Policy Analysis (/policy-analysis) /

Fikra Forum

Saudi Arabia's Surprise Soccer Victory

by Faris Almaari (/experts/faris-almaari)

Nov 23, 2022

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Faris Almaari (/experts/faris-almaari)

Faris Almaari is a research assistant for the Arab Politics Program at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



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.

n Unexpected Wir

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.alarabiya.net/sport/saudi-

From the point of view of the players, it might have been embarrassing to know of 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 has the team's previously muted performance been for want of financing. The Saudi local soccer league ranks (https://www.alqabas.com/article/5808933-

Going into the Saudi team's first game, the odds were stacked in Argentina's favor: Argentina previously had a 36-match unbeaten streak and seemed set to tie Italy 's unbeaten 37-match record. Besides Argentina being among the top projected (https://www.espn.com/soccer/fifa-world-cup/story/4803282/world-cup-predictions-argentina-over-brazil-france-england) winners of the World Cup, it is also Argentina's legendary captain Lionel Messi's last World Cup.

Afterwards, the Saudi team's coach told an interviewer that it may have been precisely the lack of undue pressure that fired up the national team 's passion, and helped secure a momentous victory against what was ranked as the third highest team in the world. Now, the team has been more than gratified by the national response and recognition: Salem Al-Dossari, the player who scored the team's second and winning goal, tweeted (https://twitter.com/salem_d29/status/1595073883052425218?s=61&t=sm9QEdGaUlkZfbqCVulXvA) images of MbS celebrating and prostrating himself in the manner that some Muslim players will thank God for a successful goal.

Reactions in Saudi Arabia and Beyond

The game has had a major impact on the Saudi public. At workplaces in Saudi Arabia—be it hospitals, corporate headquarters, or public offices—large screens were brought to show soccer matches and to watch the 1 PM Saudi-Argentina game. Offices were subsequently overwhelmed with chanting and victory dancing. Saudis are celebrating both inside of the country and out, including some Saudi dissidents (https://twitter.com/TurkiShalhoub/status/1595033038471442432?s=20&t=_iw2hwsr9xGRBY-VjrtuPA) on social media who have celebrated this moment.

Social media tweets from across the Arab world are depicting the impact of the win on a broader scale. Videos of celebrations have streamed from Yemen

 $(https://twitter.com/SaudiDRPY/status/1595123768707485702), Egypt (https://twitter.com/alekhbariyatv/status/1595041940646817794?s=20&t=I-1AaCf1WWnmLTOSlifUow),\\ Gaza (https://twitter.com/GazaNownews/status/1595072084341841921?s=20&t=I-1AaCf1WWnmLTOSlifUow),\\ Kuwait$

(https://twitter.com/AQeshaysh/status/1595131822605639681). Sudan (https://twitter.com/HassanBakry19/status/1595036221193027584?s=20&t=I-1AaCf1WWnmLTOSlifUow). Iraq (https://twitter.com/KSA_farsi/status/1595045645601148931). and Syria (https://twitter.com/Ibrahee47804295/status/1595134605979709440). One Tunisian (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/22/proud-day-to-be-arab-joy-for-saudi-arabia-tunisia-fans) fan described the moment as a "Proud day to be Arab," given Saudi Arabia's

win and Tunisia's draw with Denmark. Then, just this morning, Morocco also played Croatia to a tie. Some in the broader Muslim world have also felt a connection to the win, from the Rohingya (https://twitter.com/alestiklal/status/1595140306952863744?s=20&t=I-1AaCf1WWnmLTOSlifUow) refugees in Bangladesh, in Pakistan

(https://twitter.com/Abohaya016/status/1595077811387174913), and the rest of the Arab and Muslim world. Some Muslim fans referenced

(https://twitter.com/Ahmeed_alkatteb/status/1595053364496457728) their joy at seeing the shahada (https://twitter.com/qasmi_aman/status/1595253844409188355) raised in the air, the Islamic profession of faith included on the Saudi flag. These images are a reminder of the powerful role sports often play in public life.

On a political level, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) relations are also on the spot during this World Cup. After the al-Ula declaration in January 2021 that ended the four years rift between GCC countries, Saudi-Qatar relations have been improving, and both sides made overt displays of support for the other country's teams. MbS attended the opening ceremony of the World Cup with a Qatar national team shawl (https://twitter.com/2030Kh7/status/1594429560271028225?s=20&t=eWd2G8vVgmxJygjRG4ZWkw) on his shoulders. In return, Emir Tamim was spotted waving (https://twitter.com/OuWrd/status/1595053733112647683?s=20&t=eWd2G8vVgmxJygjRG4ZWkw) the Saudi flag before the Saudi-Argentina match. Although these are symbolic rather than substantive gestures, they provide visibility of the mend in relations between the two countries at a very public event.

The importance of sports and its intertwined role in national identity is also emphasized by the stark contrast between Iran 's national team players who refused to sing the national anthem and performed poorly against England, versus the Saudi team's stunning performance and ecstasy after their win. This seems a vivid reflection of the vastly different domestic situations in both countries right now. Iranians (https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-22/iran-s-world-cup-loss-stirs-rebukes-and-protests-at-home?

leadSource=uverify%25252520wall) "took to the streets of Tehran...to jeer their" team's defeat, while Iran's official media ignored its team's apparent political protest and instead blamed their loss on an early injury to one of the top players instead.

The win may soften accusations of "sportswashing" against Riyadh's investments in the sports sector. While one win in the World Cup does not constitute a major shift in Saudi Arabia 's players' performance, the popular celebrations and obvious passion, and the team's ability to take on one of the strongest teams in the World Cup does suggest a more nuanced motivation for investments in sports besides just political gains.

Looking Forward

For the Saudi public at least, the glow of the win continues. King Salman declared (https://www.alarabiya.net/saudi-

% 25252525D8 % 25252525B3 % 25252525D9 % 2525252584 % 25252525D9 % 2525252525D8 % 25252525D8 % 25252525A7 % 25252525D9 % 2525252584 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D9 % 25252525D8 % 25252525D9 % 2525250D9 % 25250D9 %

% 2525252508% 252525258A% 25252525D8% 25252525AF% 25252525D8% 25252525A7% 25252525D9% 25252525B+26252525447% 25252525447% 25252525447% 25252525447% 25252525447% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 25252525252547% 25252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252547% 25252525252525252547% 252525252547% 252525252525252525257% 25252525257% 25252525257% 25252525257% 25252525257% 252525257% 25252525257% 252525257% 25257% 2525257% 25257

today a national holiday to celebrate and mark the national team's sensational win, and exams in schools are postponed. Employees in both the private and public sectors are instead spending the day <u>outside (https://twitter.com/mrmr2F/status/1595392881161814016)</u> celebrating. This was visible throughout the country, in the Cornishes of Jeddah and Dammam, the roads of Riyadh, and the mountainous cities of the southern regions. Fans are also reacting with vocal expressions of support on social media for Saudi player Yasser Al-Shahrani, who had suffered a previously undisclosed serious injury during the game and is now recovering in hospital.

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/1595027402194911238) put it, echoing a British commentator: "it's not that Argentina played badly, it's that Saudi Arabia played exquisitely."

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Tracking the Religious Zionist Party Bloc in the Settlements

Nov 22, 2022

Alex Harris,

(/policy-analysis/tracking-religious-zionist-party-bloc-settlements)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Changing Population Patterns Will Reshape the Middle East

Nov 22, 2022

Patrick Clawson

(/policy-analysis/changing-population-patterns-will-reshape-middle-east)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Hezbollah Turns 40: Implications of the Group's Internal, Regional, and Strategic Shifts

November 29, 2022, starting at 12:00 noon EST (1700 GMT)

Hanin Ghaddar, Matthew Levitt, Mona Fayad, Akeel Abbas

(/policy-analysis/hezbollah-turns-40-implications-groups-internal-regional-and-strategic-shifts)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamicpolitics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulfstates)