The Saudi men’s team’s major upset against Argentina in their opening World Cup match has brought together many Saudis and the Arab world writ large in celebration, demonstrating the powerful pull of the game.

A n Unexpected Win

As with many countries, soccer is a major preoccupation, both among the general public and at the highest political levels. Just one month ago, on October 23, Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) met (https://www.aljazeera.com/sport/2022/10/24/saudi-argentina-fifa-world-cup-football-match) with the Saudi Arabian men’s national team in his office in Jeddah. Part of the meeting was to congratulate the national team for qualifying for the World Cup. MbS also framed the upcoming competition to both the players and Saudi fans during this widely publicized meeting: “we are in a tough group, no one expects us to win or play to a tie, so play comfortably without any pressure.”

From the point of view of the players, it might have been embracing the overall low expectations for their performance. Indeed, prior to this moment, an overall sense of immense frustration and pessimism with the Saudi team’s prospects was anecdotally observed among Saudi soccer fans. Nevertheless, Saudi fans showed up in droves to Qatar’s World Cup and have been one of the largest foreign fan bases present, due both to proximity and the widespread popularity of the game among Saudi Arabia’s 35 million inhabitants.

Nor is the team’s previously muted performance been for want of financing. The Saudi local soccer league ranks (https://www.aljazeera.com/sport/2022/10/24/saudi-argentina-fifa-world-cup-football-match) have been one of the largest foreign fan bases present, due both to proximity and the widespread popularity of the game among Saudi Arabia’s 35 million inhabitants.

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It is still too early to know whether Saudi Arabia will qualify for the round of 16. However, it is to Saudi Arabia’s advantage that Mexico and Poland, the other two teams in Saudi Arabia’s group, played to a tie (https://www.theguardian.com/football/live/2022/nov/22/mexico-v-poland-world-cup-2022-live-score-updates), which could lead them to their most impressive performance in almost thirty years. Like many Saudis, I hope that the team continues to win. But most importantly, I want to see them perform well for the Saudi people, regardless of the score.

Ultimately, while the experience of the game had echoes far beyond the soccer field, the actual win comes down to players’ technique and good coaching. Saudi Arabia’s coach, Hervé Renard demonstrated on the field that he understood how to deal with the players, prepare them both mentally and physically, and lead them to this historic win. As one Saudi spectator (https://twitter.com/7yhy/status/159507402194913388) put it, echoing a British commentator: “it’s not that Argentina played badly, it’s that Saudi Arabia played exquisitely.”

Looking Forward

For the Saudi Arabia at least, the glow of the win continues. King Salman declared (https://www.alarabiya.net/saudi-today/2022/11/22/%25252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525252525
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