters in London rallied this weekend outside the Qatar embassy to demand that the Gulf state be deprived of its right to host the 2022 competition because of its support for Hamas. The protest under slogans that included 'Football fans deserve better than Qatar,' 'Kick Terrorism out of Football,' and 'Qatar: Stop FUNDING Terrorism,' was organized by the Sussex Friends of Israel and the Israel Forum Task Force.

"We should not negotiate with terrorists, we should not finance terrorists and we should certainly not reward terror by awarding the World Cup to Qatar in honour of its role in financing terror... (It is) time for the referee of world opinion to blow the whistle and show a red card to Qatar. It's time to kick Blatter out of FIFA and time to kick terrorism out of football and it's time to kick the World Cup out of Qatar," lawyer Mark Lewis, one of the protest's organizers told the

demonstrators referring to FIFA president Sepp Blatter. Organizers said the protest was the beginning of a campaign to deprive Qatar of the World Cup.

Israeli officials have sought to downplay the notion that they are mobilizing their considerable lobbying resources against Qatar at a key moment in the political battle over the Gulf state's hosting rights. The officials said a campaign would be hampered by the close ties between the United States and Qatar, which hosts the Middle East's largest US military base at a moment that Washington is marshalling an international posse against the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq.

The makings of an anti-Qatar campaign nevertheless coincide with a host of crucial developments. FIFA's independent investigator into the integrity of Qatar's World Cup bid, Michael Garcia, recently submitted his report to the group's executive committee. A FIFA executive committee member, Theo Zwanziger, predicted this week that Qatar would be deprived of its hosting rights not because of any wrongdoing in its bid but because of the Gulf state's extreme summer temperatures. FIFA was quick to assert that Zwanziger was expressing a personal opinion. Qatar is also under pressure from human rights groups and TRADE unions to abolish its kafala or sponsorship system that puts workers at the mercy of their employers.

The demonstration followed a host of attacks on Qatar by Israeli politicians, officials and academics in recent months as well as a successful Israeli-Egyptian effort in the early stages of negotiations to halt seven weeks of fighting in Gaza between Israel and Hamas to sideline Qatar in the diplomatic process. In an article in The New York Times, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Ron Prosor, dubbed Qatar the "Club Med for Terrorists" because of its support for Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and other jihadist groups.

"In recent years, the sheikhs of Doha, Qatar's capital, have funnelled hundreds of millions of dollars to Gaza. Every one of Hamas's tunnels and rockets might as well have had a sign that read 'Made possible through a kind donation from the emir of Qatar... It is time for the world to wake up and smell the gas fumes. Qatar has spared no cost to dress up its country as a liberal, progressive society, yet at its core, the micro monarchy is aggressively financing radical Islamist movements... In light of the emirate's unabashed support for terrorism, one has to question FIFA's decision to reward Qatar with the 2022 World Cup," Prosor wrote. Describing Qatar as a "petite petrol kingdom," Prosor demanded that the Gulf state be internationally isolated.

Israeli Prime Minister has moreover privately lobbied US Congressmen as well as various world leaders in a bid to rally support for depriving Qatar of its World Cup hosting rights if it fails to cut its ties to Hamas. Diplomats and analysts in Doha dismissed media reports that Qatar may expel Hamas leader Khalid Masha'al in the wake of the departure from the Gulf state of members of the Brotherhood that is widely viewed as a temporary move to pacify Saudi Arabia rather than a policy shift.

Ironically, the Israeli campaign could well produce the one thing Israel does not want: a moderation of Hamas' stance toward Israel that would allow it to endorse peace negotiations between the Palestinians and the Jewish state under the leadership of President Abbas based on the notion of mutual recognition and the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Israel has sought to sabotage Palestinian efforts to manage the rivalry between Hamas and Abbas's Al Fatah movement and form a national unity government that would negotiate on behalf of a unified rather than a debilitating divided polity.

Israel's efforts were long aided by Hamas' intransigence but that may be changing, according to Palestinian officials. With Abbas heading to the United Nations to demand that the Security Council establish a deadline for an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and the lifting of its blockade of the Gaza Strip, Palestinian officials said that Qatari pressure on Hamas to moderate its positions may be bearing fruit. The officials said that Hamas had in recent days confirmed that it was "on board" in terms of peace talks with Israel. They said opponents to peace talks within Hamas were lying low rather than attempting to resist Qatari pressure.

"Hamas has changed its tone. It is desperate to maintain the ceasefire in Gaza. Qatar is Hamas' one remaining friend. That gives it leverage, leverage that would be lost if Qatar loses the World Cup. That is something the Americans understand," said a Palestinian with close ties to both Qatari officials and Hamas.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2014/09/israel-mobilizes-to-deprive-qatar-of.html>

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