



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The 2018 World Cup Could Become the Middle East's Latest Battlefield

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The simultaneous presence in Russia of the Saudi and Iranian teams for the 2018 World Cup is likely to shine a spotlight on the covert wars between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran as well as on a related dispute over 2022 World Cup host Qatar, which did not qualify for this year's tournament. Tensions will be present even if the kingdom and the Islamic Republic fail to meet face to face on the pitch.

A [possible Saudi-Iranian clash on the soccer pitch](#) promises to be a highlight of the World Cup, which begins in Russia on June 14.

It would add significant drama to multiple soccer-related battles involving Saudi attempts to control Middle Eastern and Asian governance of the sport at the expense of Iran, as well as its challenges to Qatar's 2022 hosting rights and its [holding of World Cup broadcasting rights](#). These battles threaten to deprive Gulf fans of access to the Russian tournament's matches.

For the clash to happen, both Iran, the highest-ranked Middle Eastern team to have qualified for the 2018 tournament, and Saudi Arabia, widely viewed as an outsider, would have to make it out of the group stage. That could prove to be a tall order for both. Still, the simultaneous presence of the two teams in Russia will shine a light on tensions between the nations.

This month commemorates the imposition a year ago of a diplomatic and economic embargo by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt on Qatar – in part because of the Gulf state's relationship with Iran.

Gulf fans are already feeling the impact of uncertainty over whether the boycotting states will allow broadcasts of matches by BeIN, the sports subsidiary of the Qatar-owned Al Jazeera television network that owns the

broadcasting rights. The boycotting states are demanding that Qatar shutter Al Jazeera or at least curb its freewheeling reporting and talk shows, which often challenge the policies of countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

BeIN has been blocked in the boycotting states for the past year. While Saudi Arabia has sought to ignore Qatar's rights by creating beOutQ, [a 10-channel bootlegging operation based in the kingdom](#), the UAE has backed down from its initial blockage of BeIN broadcasts but maintained its jamming of Al Jazeera. beOutQ transmits over Arabsat, a Riyadh-based satellite provider owned by Saudi Arabia.

In the soccer-crazy Middle East, the sport arouses a deep passion similar to that stirred by religion and nationalist sentiment. Depriving viewers in the region of access to World Cup broadcasts is thus a serious matter.

Unable to challenge the Saudi action in Saudi courts, [Qatar has urged world soccer body FIFA](#) to take steps against what it describes as Saudi pirate broadcasters. Qatar also appears to have decided to stir the pot by blocking BeIN broadcasts to the UAE.

"We regret to inform that our customers are temporarily unable to view BeIN sports channels and packages as a result of a decision by the broadcaster of BeIN sports," [UAE telecom and digital television company Du said in a statement](#) on its website.

Qatar's move appeared to be designed to force UAE carriers to accept commercial terms. In so doing it would score a political success by breaching the boycott.

Its strategy appeared to have an effect on Du's competitor, [Etisalat, which announced 24 hours after the Du statement](#) that customers could sign up for BeIN broadcasts of World Cup matches.

The dispute reflects deep-seated disagreement within the lame-duck six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) over the campaign against Qatar. Oman, which, like Qatar, maintains close ties to Iran and has offered to mediate, [sought to thwart the Saudi bootlegging effort](#) by banning the import of beOutQ decoders.

"The import of these decoders, called beOutQ, was banned because they violate the law on intellectual property," an Omani official said. Oman was responding to a Qatari request.

Qatar's broadcasting rights are but one soccer battlefield on which the Gulf dispute is being fought.

Saudi and [UAE media](#) together with UK tabloid *The Sun* exploited the recent [London launch of the Foundation for Sports Integrity](#) by Jamie Fuller, a prominent Australian campaigner for a clean-up of global soccer governance.

The launch involved a reiteration of assertions of Qatari wrongdoing in its successful World Cup bid that media like Abu Dhabi's *The National* and Saudi Arabia's *Al Arabiya* projected as pressure on FIFA to deprive Qatar of its hosting rights.

"It is no secret that football's governing body is rotten to the core. (FIFA) will rightly come under renewed pressure to strip Qatar of the competition and carry out an internal investigation in the wake of the most recent allegations. The millions of fans eagerly anticipating 2022's festival of football deserve better," *The National* said.

The Saudi-owned *Ash-Sharq Al Awsat* newspaper reported that this month's FIFA Congress may [hold a re-vote on the hosting of the 2022 World Cup](#). There is no independent indication of such a move.

In a further bid to complicate life for Qatar, Saudi Arabia has backed a proposal to speed up the expansion of the World Cup to 48 teams from 32 – now scheduled for 2026 – by making it applicable to the 2022 World Cup.

If adopted, Qatar could be forced to share the hosting of the 2022 tournament with others in the region. Iran has already offered to help Qatar.

The Saudi-UAE moves come on the back of a two-pronged Saudi effort to gain a measure of control over global soccer governance.

Global tech investor Softbank, which counts [Saudi Arabia and the UAE among its largest investors](#), is believed to be behind [a \\$25 billion proposal embraced by FIFA president Gianni Infantino](#) to revamp the FIFA Club World Cup and launch a Global Nations League tournament. If approved, the proposal would give Saudi Arabia a significant voice in global soccer governance.

Complementing the Saudi FIFA bid is a Saudi effort to undermine the position of the 47-nation Asian Football Confederation (AFC) headed by Salman Bin Ibrahim Al-Khalifa, a member of the Bahraini ruling family and one of the most powerful men in global soccer.

To do so, Saudi Arabia has unilaterally launched a new regional bloc, the South West Asian Football Federation (SWAFF), a potential violation of FIFA and AFC rules.

The federation would be made up of members of both the AFC and the Amman-based West Asian Football Federation (WAFF), which groups all Middle Eastern nations except for Israel and is headed by Jordanian Prince Ali bin al-Hussein, a prominent advocate of soccer governance reform.

The heads of founding member associations, including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the UAE, were [flown, all expenses paid, to Jeddah for the SWAFF launch](#), offered gifts, and promised funding for soccer development.

SWAFF will be based in Jeddah with Saudi football federation president Adel Ezzat at its head and Saudi sports czar Turki al-Sheikh, a close associate of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, as its honorary president.

If SWAFF takes off, it will weaken the AFC, of which Iran is a prominent member. Iran is unlikely to want to try to join SWAFF given that Saudi Arabia would probably veto its membership.

Saudi Arabia's bid for regional soccer hegemony runs parallel to US President Donald J. Trump's vow to isolate Iran. It makes a mockery of the insistence by global sports governance that sports and politics are separate.

The jokers in the Saudi bid are the East Asian nations, with China, Japan, and South Korea in the lead. These countries are powerhouses within the AFC and maintain close economic and diplomatic ties to the kingdom, but have studiously remained on the sidelines of its struggle with Iran. The East Asian nations are unlikely to want to be sucked into Riyadh's battles.

*Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.*

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