

After World Court Win, This Debevoise Partner Is (Almost) a Celebrity in Doha

By Jenna Greene
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Earlier this summer, **Catherine Amirfar** stepped up to the podium to face 15 somber judges at the **International Court of Justice in The Hague**.

The **Debevoise & Plimpton** partner was appearing before the UN's highest court on behalf of Qatar—a notable choice of outside counsel for an Arab nation where women commonly wear abayas and cover their hair, and a wife is required by law to obey her husband.

Citizens of a country would normally have little idea who was representing them in a dispute being litigated 3,000 miles away and in a foreign language, but this case was different. Al-Jazeera broadcast the three-day proceedings live. And people in Qatar actually tuned in, turning Amirfar into a minor celebrity, even recognized in the Doha airport.

“It was a little bit of a shocker to me,” Amirfar said in an interview. Then again, she noted, this litigation “impacts literally everyone in the entire country.”

Qatar sued the United Arab Emirates in June, citing an “ongoing, brutal campaign of sweeping measures” imposed against Qataris by the UAE.



The suit comes amidst a bitter, year-long dispute with UAE, as well as Bahrain, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which have cut ties and boycotted Qatar over its alleged support for extremist groups—a charge which Qatar adamantly denies.

In June of 2017, UAE expelled all Qataris, prevented their re-entry, separated families and prevented Qatari students from seeking or

continuing education in UAE, according to the complaint. The suit claims the measures violate UAE's obligations under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

The matter is ongoing, but the Debevoise team—which also includes **Lord Peter Goldsmith**, who is the former attorney general for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, partners **Donald Francis Donovan** and **David W. Rivkin**—won the first round.

In an 8 to 7 vote, the world court imposed provisional measures requiring the UAE to ensure that families including a Qatari who have been separated by its measures are reunited; Qatari students affected by the measures are given the opportunity to complete their education in the UAE or to obtain the necessary records to do so elsewhere; and Qataris affected by the measures must be allowed access to tribunals and other judicial organs.

Qatar's counsel also includes **Lawrence Martin of Foley Hoag**.

UAE is represented by lawyers from firms including **Curtis, Mallet-Prevost, Colt & Mosle**.

For Amirfar, who was born in the United States but spent her early childhood in Iran until the

revolution of 1978, what's been particularly gratifying about the representation is feedback she's gotten from Qatari women, who have told her they see her as a role model.

"The idea of being part of inspiring the next generation...it's an honor," she said.

The co-chair of Debevoise's public international law group and a member of the firm's management committee, Amirfar represents a mix of Fortune 500 companies, international organizations including the United Nations, and sovereign nations.

She's also got a vigorous pro bono practice. She's currently representing four survivors of a 1990 massacre of 600 people seeking refuge in a church in Monrovia, Liberia. Colonel Moses Thomas, who allegedly directed the attack, has taken haven in the United States since 2000—admitted under an immigration program intended to help war victims.

Along with co-counsel from the **Center for Justice & Accountability** and **Blank Rome**, Amirfar is suing Thomas under the Alien Tort Statute and Torture Victims Protection Act in **U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania**.