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Arabian Gulf Cup offers hope of diplomatic breakthrough

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Introduction

On 8th December, Sayed Mohammed Jaffer, the captain of the Bahrain national football team, lifted aloft the Arabian Gulf Cup at Abdullah bin Khalifa stadium in Doha. The victory of his tiny island nation didn't simply signal an unexpected triumph on the football field. It also represented a glimmer of hope for a diplomatic breakthrough.

Less than a month earlier, Bahrain hadn't even been expected to participate in the tournament — the bi-annual highpoint on the region's football calendar. The kingdom, along with Gulf neighbours Saudi Arabia and the UAE, had announced that it would refuse to take part in the contest.

The decision was the latest snub of Doha in a dispute that has run since June 2017, when Gulf neighbours Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (along with Egypt) severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, closing their land border and airspace to Qatar. The blockading countries accused Qatar of supporting terrorism, a charge that Doha repeatedly denied. They set out a list of demands that Doha refused to meet.

Sport and the blockade

From the outset, sport has been caught up in the dispute. In October 2017, a top UAE security official suggested that the only way for the blockade to end was for [Qatar to give up on hosting the 2022 World Cup](#). A [sophisticated piracy operation](#) – bootlegging the content of Qatar-based sports broadcaster BeIN Sports – has been transmitted using satellite infrastructure owned by Arabsat, a

Saudi-based communications company. The blockade affected the 2017 edition of the Gulf Cup, which moved from Qatar to Kuwait after Saudi, UAE and Bahrain threatened to pull out.

As this year's tournament in Doha drew closer, the blockading nations were once again expected to boycott the event. In November, a draw took place to determine the matches between the five remaining countries of Oman, Yemen, Qatar, Iraq and Kuwait. Organisers worked on the basis that they were hosting a reduced-sized event, planning stadiums and tickets accordingly. I still have what I hope is now a collector's edition 'ticket guide', produced in early November, outlining the five-team tournament.

But on 13th November, just 11 days before the tournament was due to start, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain had a sudden change of heart — and announced that [they were willing to participate in the contest](#). The decision came after a [visit by the Qatari foreign minister](#) to Saudi Arabia. It arrived against a backdrop of talk of a wider thaw between the rival nations, following the attendance in May of Qatar's Prime Minister at the GCC summit in Mecca and a meeting of all six GCC interior ministers in early November.

Kristian Ulrichsen, Middle East fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, believes that other geopolitical developments in the region — including the recent hijacking of oil tankers and a major attack on Saudi oil facilities — concentrated minds among the region's rulers. 'The attacks on maritime traffic and oil facilities since May have refocused attention on real rather than

manufactured threats to stability,’ he told the [Bloomberg news agency](#). Kuwait, which has sat on the sidelines of the dispute, reportedly urged Saudi Arabia to take part in the tournament as a goodwill gesture.

The Qatari organising committee swung into action. A new draw was held, a revised schedule published and preparations made for an eight-team event. On the eve of the tournament, the Saudi squad flew direct to Qatar from Riyadh, the first flight to do so in over two years. The UAE team chose to fly to Doha [via Kuwaiti airspace](#), a gesture that led regional analysts to speculate that Qatar is closer to making up with Saudi than it is with UAE.

On the field

I attended the opening match between Qatar and Iraq, excited to see how the expanded tournament would work. There were no boos or jeers upon the unfurling of the Saudi, Emirati or Bahraini flags — something that surprised me, given my previous experience of the hyper-nationalist and partisan crowds in England, where I grew up, and in Turkey, where I have spent many years [researching local football culture](#). “Everyone is welcome to Doha for the championship,” said the Qatari fan sat next to me. “All of our Gulf brothers. Even the blockading countries. We hope for an end, because we don’t like it like this”.

The game started the tournament with a shock, as Iraq beat Qatar 2-1. The Iraqis in the crowd were very excited, waving flags, running up and down the stairwells and chanting loudly. The Qatari fans merely looked on with amusement.

The following evening I joined a thinner crowd as Kuwait played Saudi Arabia. Whilst the Saudi football team had come to Doha, few fans had made

the same journey – the land border with Qatar remained closed, leaving only the hardcore fans willing to make a seven-hour flight via Kuwait, and a small number of Saudis already living in Qatar. Indeed, there were more Omanis in the crowd than Saudis – fans who had chosen to hang around after their side had played Yemen earlier in the evening. When Kuwait scored, they all jumped up and cheered loudly. ‘You want Kuwait to win?’ I asked one fan, sensing perhaps a geopolitical statement behind the celebration. ‘No,’ he cautioned me. ‘If Saudi score, you will see the same reaction!’

The fan’s comment was a reminder that, by focusing only on government or state-level actions, social scientists can miss certain dynamics of cultural events. The Arabian Gulf Cup was not solely about geopolitical maneuvering. Dating back to 1970, the competition is a celebration of regionalism as much as a crucible of competition for Gulf nations. In the fans’ celebrations for any side that scored, we can glimpse another, more tacit political gesture – eschewing the narrative of disagreement propagated by governments for one of unity with ‘all of our Gulf brothers’.

The group stages rattled along. Yemen were poor, Oman and Kuwait a bit unlucky. In the first-round showdown, Qatar beat the UAE to set up a semi-final clash with none other than Saudi Arabia.

The tickets for the eagerly-anticipated match vanished as soon as they went on sale. The online website ground to a halt. There were long lines in all the malls — populated in equal numbers by Qataris and expats. The game was a close-fought 1-0, Saudi Arabia defending tenaciously and Qatar unable to break them down, despite a plethora of chances. The Bahrain-Saudi final was equally close, settled by

a Mohamed Al Romaihi flick on a second-half counterattack.

The Arabian Gulf Cup breakthrough has kindled new hope among both fans and football officials that the blockade will be over by the time of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. “The problem between the nations is from above,” one Saudi fan told a Qatari TV reporter a fortnight after the event. “The Qatari people are good. We are brothers”. I have heard similar sentiments about Saudi Arabia from Qatari fans.

When it put itself forward in 2010, Doha branded its bid for the first Middle East World Cup as a chance to bring the region closer together. The blockade had made that idea seem all but impossible. But after the Gulf Cup thaw Qatari officials are stressing the ability of football to rebuild bridges.

Hassan Al Thawadi, secretary general of the Supreme Committee for Development and Legacy, the organization tasked with organizing and running the 2022 FIFA World Cup, said that the Gulf Cup had “a special place in our hearts”. He added: “It showcases... the concept of building platforms that, despite differences, [bring people together.](#)”

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students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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