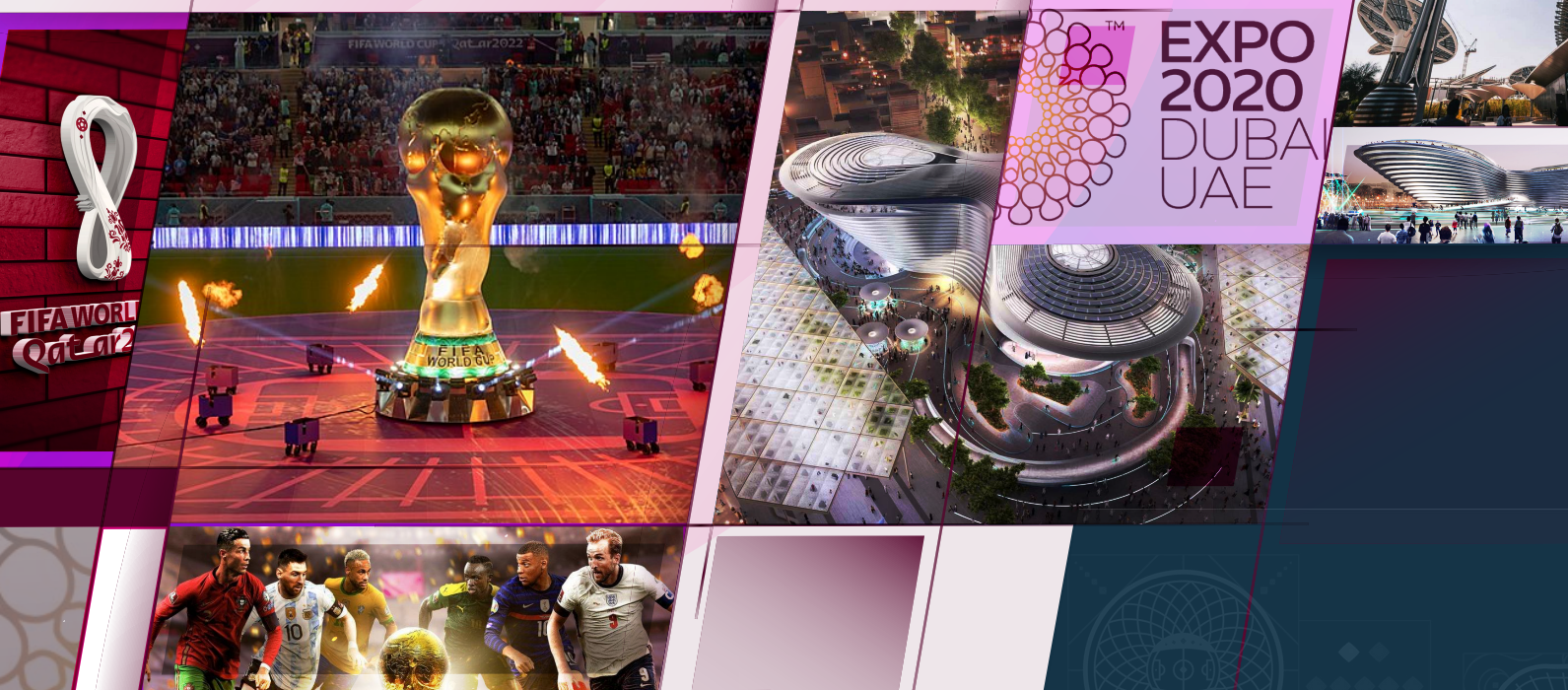




LESSONS LEARNED

FROM THE GULF'S HOSTING
OF THE GLOBAL MEGA EVENTS
**FIFA 2022 DOHA AND
EXPO 2020 DUBAI**

By Matthew K. Asada

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Executive Summary

In 2023, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) hosted two major international events following their successful delivery of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Doha and Expo 2020 (World's Fair) in Dubai. Doha's International Horticultural Exposition (Expo 2023) and Dubai's "Conference of Parties" climate conference (COP28) would not have been possible without the physical infrastructure, human capital, and diplomatic experience gained from their prior hosting of the World Cup and World's Fair.

As the United States prepares to host the 2026 FIFA World Cup—along with Canada and Mexico—and the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, it should review the lessons learned from Qatar and the UAE's historic global mega events. North America has a unique opportunity to learn from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) hosts, and in turn to pass on those lessons to Saudi Arabia as it prepares to host EXPO 2030 and FIFA 2034.

The World's Fair, the Summer Olympics, and the FIFA World Cup are the three most widely attended events in the world.^[1] Prior to 2021, none of these had ever taken place in the Middle East before, or North Africa or South Asia for that matter. However, the UAE made history by becoming the first Middle Eastern nation to host the World's Fair in 2021-2022—delayed by one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic^[2]—and Qatar shortly followed suit by hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Both of these events took place with in-person attendees, unlike the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

These three global mega events have incredibly long lead times: a decade is the norm. Given the long lead, neither Doha nor Dubai could have predicted how external events, such as a global pandemic or geopolitical fissures, would impact their delivery. Both countries also had to address socioeconomic issues such as worker welfare, advances in LGBTQ rights and social mores around alcohol consumption. Future hosts, particularly countries with Muslim populations such as Saudi Arabia, will also have to deal with these issues in the future.

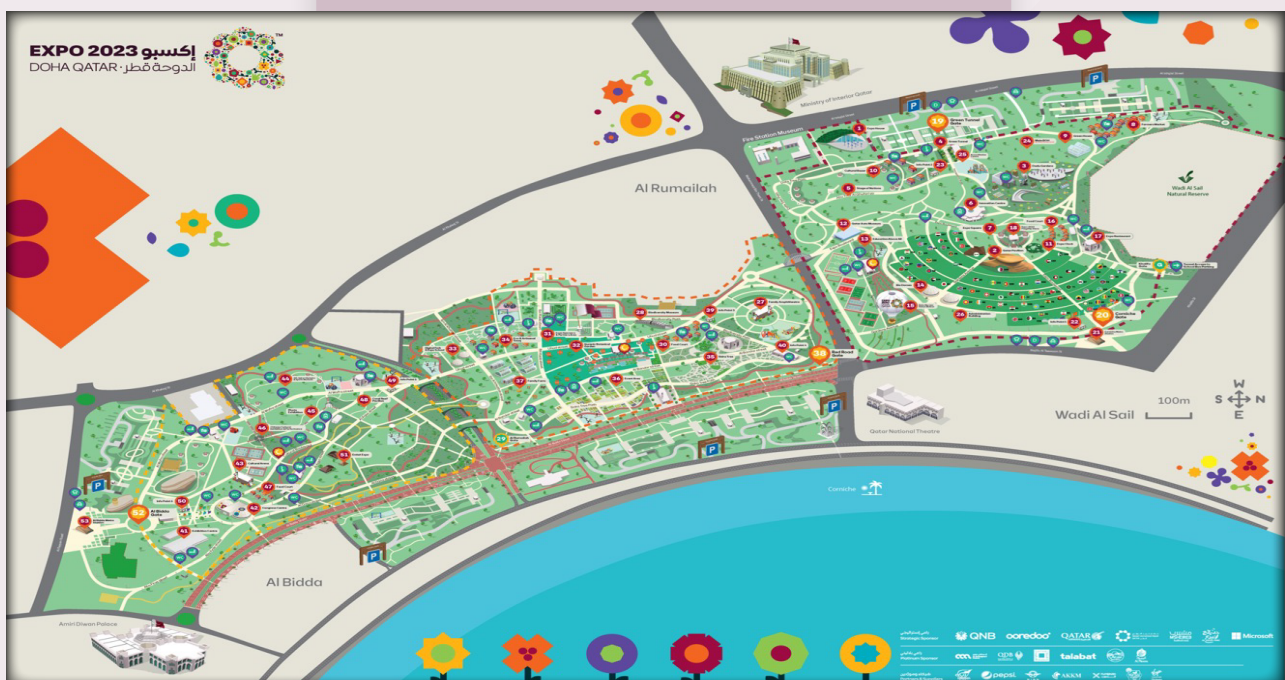
This report expands on the first inter-event comparison of these two global mega events in popular or academic literature, which the author published in 2023.^[4] Given the UAE and Qatar's proximity and similar political-economic systems and culture, it is worth examining their bid narratives, response to external stimuli, and innovation on event type to find areas of commonality and divergence. That report built on others' work on why countries host these events to focus on the how of their implementation. Motivations for hosting these events generally fall into three categories: nation branding (establishing a country's narrative), nation building (infrastructure and human capacity) and projecting soft power. This report goes one step further in identifying lessons that apply to all global mega event hosts as more countries, particularly developing nations, adopt global mega events as part of their public diplomacy strategies. This is especially relevant in an era of competing powers' vying for influence in a new, non-aligned world.

Recommendations to Future Global Mega Event Host Countries:

1. Lean into the strategic value of a global mega event as a country's overarching narrative
2. Resolve regional conflicts in advance to ensure that bilateral relations do not impact event execution
3. Try to anticipate crises—global, regional and local—and make contingency plans for pandemics, conflicts, and changes in diplomatic representation
4. Consider the cultural norms and sensitivities of visiting guests
5. Learn from past global mega event hosts



In 2023, the UAE (top) and Qatar (bottom) hosted international conferences and events on the grounds of EXPO 2020 and FIFA 2022's Fan Festival.





Host Country and Event Background

Since their independence in 1971, both Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have recorded impressive levels of economic growth, capitalizing on their natural resources, strategic location, and orientation towards free trade. While both countries are resource-rich, dynastic, absolute monarchies, whose citizens are a minority of the overall population, they have each attempted to differentiate themselves from one another through culture and commerce.

The men's World Cup is a quadrennial soccer competition organized by the International Federation of Football Associations, or FIFA, and is the most prestigious soccer competition in the world. FIFA's executive committee chose Qatar to be the tournament's 2022 host via a secret ballot held in 2010.

A World's Fair, also known as an international exposition or World Expo, is one of the planet's largest in-person gatherings. World's Fairs bring together people from every corner of the globe to innovate, collaborate, and showcase a vision for the future. The rights to host a World's Fair are awarded by member states of the Bureau of International Expositions (BIE). Either three- or six-months in length, the World's Fair requires host countries and international participants to build both temporary and permanent structures that address the event's theme and help to tell a country's story.

The journeys of Qatar and the UAE to FIFA 2022 and Expo 2020 began as early as 2009, on the cusp of a new decade and in the immediate aftermath of a devastating financial crisis that hampered many other nations' ability to invest in mega events. It was within this context that the states each selected the global mega event that would serve as their central organizing principle for a subsequent decade of development. To bid on the World Cup, Qatar leveraged its investments in culture and sports, membership in sports governance organizations, and hosting of previous regional sporting events, such as the Asian Games in 2006.^[5] To bid on the Expo, the UAE bet on its location as a regional hub for trade, travel, and commerce—as well as its diverse demography, with more than 100 nationalities residing in the country and abundant tourism offerings.^[6]

Bidding is the first phase of a five-phase delivery of global mega events: bidding, planning, construction and delivery, operations, and decommissioning. Winning the rights to host either of these events require multi-year, multi-million-dollar campaigns, albeit geared towards different audiences.

		
Announcement of Bid	November 2011	May 2009
Date of Award	November 27, 2013	December 2, 2010
Duration (days)	182	29
Opening – Closing Dates	October 1, 2021 – March 31, 2022	November 20, 2022 – December 18, 2022
Countries Participating	192	32
In-person Attendance	24M	3.4M (Stadiums) 1.8M (Fan Festival)
Broadcast Attendance	248M	5B 6B Social Media

Global Mega Events as Meta-Narratives

Recommendation #1: Embrace global mega events as narrative-building opportunities.

The bidding materials for FIFA 2022 and EXPO 2020 are still available online, and can be used to analyze each host country's theme and the overarching narrative they aimed to promote. Included amid these materials are the bid videos that both countries created to appeal to the voting members, FIFA's Executive Committee and the BIE member states.

Qatar produced three bid videos that centered upon the historical significance of an Arab state hosting the tournament. The videos showed visibly recognizable Muslims in traditional Islamic attire. They described a "truly unique world cup destination," raised the prospect of Israeli and Arab teams meeting on the pitch, and suggested that hosting the tournament would be an opportunity to dispel long-held stereotypes against Arabs. The narrator states, "We can completely change the image of the Arab region and the whole Middle East."

The UAE's bidding effort for Expo 2020 was initially led by Dubai—one of the UAE's seven emirates—as opposed to a federally-led campaign. Dubai's two bid videos centered around the emirate's incredible growth, its location as the meeting place for East and West, and claimed that it was the "UAE's turn to amaze the world." Expo 2020 Dubai was initially viewed as more tourism promotion: it was widely framed as "just another event for Dubai," a city already famous for its value as a meeting-point, and was included as part of the official Dubai Tourism Vision 2020 strategy launched in 2013.^[8] However, throughout the course of the event, Dubai would come to embrace, innovate and transform the Expo model, setting "a new bar," as the BIE Secretary General remarked at the delivery of the Expo 2020 final report.^[9]

The fact that both countries have continued to make these videos available online through state-affiliated YouTube channels (QatarFilmotion and Expo City Dubai) attests to their continuing resonance beyond the multi-year journey. Countries bidding for global mega events place a heavy importance on the bid videos, in addition to in-person testimonials from government officials and cultural ambassadors. The scripts for these videos are closely edited, and the visuals, music, and voicing are chosen to maximize emotional impact.

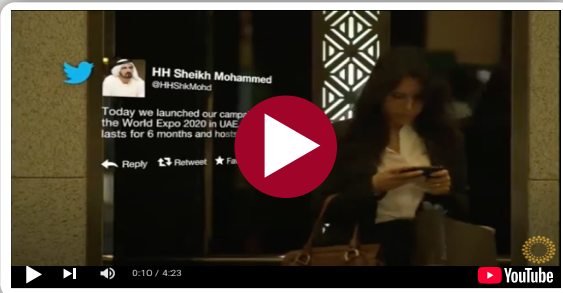
For both Qatar and the UAE, the mega events presented an opportunity to do more than simply host an international gathering. The rulers approached the historic task of hosting the region's first World Cup and World's Fair as national priorities and strategic elements in their nation-building efforts. At the time of their hosting, neither event had ever been held in a country as small, young, Islamic or wealthy as Qatar and the UAE—all of which would play out later in global perceptions.^[10]



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnhnOsnpGFw>

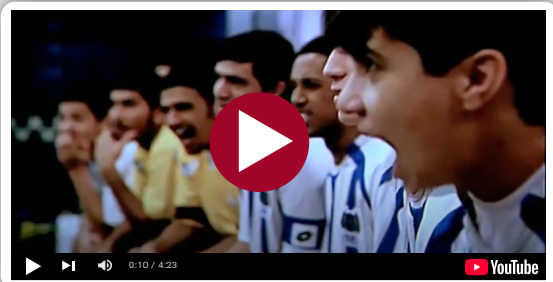


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**FIFA WORLD CUP
Qatar 2022**

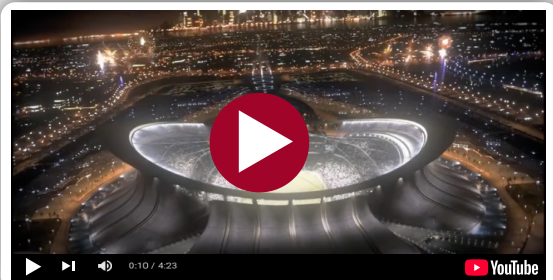
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MouGKZ39O7s>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaaj6AfE0Jc>



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Resolve Regional Conflicts Before the Event

Recommendation #2: Resolve regional conflicts in advance to ensure that bilateral relations do not impact event execution.

Unfortunately, the fluctuating bilateral relationship between the UAE and Qatar during the decade of delivery had a direct impact on both Expo 2020 Dubai and FIFA 2022 Doha. On June 4, 2017, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with Bahrain and Egypt, imposed a diplomatic, economic, and travel blockade against Qatar. The blockade was the culmination of a long-running dispute regarding leadership within the GCC and Qatar's pursuit of a more independent foreign policy.

As early as October 2017, the blockading nations issued complaints to FIFA that Qatar's status as a regional pariah made it an inappropriate venue for the World Cup, as the ongoing travel ban would make it impossible for Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini, and Egyptian athletes and fans to attend the event. Instead, the idea was floated that Qatar should share hosting rights of the 2022 World Cup with UAE and Saudi Arabia to break the deadlock. Although FIFA expressed no interest in the proposal—reasoning that the blockading nations could end the standoff at any time by restoring relations—this possibility was promoted as a serious possibility as late as 2019. A well-funded social media campaign, allegedly bankrolled by the UAE, strongly criticized the poor state of workers' rights in Qatar and suggested that the tournament should be moved out of the country for ethical concerns.^[12] As before, this proposal ultimately came to nothing, but it helped to reinforce perceptions about the event and shape the international discourse surrounding it.

On January 5, 2021, after three and a half years of impasse and few tangible public concessions, Qatar and Saudi Arabia signed the Al-Ula Declaration, ending their blockade. In May 2021, Qatar joined the Expo 2020 International Participants Meeting and signed its official participation agreement to become the 190th

country to join the world's fair and its pavilion was ready on the Expo's opening day. On November 20, 2022, the ruler of Dubai similarly joined the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the President of Egypt as guests of the Qatari Emir for the opening match of the World Cup.^[13]

It is difficult to evaluate the cost of the rift to each country, but there were negative consequences to both Qatar and the UAE.

Throughout it, international media reported on suspicious hacking of social media accounts and unauthorized access and disclosure of confidential files. This internal GCC turmoil caused reputational damage to both host countries and events, and may have prompted more external scrutiny of some of the issues—notably the use of migrant labor—that arose during the dispute.

The blockade had a direct impact on the countries' independent preparations for their global mega events, for instance in construction, delivery and planning. It also affected Qatar's participation in Expo 2020 and their beautiful, but limited in scope and exhibition, pavilion which shared the same architect as the UAE Pavilion. Finally, it negatively impacted the number of Qatari and Emirati visitors to the events due to the restricted cross-country advertising during the blockade. Even after travel links were restored and Qatari and Emirati nationals were allowed to visit, there was still some question about whether it was socially acceptable to do. Some international participants have even speculated whether Qatar's hosting of the International Horticultural Exposition (Expo 2023) was a direct response to their potential exclusion from Expo 2020 Dubai.

The economic impact of hosting these two global mega events could have been even larger had it not been for the blockade. Future hosts are encouraged to learn from Qatar and the UAE and mitigate, better yet resolve, regional conflicts before bidding, and definitely after receiving the rights to host.

Anticipate Crises – Global, Regional and Local

Recommendation #3: Try to anticipate crises—global, regional and local—and contingency plan for pandemics, outbreak of hostilities, and changes in diplomatic representation.

COVID-19

While the World Cup and Expo 2020 organizers prepared for a number of contingencies, neither anticipated the rapid onset of COVID-19 in early 2020, and the global disruptions that followed. While the global pandemic ultimately impacted the construction and preparation of both events, the primary operational impact was on Expo 2020 Dubai, which was eventually delayed for roughly one year as a result. The pandemic underscored the world's interconnectedness and brought these two global mega events even closer—temporally—together. When the bids were originally won, the events were scheduled to take place more than 15 months apart; ultimately, they were separated by less than a year, as Expo 2020 continued until March 2022 and the FIFA World Cup began in November of the same year. The UAE was able to successfully host a global mega event during a global pandemic, and future hosts will want to build on these lessons as part of their preparations.

The Expo 2020 organizers worked with Emirati authorities to introduce rigorous testing protocols to stop the spread of COVID-19 at the event. These preparations included four on-site laboratories, a vaccine mandate for Expo staff, and positive community messaging that kept construction going, doors open, and visitors coming. All visitors were required to be fully vaccinated or to present a negative result for a PCR test conducted within 72 hours of arrival. Expo 2020 required all in-person visitors to wear a mask both indoors and outdoors, although the outdoor requirement was substantially relaxed over time. Expo 2020 mobilized local volunteers to staff participant pavilions when their staff got sick during the event so that the pavilions could remain open. Even during the height of the January 2022 omicron surge, Expo 2020 never closed its doors due to COVID-19.

Ultimately, the event was heralded as a major success in extremely adverse conditions. To put this in perspective, the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, also delayed a year due to COVID-19, took place from July to August 2021, but it did so without any spectators, and Japan only re-opened to individual tourists in late 2022. The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, which also overlapped with Expo 2020, similarly took

place without any spectators. By the time FIFA 2022 kicked off in November 2022, COVID protocols in Qatar had been completely lifted.

In the two years preceding COVID-19 pandemic, Expo 2020 organizers had held few, if any, discussions with international participants regarding pandemic contingency planning. In 2020, the impact on pavilion construction and delivery became apparent, especially with the delays in supply chains and global shipping. The one-year delay required most pavilions to either reduce costs (personnel, exhibition, operations) to remain within their approved budgets, or seek additional funding from governments. During the operational phase, the pandemic prompted organizers and participants to develop new COVID protocols, which could have been considered as part of their original planning checklist, and organizers had to stand-up on-site testing facilities at short notice and at a higher cost than had it been part of initial planning. Fire, security, and terrorism scenarios had all been thoroughly considered, but a pandemic response and associated medical facilities were not part of the extensive planning.

Russia and the Region

Global mega events are invariably impacted by the outbreak of geopolitical hostilities, even between countries not directly associated with the events. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the pavilions of both Russia and Ukraine came under significant scrutiny at the Expo. Shortly after the invasion, the Ukrainian pavilion established a "Solidarity Wall" where visitors—civilian and dignitary alike—took pictures and left messages of support. The wall amounted to an unusual sign of political expression in a country not known for its political openness; nonetheless, it became a popular stop at the fair and was tolerated by Expo 2020 and UAE authorities. At the same time, the Russian pavilion—anticipating possible protesters—established a security perimeter to keep out any potential disruptors and protect the pavilion's facade. Member states kept their official signs of disapproval in the Expo 2020 setting to flying Ukrainian flags and projecting messages of support on their pavilions.

FIFA's crackdown on Russia was much more pronounced. Within a week of the invasion, Russia was banned from participating in the qualifying rounds for the 2022 World Cup. Prior to the ban, several Eastern European nations—notably Poland and the Czech Republic—refused to play against the Russian team, a situation that would have created a

conundrum for the hosts had Russia been allowed to remain in the tournament. Future hosts should consider contingency planning for what happens if a participating country attacks another participating country, and their policies on public displays of support or disapproval to avoid having to create policy and procedures post facto.

The Fall of Afghanistan

Global mega event hosts may also have to deal with a change in the government or political system of a participating country. When the democratically-elected government of Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in August 2021, President Ashraf Ghani flew to Abu Dhabi and the pavilion that had been reserved for the Afghan government became an unofficial Afghan cultural pavilion instead. In Qatar, where the Taliban had cultivated close ties with the government, the militant group continued to use its former political office in Doha alongside the Afghan embassy.^[14] Both Qatar and the UAE temporarily hosted Afghan refugees fleeing their country, with Qatar even creating an exhibition, visible outside of the Museum of Islamic Art during its global mega event, highlighting its support for Afghan refugees.

Israel and Palestine

The greater Middle East region's political conflicts were never far from the pavilions or the pitch. On September 15, 2020, the United States hosted the governments of the UAE, Israel, and Bahrain for the signing of the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and the two GCC members. Building off the success of the accords, Israel was announced as an official Expo 2020 participant country in May 2021. In Dubai, the Israeli pavilion was the centerpiece of the country's public diplomacy efforts in the region. Over the course of the expo, the Israeli pavilion hosted dozens of Israeli ministers, thousands of Arab officials and tourists, and a historic visit by Israeli President Isaac Herzog—the first of any Israeli president to the UAE. At the same time, Abu Dhabi attempted to evenhandedly manage its relations with the Palestinian Authority. Across the park, the Palestinian pavilion, funded by the UAE, won accolades for its interior design and sensory exhibition.

During the 2022 World Cup, Qatar—which has not established relations with Israel and had previously refused to accept Israeli passports—allowed Israeli tourists to enter the country to watch the tournament. However, in contrast to the UAE, Israeli visitors received a noticeably icy reception, both from their hosts

and from tens of thousands of Arab tourists. Conversely, Palestinian visitors to Doha were welcomed by Palestinian flags lining entry into the stadiums.

Know Your Audience and Consider the Cultures

Recommendation #4: Know your audiences and consider their cultures when designing the visitor experience and managing public relations

For the two host countries, these global mega events were always about more than soccer or public diplomacy; they also provided the host countries with the opportunity to connect with both domestic and international audiences. However, rather than seizing the opportunity to present new narratives about their states, the hosts were often stuck navigating conversations regarding their domestic records: labor practices, attitudes towards LGBTQ rights, and alcohol consumption. Proper preparation and salient messaging campaigns prior to the events could have tamed down some of the controversy surrounding these policies, improving the nations' soft-power image and allowing them to emphasize their positive policies without needing to do damage control on the negative ones.

Expo 2020 Dubai had far more in-person visitors than the Doha World Cup, with 24 million total visits. This was partially a product of the fair's long duration—lasting six months, while the soccer tournament lasted one month. Despite its shorter timeframe, Doha's World Cup had far greater global visibility than Expo 2020; 1.5 billion people tuned in to watch the final match between Argentina and defending champions France. While Expo 2020 was primarily an in-person event, it nonetheless reached new online audiences through its virtual navigable environment, virtualexpodubai.com. Other online initiatives included an Expo 2020 environment for Microsoft's Minecraft and social media and streaming platforms, including for its marquee concerts in Al Wasl Plaza. The UAE made it easy to travel to Dubai for the event, with no special visa requirement and a free Expo ticket with almost every flight. Ultimately, Expo 2020 reported that 30% of the 24 million visits were international.

On the other hand, Qatar limited entry to the country, requiring a special visa (Hayya permit). FIFA reported 3.4 million spectators watched World Cup matches from within the stadium; 1.8 million people visited the FIFA Fan Festival; nearly 500 million people tuned in to the World

Cup's opening match; and five billion engaged with the event throughout its lifecycle. According to Nielsen, there were nearly 94 million social media posts about the World Cup with a cumulative reach of 262 billion, delivering around six billion total social media engagements.^[16]

Both countries leaned into partnership with celebrities and social media influencers, in addition to traditional media outreach, to drive awareness and encourage visitors. In August 2021, Dubai's Tourism Authority unveiled a slick, Hollywood-style advertising campaign featuring American actors Jessica Biel and Zac Efron in a series of five short films. Qatar sponsored around 400 fans and influencers from 60 countries to visit the World Cup and post about their experience. However, both of these items were relatively late and did more to raise awareness of the event than encourage prospective visitors to book new trips. In-person word-of-mouth testimonials about the country or event, preferably a year out or more, could increase event attendees given the logistical and financial planning that most North American visitors need for long-distance trips to the Middle East. Due to the COVID pandemic, Dubai Tourism was only able to resume in-person travel and Expo 2020 North American promotional activities in September 2021, one-month before Expo 2020 opened.

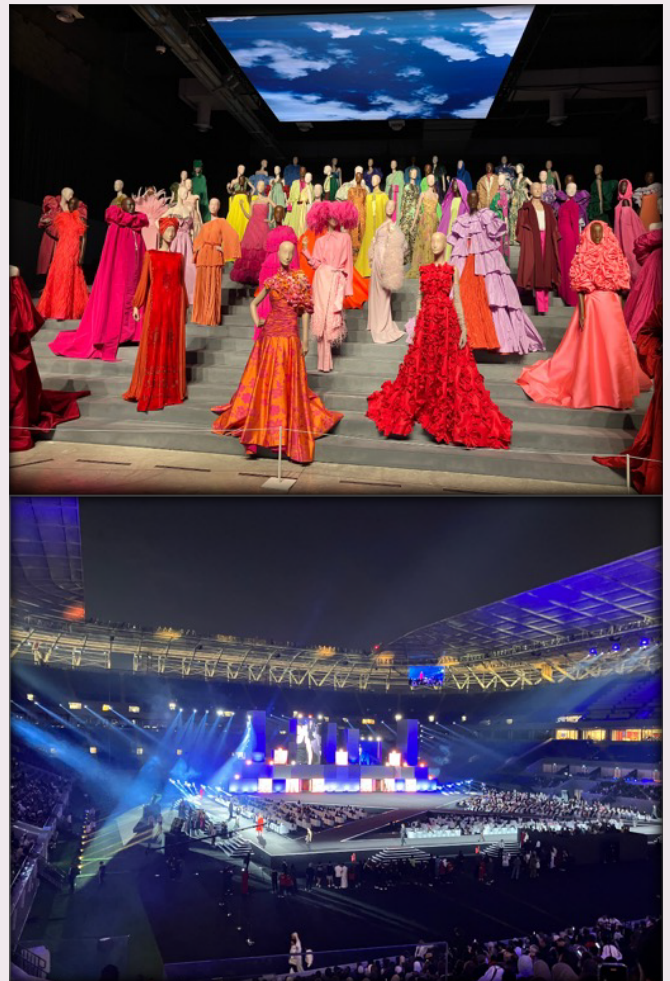
Learn from Past Hosts

Recommendation #5: Learn from past hosts of global mega events and build in active knowledge transfer protocols to successor events

As part of the bid development phase, many candidate countries look at past hosts and how they have previously used global mega events to advance their diplomacy strategies. Qatar and the UAE were able to look at how South Korea underscored its recent democratization (Seoul Olympics 1988, Taejon Expo 1993); Germany highlighted its reunification (Expo 2000 Hanover, World Cup 2006); and China announced its emergence on the world stage (Beijing Olympics 2008, Shanghai Expo 2010).^[17] China was the first developing country to host the World's Fair, and it broke records with total attendance (72 million) as well as infrastructure investment. China was an opportunity for social scientists and urban planners to examine nation branding and building around global mega events.^[18]

Both FIFA 2022 and EXPO 2020 looked to innovate their respective global mega events, leaning into their strengths, with Doha developing a cultural program and Dubai creating a com-

mercial program. The two countries' successful innovation on the event set a new standard for those hosts that followed. Of course, both the UAE and Qatar had a major advantage that most countries do not: they both relied on their substantial oil wealth to spend lavishly on the events. Host countries with lower budgets will need to tap more into the private sector and leverage public-private partnerships for cultural promotion and business attraction. The United States has a unique opportunity to both learn from and impart lessons to global mega event hosts from the Gulf given the upcoming events' timing.



Doha's Cultural Program

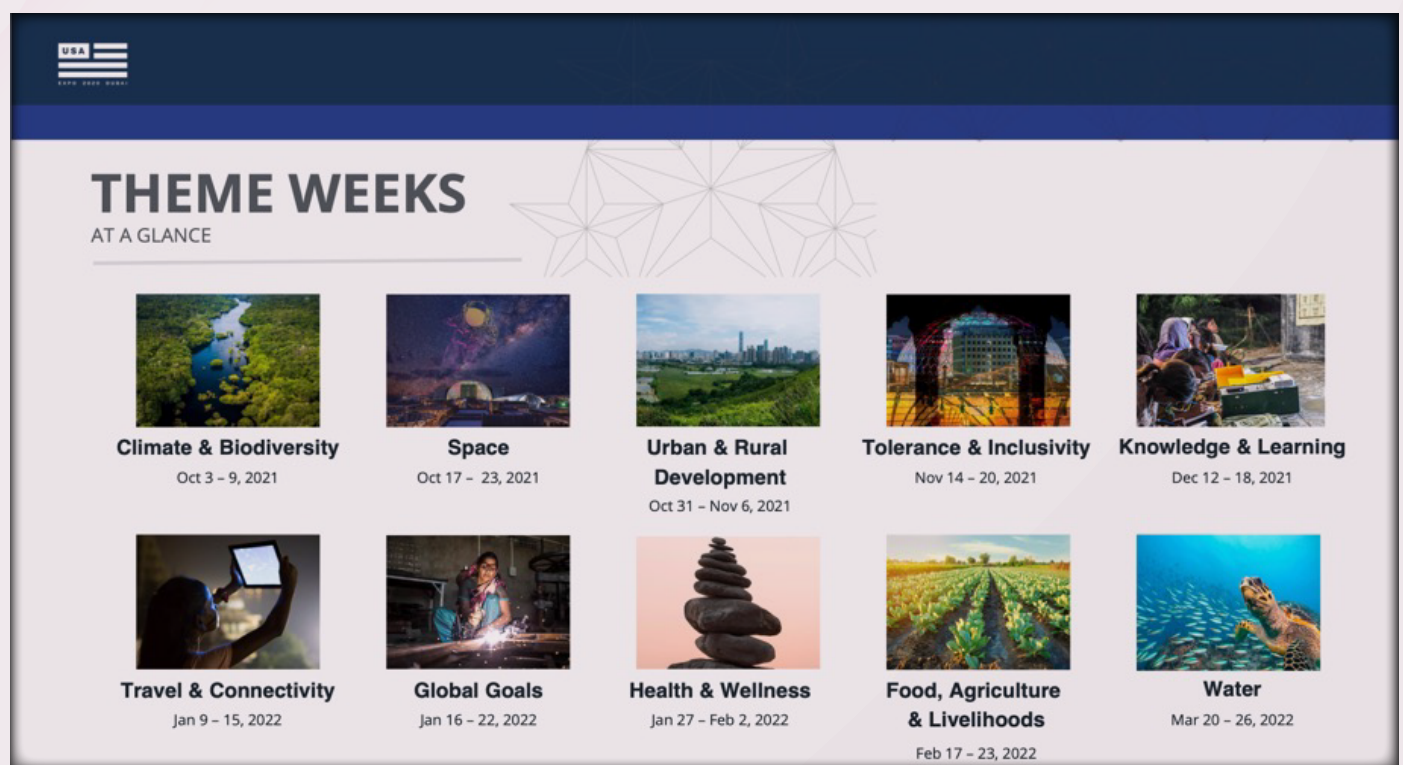
One of the surprises about FIFA 2022 was the strength of Qatar's cultural program, which outshined any previous World Cup hosts. In advance of the hosting of the tournament, the award-winning Museum of Islamic Art had been renovated, and a new exhibition gallery opened within the National Museum of Qatar. At the same time, Qatar Museums hosted well-curated temporary exhibitions on Baghdad across the years, the Doha-based international broadcaster Al Jazeera, and Qatar's resilience in overcoming the Gulf blockade. There was a temporary exhibit on the new Lusail

Museum, a civilizational dialogue museum that would be the centerpiece of the new Lusail city district. Those interested in fashion could visit the Italian fashion designer Valentino's retrospective in Doha's new design district (Page 10, top) or view the fashion-heavy closing concert in Stadium 974 (Page 10, bottom). There were not one, but two, daily electronic dance festivals, complete with the Glastonbury Spider and nightly concerts—free to FIFA ticket holders—at the FIFA Fan Festival. To top it off, Qatar Museums commissioned a two-week dance festival, which featured famed dancer and choreographer Benjamin Millepied and the L.A. Dance Project, performing in front of Doha's most famous museums and monuments. There was something for everyone, even “Exploring Islam” discussions for those visitors curious to learn more about the religion.

Dubai's Commercial Program

Expo 2020 Dubai was not a trade show, but it nevertheless had an emphasis on business and commerce—unusual for a contemporary

World's Fair, which are usually framed more as cultural events. Organizers prepared ten theme weeks to curate cultural and commercial programming, aligning the weeks with Dubai's annual and semiannual regional trade shows such as Gulfood and Arab Health; they stacked the international conference schedule to host specialized conferences such as the region's first International Aeronautical Congress (aka the 'Space Conference'); and they relocated other UAE gatherings such as the Dubai World Summit and Sir Bani Yas Forum to be Expo-adjacent. The newly built Dubai Exhibition Center, a permanent building located on the Expo 2020 grounds, hosted three Global Business Forums for ASEAN, Africa and Latin America to attract new business investment in the UAE. In the closing days of Expo 2020, Expo 2025 Osaka organizers acknowledged publicly the value of the 'theme week' organizing principle, and privately discussed how to replicate it in their own program of events.^[19]



Conclusion

Qatar and the UAE brought whole-of-country focus and an almost city-state clarity of purpose to hosting these global mega events as part of their public diplomacy strategies. Qatar leveraged its investments in sports, and the UAE doubled down on its position as a global hub for doing business. It proved to themselves and the world that they could host the world's largest and most-watched events. Hosting the events has contributed to the countries' workforce development strategies with a newly trained professional labor pool that can be deployed for future events and a new class of Qatari and Emirati professionals in government and private sector positions. In 2023, the countries went on to leverage their built and human capital to host the successful COP 28 climate talks (Dubai) and horticultural exposition (Doha).

2026 FIFA WORLD CUP VENUES

BC PLACE
VANCOUVER

LUMEN FIELD
SEATTLE

LEVI'S STADIUM
SAN FRANCISCO

SOFI STADIUM
LOS ANGELES

AT&T STADIUM
DALLAS

NRG STADIUM
HOUSTON

ESTADIO AKRON
GUADALAJARA

BMO FIELD
TORONTO

ARROWHEAD STADIUM
KANSAS CITY

MERCEDES-BENZ STADIUM
ATLANTA

HARD ROCK STADIUM
MIAMI

LINCOLN FINANCIAL FIELD
PHILADELPHIA

MET LIFE STADIUM
NEW YORK

GILLETTE STADIUM
BOSTON

ESTADIO BBVA BANCOMER
MONTERREY

ESTADIO AZTECA
MEXICO CITY



World Cup 2026 (USA-CAN-MEX) - Thursday, June 11 – Sunday, July 19

North America

The 2026 FIFA World Cup will be hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico from June 11-July 19, making it the first tournament to be hosted across three or more countries. This World Cup will also have an expanded format of 48 (up from 32) teams—translating to more than 100 matches, requiring considerable trilateral, subnational, and public-private coordination. While the tournament will have local host committees in the sixteen cities, it lacks a continent-wide host committee, such as Qatar's country-wide "Supreme Committee." The FIFA organizers and the host committees in each city are focused on arranging the security, transportation, and the operational infrastructure required for these global mega events. While admittedly a daunting task, the North American host cities are well-equipped to deliver the games—and Qatar has already begun sharing its lessons learned on the security and logistical organizing of FIFA 2022, including during a special session of the March 2024 US-Qatar Strategic Dialogue.^[20]

What no one is focusing on thus far—neither at the city, country, nor continental level—is a strategy to maximize the cultural engagement and economic development opportunities that this World Cup offers. What happens off the pitch and outside of the stadium is neither the remit of FIFA nor the host city, but rather stakeholders of the greater metropolitan regions. Qatar has shown us that there is an opportunity to bring together the 16 hosting metropolitan regions to develop a cultural and commercial diplomacy framework and strategy surrounding the North American World Cup, one putting forward a message of hemispheric unity, congeniality and economic competitiveness – a critical message as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) comes up for review.



Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's hosting of Expo 2030, and then the 2034 FIFA World Cup, will be the country's mobilizing projects for the next decade, as they were for the UAE and Qatar. At Expo 2030, the three pillars of Saudi Arabia's strategic "Vision 2030" roadmap will be on display: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. Saudi Arabia's event organizers will have to navigate the challenges faced by FIFA 2022 and Expo 2020: Saudi event organizers should expect controversy around the use of migrant labor to build the necessary infrastructure, Saudi Arabia's treatment of LGBTQ visitors, and rules around alcohol consumption—currently banned in the kingdom. Critically, Expo 2030 will provide Saudi Arabia's rulers with an opportunity to recalibrate the role of religion in society and visitors' ideas about the kingdom. A shared Expo 2030 and World Cup 2034 objective is that foreign visitors will help kick-start Saudi Arabia's nascent tourism economy, translating into job-creating investments for its young population. Over the next decade, Saudi Arabia and the Expo 2030 and the FIFA 2034 organizers will have consistent, sustained interactions with the foreign, commercial, trade or culture ministries responsible for countries' participation. Expo 2030 and FIFA 2034 will challenge, stretch and shape the country's diplomatic apparatus, providing opportunities for other hosts of global mega events to share best practices and help build capacity.

Author Biography



Matthew Asada is a career diplomat and a World's Fair enthusiast, policymaker, and practitioner. The author has visited six World's Fairs, including the last five World Expos, and led the five-year effort to realize a USA Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai, first as the project manager at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, DC, and later as the Deputy Commissioner General of the USA Pavilion in Dubai, UAE.^[21] He served as the Deputy Commissioner General during the Trump and Biden Administrations. Before serving as project manager for the Dubai pavilion, he led the diplomatic campaign for the United States' bid to host the 2023 World's Fair. The author's prior assignments in South Asia (Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan) helped the author better understand the historic and contemporary linkages between South Asia and the Gulf.

The observations and conclusions in this article are drawn from the author's meetings with officials and staff from the Bureau of International Expositions, Expo 2020, FIFA and the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, foreign diplomats accredited to Expo 2020 and diplomatic missions in Qatar and the UAE, journalists, academics and vendors for the global mega events. These conversations took place during the years 2017-2024. The author lived in Dubai from 2020-2022, and while there read contemporary English-language newspaper coverage and spoke with people that were involved with the two events. The author visited Doha for the final week of the men's soccer World Cup (December 12-19, 2022), his second visit to a men's soccer World Cup. In 2006, the author supported the U.S. Department of State's flagship sports diplomacy intervention surrounding the FIFA 2006 World Cup in Germany and was responsible for American citizen engagement in Bavaria during the global mega event.

The research was supported by the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy. Initial findings were presented in a CPD Perspective and the idea for an inter-event comparison was first introduced at a November 2022 event with a Los Angeles Times sportswriter looking back at Expo 2020 Dubai and forward to the FIFA 2022 World Cup.^[22] Conclusions from this report have been presented at sessions organized by the US-Qatar Business Council, Public Diplomacy Council of America, the Council on Foreign Relations and the inaugural Gulf Studies Symposium.

^[1] The two largest sports mega events are the Summer Olympics and the FIFA World Cup. Due to its sustained duration, a World's Fair generally has more attendees than these two events. Jonathan Grix, Paul Michael Brannigan, and Donna Lee. *Entering the Global Arena: Emerging States Soft Power Strategies and Sports Mega-Events*. 2019. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

^[2] The Summer Olympics and the men's World Cup are normally held every four years, two years apart from one another. The World Expos are every five years, so there is potential intersection with either the Summer Olympics or the men's World Cup every 20 years, i.e. four iterations. The Summer and Winter Olympics were held in the same year, every four years through 1992 before they moved to alternating every two years.

^[3] The 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics were delayed one year, until 2021, due to COVID.

^[4] Asada, Matthew. *An Inter-Event Comparison of Two Historic Global Mega Events: FIFA 2022 and Expo 2020*. Figueroa Press, Los Angeles, 2023.

^[5] See *Qatar and the 2022 FIFA World Cup: Politics, Controversy, Change*. Paul Brannigan and Daniel Reiche (2022).

^[6] This statement is based on the author's analysis of Expo 2020 communications. The author was unable to find an academic analysis similar to Brannigan and Reiche (2022) for Expo 2020 Dubai.

^[7] Expo 2020 Dubai riffed on this line in their theme song "This is our Time."

^[8] The Dubai Tourism Vision 2020 strategy was launched in 2013, after winning the rights to host the Expo, as a roadmap to attract 20 million annual tourists to Dubai by the year 2020. See <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/strategies-plans-and-visions-until-2021/dubai-tourism-strategy-2020> accessed June 14, 2023.

^[9] Author conversation with Expo 2020 official. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hIOXHe9HXA> - Expo 2020 Dubai Final Report. Videos accessed February 20, 2023.

^[10] These countries hosted the most recent men's soccer World Cups (Russia, Brazil, South Africa, Germany, Korea/Japan) and Expos (Kazakhstan, Italy, Korea, China, Spain, Japan).

^[11] The 2026 and future editions of the World Cup will have 48 teams participating.

^[12] "UAE open to co-hosting World Cup if Qatar rift resolved - sports chief" article by Alexander Cornwell and Nick Mulvenney for Reuters. January 22, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-fifa-worldcup-emirates-idUKKC1PG18E/> accessed February 14, 2024. "Oman rules itself out of 2022 World Cup co-host role" article by Anthony Harwood for SportsProMedia. April 11, 2019. https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/oman-qatar-fifa-2022-world-cup-co-host-role/?zephrosso_ott=k4KO1p accessed February 14, 2024.

^[13] On June 19, 2023, the UAE and Qatar resumed full diplomatic relations, re-opening their embassies in the respective capitals.

^[14] While the United States suspended diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and closed its embassy in Kabul following the Taliban's takeover, in November 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the United States' diplomatic interests in Afghanistan would be represented by Qatar. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-qatar-deputy-prime-minister-and-minister-of-foreign-affairs-mohammed-bin-abdulrahman-al-thani-at-a-signing-ceremony-and-joint-press-availability-for-the-u-s-qatar-str>. Accessed June 21, 2023.

^[15] For a review of the Expo 2020 Dubai experience, see Cull, Nicholas J. The Greatest Show on Earth? Considering Expo 2020, Dubai. *Place Brand Public Diplomacy* 18, 49–51 (2022). For a review of the FIFA 2022 Doha experience, see Culpepper, Chuck. "In a nation of guest workers, the world showed up at Qatar's World Cup." *Washington Post*, December 20, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2022/12/20/qatar-guest-worker-world-cup-fans/> accessed June 21, 2023. See also Ulrichsen, Kristian Coates. Qatar's Successful World Cup Signals a New Era in the Gulf and Beyond, *Arab Center Blog*, January 5, 2023. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/qatars-successful-world-cup-signals-a-new-era-in-the-gulf-and-beyond/>

^[16] "One Month On: 5 billion engaged with the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022" FIFA Press Release January 18, 2023 <https://www.fifa.com/tournaments/mens/worldcup/qatar2022/news/one-month-on-5-billion-engaged-with-the-fifa-world-cup-qatar-2022-tm> accessed June 21, 2023.

^[17] See *Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*. John Findling and Kimberly Pelle ed. (2008).

^[18] See *Shaping China's Global Imagination: Branding Nations at the World Expo*. Jay Wang. (2015).

^[19] "Japan learns from Expo 2020 Dubai as it looks to Expo 2025 Osaka Kansai" press release from Expo 2020 Dubai on March 21, 2022 <https://www.expo2020dubai.com/en/news/japan-learns-from-expo2020> accessed June 21, 2023.

^[20] "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue" U.S. Department of State March 5, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-qatar-strategic-dialogue-2/>

^[21] Asada, Matthew. "The Journey to Expo 2020 Dubai and Its Legacy." *Foreign Service Journal*, May 2023, 53-60 (2023). <https://afsa.org/journey-expo-2020-dubai-and-its-legacy>.

^[22] USC Center on Public Diplomacy. "Global Mega-Events: from Expo Dubai to World Cup Qatar." <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/event/global-mega-events-expo-dubai-world-cup-qatar>. Accessed June 6, 2023.

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