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What lessons we can take from The 2021 FIFA Arab Cup Mahfoud Amara

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Introduction

The FIFA Arab Cup held in Qatar one year before the 2022 FIFA Arab Cup offers a number of opportunities to examine the region from different angles. The [Arab cup](#) is not a new idea. There have been a number of attempts in the past, in particular after the independence of Arab nations in late 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, to establish sport events that bring together Arab countries to celebrate Arabness and Arab nationalism. This is applicable to the Arab world as a whole with the Pan Arab Games or for different regions such as the Maghreb in North Africa and the GCC, with respectively the Maghrebini Football Cup and the Arabian Gulf Cup. With the exception of the Arabian Gulf Football Cup, which has its unique identity and supported by the GCC countries, other regional tournaments witnessed irregularity and limited success for a number of reasons. First, disparity between Arab countries in terms of financial support and facilities. Second, the dominance of other international sport competitions, which receive higher media attention as well as public and private financial support. With the dominance of professional sport, it has become difficult to convince elite and professional athletes to participate in competitions that are not endorsed by International Sport Federations, including FIFA and the International Olympic Committee. This means that the performance of athletes participating

in the Pan Arab games for instance are not counted toward their qualifications to world championships and the Olympics. It is becoming more difficult for international players to join their national teams mid season, including for competitions such as the African and the Asian Cup of Nations. Third, the political situation and turmoil in the region that has affected the stability of sports sector. Hence, most of these competitions, despite the involvement of national sport federations and national Olympic committees in their organizations turned more into sport festivals and an occasion for junior athletes to compete, with little media coverage.

The rebranding of the Arab Cup

One needs to mention that the Arab Football Cup (up to 2021), [The Arabian Gulf Cup](#), and the Pan Arab Games are not recognized by international Federations such as FIFA and the International Olympic Committee because they are tied to, and branded around, a single ethnic identity (i.e. Arab). [This goes against the rules of international sport shaped by universalism and olympism](#). Furthermore, FIFA recognizes only competitions organized by continental confederations; however, with no other official competitions before the World Cup, endorsing the 2021 Arab Cup became of paramount and a way to test the new stadia built to host the FIFA World Cup. FIFA's endorsement with

the participation of international referees have completely changed the dynamic of the tournament in terms of its attraction to elite football in the region, media and sponsors. The tournament offered an opportunity for players playing mainly in local leagues to be in the spotlight and not under the shadow of the first teams dominated by professional players playing in European leagues with a higher chance of being selected to play in international competitions. The tournament gave them the opportunity to compete in Qatar, the host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and to play in stadiums hosting the mega event, one year before the world cup, even before high ranked teams do such as Brazil, Argentina, France, England, to name a few. For national teams such as Syria, Iraq and Lebanon it was an opportunity to compete far from the harsh political and economic conditions in their countries.

Qatar's test before the 2022 FIFA World Cup

For the host, it was an opportunity to test the logistics of the World Cup including, ticketing, crowd management and Fan IDs, stadiums operation, security and safety, media coverage, cultural festivals, etc. Two of the iconic stadiums, Al-Bayt and 974 stadiums, were inaugurated for the tournament. It was an occasion to celebrate the FIFA 2021 Arab Cup and the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup not only as events happening in Qatar, but also for involving all Arabs in the Arab World, including those of the Diaspora . For the Qatar National Team, which

played with the full squad, the tournament after a long tour in Europe and Latin America, was the last occasion to test its readiness physically and tactically.

With the success of the FIFA 2021 Arab Cup in Qatar, some observers suggested to stop the Arabian Gulf Cup ([the next edition to be held in Basra in Iraq was postponed to 2023](#)) and other small regional competitions, which have limited number of participant countries, in favor of maintaining the Arab Cup in its current format as the main competition for the region. The future of the Arab Cup will depend on FIFA's continued endorsement – FIFA is keen on having more competitions, and increasing number of nations in the FIFA World Cup. It will also depend of the financial support and number of countries in the region interested in hosting it, considering the economic disparity in the Arab region.



“After what we had witnessed in the 2021 FIFA Arab Cup I wish if we abandon the Arab Gulf Cup and put all our efforts of Arabian Gulf Football Federations with the support of Arab Football Federations to maintain the Arab Cup under FIFA calendar. This is the most fruitful competition at all levels”

The Geopolitical Dimension

Having discussed the sporting context, the other dimension worth exploring is the geopolitical context. The participation of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt announced symbolically the end of the antagonism between the belligerent following the imposed blockade by these countries on Qatar. Interestingly, despite the blockade, one of the sectors that was not disturbed was that of sport. This was clear through Qatar's outstanding participation in the 2019 Asian Cup in the UAE, despite all the controversies before and during the competition, followed by the participation of Bahrain, the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the 24th Arabian Gulf Cup in Qatar in the same year. When all other venues are closed, sport can remain a site for (soft) diplomacy. As was the case between the US and China with the ping-pong diplomacy, and more recently between North and South Korea. The divided nation decided to compete as one country during the 2018 Pyongyang Winter Olympics.

However, some of the sensational and social media can play a negative role and can go against the spirit of the FIFA Arab Cup . [The debate of who is considered true Arab and who](#)

[is not emerged again into the surface.](#) Countries from the Maghreb namely Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, are depicted by some commentators as non –Arabs (i.e. Berbers) hence participating in the tournament as “guests” . The derby between Algeria and Morocco in the quarterfinal turned somehow to a competition between the two regimes. This is in the light of the [diplomatic strife](#) between the two countries over the Western Sahara question and more recently the normalization between Morocco and Israel, which has been received by Algiers as a threat to its national security. The day before the final match between Algeria and Tunisia, Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboun was in an official visit to Tunis to offer Algeria's political and financial support to President Kais Said and hence strengthening the strategic alliance and border with its Eastern neighbor.

Conclusion

Despite all the political tensions off the pitch, what counts for the fans at the end is the spectacle, the quality of football, the goals and the chanting. The FIFA 2021 Arab cup was a success in terms of organization, number of spectators, the celebrations and other cultural activities. Qatar after winning the bid to hosting the FIFA World Cup was [criticized](#) for its culture (including football culture), its small territory, weather conditions, and its capability as a nation (with the stigma it entails being the first Arab and Muslim country to host the World Cup)) to be ready for the mega event. The final between

neighbors Algeria and Tunisia, in the iconic Albayt stadium, in the presence of the Amir of Qatar, the FIFA president, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup ambassadors Wenger, Beckham, Cafu, Eto'o, to name but a few, followed by the celebration of Algerian supporters all over the world, offered the tournament the international exposure it deserves, one year before the biggest football event to be held in the region.

About the author

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