

Palestinian Flags and Warm Embraces: Politics and Arabism at the World Cup in Qatar

by Francesco Belcastro

The 2022 men's football World Cup ended with Argentina's victory over France, in what has already been dubbed by some fans as 'the best final in world cup history'. While observers have praised the quality of football on display, the political dimension of the event has been a constant theme throughout the tournament. Arabism and solidarity with Palestine¹ have certainly been one of the key political aspects of the World Cup. But are the different expressions of Arab solidarity we have witnessed spontaneous and popular – in other words, do they reflect a strong popular feeling among Arab supporters, players and, in some cases, even leaders? Or are they limited manifestations of Arab identity and solidarity allowed within a controlled environment, or even worst, orchestrated events?

¹ "Morocco's World Cup Success Sparks a Debate about Arab Identity", in *The Economist*, 13 December 2022, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/12/13/moroccos-world-cup-success-sparks-a-debate-about-arab-identity>.

Leaders and flags

A major sports tournament, especially a World Cup, is undoubtedly a unique stage for the leaders that attend it. The tournament represents a powerful diplomatic tool in the hands of those who invested so much for the right to organise it.² In this sense, the World Cup in Qatar is not different from previous tournaments. The eyes of the world are focused on the tournament (as well as on the host country) for a whole month, and stadiums become theatres for political performances. This is particularly relevant for leaders of smaller countries that might not be so often in the spotlight, or at least not on such a global scale. The image that a leader decides to project, the message that he or she conveys, is therefore an important political fact, and certainly not something that can be considered

² Jonathan Grix and Donna Lee, "Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction", in *Global Society*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2013), p. 521-536, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2013.827632>.

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casual or that is based on football considerations only.

This is clearly the case of the Emir of Qatar, who skilfully used the tournament to project a message of Arab unity, emphasising both Qatar's support for its fellow Arab states and its centrality in Arab politics. This dimension of inter-Arab politics, often missed by observers concerned with reactions in 'the West', represents an important factor in the politics of the Qatar 2022 World Cup. In the first week of the tournament, eventual winner Argentina lost against Saudi Arabia in a match that proved to be one of the footballing shocks of the tournament. Most political observers were however more interested in what was happening on the stands and particularly in the VIP box: the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani sporting a Saudi flag as he celebrated the Kingdom's victory over the mighty Argentinians.³ This marked a significant change from the previous years when the two countries had been embroiled in a bitter dispute that had led to the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and their allies. The blockade ended in 2021, and relations between the parties have (moderately) warmed since. The Emir's celebrations were not only symbolising the newfound *khaliji* unity, but also the return of Qatar to a central position in Gulf politics after long years of isolation.

³ Tamara Abueish, "Qatar's Emir Waves Saudi Arabia's Flag during FIFA Match against Argentina", in *Al Arabiya*, 22 November 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2022/11/22/Qatar-s-Emir-waves-Saudi-Arabia-s-flag-during-FIFA-match-against-Argentina>.

Even more vocal (and visible) was the Emir's support for Morocco in their mighty run to the tournament semi-finals. The size and number of Moroccan flags in the section occupied by the Qatari leader seemed in fact to increase as the tournament progressed, as did the enthusiasm of the Qatari royal family.⁴ Here it was, the leader of the tiny Emirate, an Arab leader celebrating Arab successes: the success of Morocco on the field as well as the success of the first Arab state organising a world cup. None of this was casual, as regardless of whether the Emir was genuinely happy for the victories of Arab teams (and there is no reason to think he was not), the success of Saudi Arabia and Morocco on the pitch offered him the perfect opportunity to carry out its symbolic performance aimed at showing the newfound unity of the Arab world, and Qatar's central role in it.

Palestinian flags and hearts

If the behaviour of Arab leaders in general and the Emir of Qatar in particular was undoubtedly part of a public performance (and a very relevant political act), the support for Palestine and the Palestinian cause that emerged at the World Cup is a rather more complex issue. This support was arguably both spontaneous and regulated. Widespread support for the Palestinian cause stemmed from an honest sentiment among Arab (and in some cases world) fans and players, but

⁴ Safaa Kasraoui, "Emire of Qatar Celebrates Morocco's Historic Win against Portugal", in *Morocco World News*, 10 December 2022, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2022/12/352943/emir-of-qatar-celebrates-moroccos-historic-win-against-portugal>.

took place in a controlled and 'sanitised' environment.

This pro-Palestinian sentiment emerged quite clearly as a key theme among Arab supporters in the early days of the tournament. While international fans regularly showed their support for the Palestinian cause, it was in particular fans and players of the two North African teams present at the tournament (Tunisia and Morocco) that made more of a splash in this sense. Tunisian fans demonstrated constant support for the cause, including showing a big 'Free Palestine' banner during the match against Australia. One Tunisian fan invaded the pitch carrying a Palestinian flag during the match against France.⁵ Ironically, though, it was Morocco and its team that provided the greatest support for the Palestinian cause. Symbols of solidarity and pro-Palestinian chants were present whenever Morocco played, and were mirrored by the players' proud display of Palestinian flags after every match.⁶ Morocco, however, historically kept positive (if unofficial) relations with Israel, and eventually signed the controversial Abraham accords in December 2020 signalling the start of a new era of cooperation between the two countries.⁷ Whilst the expressions

of support for the Palestinian cause surely reflected a widespread sentiment in the Moroccan population, it is highly unlikely that the players' behaviour (repeated in every match) was not at least tacitly accepted by Moroccan authorities.

A similar reasoning could apply to the fans (and not only to those of Morocco). The display of Palestinian symbols on the stands was clearly accepted by the Qatari government. This was in stark contrast with the removal of other symbols such as LGBTQ+ flags.⁸ Nonetheless, for all of its pro-Palestinian rhetoric (due to which Qatar has often been accused by its opponents of being an 'extremist' state), the Gulf state enjoys an important security partnership with the US and can hardly be described as a revolutionary force in the region.⁹ Ultimately, the Qatari leadership must have concluded that the displays of Palestinian solidarity at the World Cup were either positive, as they played up the narrative of a 'pro-Palestinian' Qatar, or at least innocuous. The shows of support for Palestinians by Arab fans were therefore evidence of a strong popular sentiment, but one that was considered to be either harmless or even positive by Qatari authorities.

⁵ "Tunisian Fan with a Palestinian Flag Makes World Cup History", in *Palestine Chronicle*, 30 November 2022, <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/?p=83454>.

⁶ The issue is made somehow more complex by Morocco's own occupation of Western Sahara, something that several Palestinian and international activists have raised on social media in response to Moroccan displays of solidarity against the Israeli occupation.

⁷ "Morocco, Israel Sign First-ever Defence Agreement in Rabat", in *Al Jazeera*, 24 November

2021, <https://aje.io/tv4qcm>.

⁸ Leo Sands and John Hudson, "Rainbow-wearing Soccer Fans Confronted at Qatar World Cup", in *The Washington Post*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2022/11/22/rainbow-flag-fifa-soccer-qatar>.

⁹ Jon Gambrell, "Top US Diplomat in Qatar for Soccer, Talks amid Iran Tension", in *AP News*, 21 November 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/6ff02de15576edc4248b245d563390fc>.



Looking ahead

Does the World Cup signal the start of a new era of Pan-Arabism, and/or a turn towards more substantial support for the Palestinian cause by Arab leaders? Unlikely so. The World Cup, however, shows that Pan-Arabism still exists, although in a much different form from its golden days, and can be used as a powerful tool by Arab leaders. The Qatari leadership in particular proved to be extremely successful in using what could be defined as 'light Arabism' through the symbolic display of Arab unity and commitment to the Arab cause. While many Western-centric analyses focused on the perception of the World Cup in Europe and North America, Qatar reaped most of its reputational rewards from the event in the non-Western, particularly the Arab, world. More generally, the case of the 2022 World Cup suggests that the political success of a major sport event should not be judged only by its impact on Western audiences, as both targeted audiences and (crucially) differences in how the role of sport and its relationship with politics are perceived around the world should be taken into account.

The case of Qatar 2022 also shows that the Palestinian cause, for all the attempts by (some) Arab leaders to consign it to the past, is still relevant to many people in Arab countries. Arab leaders can navigate this popular sentiment, and even go against it: after all, support for the Palestinian cause did not prevent some Arab countries from signing the Abraham accords. Conversely, Arab leaders can utilise the Palestinian cause to increase their own popularity, as shown by the Qataris.

What they cannot disregard, though, is that this flame, however tame (and perhaps tamed) it might be, still exists. Football, and particularly high-profile events, could, if political circumstances were to change, act as a catalyst for popular (transnational) mobilisation.

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