

The Saudi-Egyptian Rivalry: How a Football Match Reflects Geopolitical Power Relations

By [Adeyinka Makinde](#)

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[Adeyinka Makinde](#)

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The defeat of the Egyptian national football team by their Saudi Arabian counterparts in the 2018 World Cup can be viewed as a metaphor for the triumph of the Saudis over Egypt after an intense and sometimes deadly political rivalry played out during the rule of the charismatic and secular-orientated Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Egypt has a rich tradition of football at both domestic and international levels. Along with the 'Black Stars' of Ghana, the 'Pharaohs' of Egypt were the glamour team of African football back in the 1960s and despite several significant lows have over the course of time established as seven-times winners of the African Cup of Nations tournament. The derby matches held between the Cairo club sides Al Ahly and Zamalek represent an enduring rivalry which is arguably as passionately intense as any other in the world including Istanbul's *Kitalarasi Derbi* and the Spanish *El Clasico*.

Saudi Arabia, which established its football federation 35 years after Egypt's, did not enter a tournament until 1984. And although it has gone on to become one of Asia's most successful national football teams, the rankings tabulated respectively by FIFA and the Soccer Power Index, demonstrate that Asian football continues to trail that of the African continent.

Going into yesterday's match held in Volgograd, Egypt could boast of having defeated Saudi Arabia in 4 out of 6 meetings. The first meeting between both countries in September 1961 during the Pan Arab Games ended in a 13-0 rout of the Saudis. Although the phenomenal gap in quality had closed over the years, Egypt emerged as 2-1 winners the last time they met in 2007.

For these reasons, it would appear rather perplexing to think of a footballing rivalry as existing between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. However, the nature of the football World Cup tournament in its straightforward evocation of nationalist pride and rivalry has been apt at bringing into sharp focus the relations of nations who have been scheduled to play each other.

This was clearly the case when England played Argentina in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico, four years after the military conflict between Britain and Argentina over the Falkland Islands, or, to Argentinians, Las Islas Malvinas.

And the imagination of the global public was stirred by the drawing of the United States and Iran in the same group during the 1998 tournament.

While the same cannot be said about the drawing together of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

and the Arab Republic of Egypt into Group A of the present World Cup, the Saudi defeat of an Egyptian side which included English Premier League Golden Boot winner Mo Salah, may have brought to the minds of some the previously intense and sometimes deadly political rivalry which existed between both countries.

The struggle for the heart and soul of the Arab masses between the secular Egyptian republic led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Wahabbist monarchy of Saudi Arabia was at its peak during the 1960s. The eight-year-long civil war in North Yemen between republican and royalist factions was one manifestation of a struggle, which also placed both countries on opposite sides in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Where the pro-Western Saudis were tradition-bound and seemingly resistant to change, the government of Nasser, which had been formed by members of the Free Officer Movement, appeared to be progressive. Nasserism not only embodied Arab nationalism, it also embraced the spirit of Bandung-era anti-imperialist sentiment and Afro-Arab solidarity.

At the apex of its appeal in the years following the Suez War of 1956, Nasser-led Egypt appeared to represent the aspirations of the Arab people -not the rulers of Saudi Arabia, who felt threatened and sought to check the spread of Egyptian influence.

That rivalry has, for all intents and purposes, been defunct for several generations.

How and why did Egyptian prestige and influence in the Arab world fall to its present state? Perhaps a starting point can be made by referencing the humiliating defeat inflicted on the Egyptian armed forces by the State of Israel in 1967 when the Israelis routed the combined armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

This defeat so traumatised the Arab psyche that it provided an avenue through which the fundamentalist brand of Islamism espoused by ideologues such as the Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyid Qutb could begin to gain greater appeal.

Nasser may have executed Qutb, but a succession of failures: militarily against Israel, economically in relation to the implementation of his brand of socialism, and politically the fracture of the United Arab Republic project with Syria alongside the quagmire in Yemen, began to convince some intellectuals and the man-in-the-street that secular nationalism was no longer the preferred course through which Arabs could develop their societies.

Egyptian prestige dwindled when it began to be perceived that Anwar Sadat, Nasser's successor, had become a tool of the West, and Egypt, with its ever expanding population but meagre resource, could not compete economically with the oil-rich Saudis.

While Sadat had garnered a modicum of esteem for Egypt after the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, the oil embargo and the ensuing fuel crisis strengthened the hand of the Saudis whose deal with the United States to sell oil solely in US dollars in return for guaranteeing the security of the House of Saud, offered the Saudi monarchy an extra layer of protection.

Although less concerned now about the possibility of Nasserite-inspired conspiracies aimed at overthrowing the royal house as had occurred during Nasser's heyday, the Saudis still felt threatened by the possibility of a revival of the Nasserite ideology in Egypt, or by the machinations of his ideological heir, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, who had overthrown the Libyan monarchy in 1969.

An indication of the change in the balance of Saudi-Egyptian relations was apparent with the more or less wholesale abrogation by Sadat of Nasser's policies, in return for subsidies and low-interest loans from the Saudis. Also, while the Arab League has for much of its history been characterised as a 'do-nothing' organisation, it was clear that as Egyptian influence waned, that of the Saudis grew.

The hand of the Saudis was also strengthened by the jolt caused in 1979 by the Siege of Mecca, which had the effect of intensifying the policy of exporting the Wahhabist ideology to foreign Muslim lands as a form of atonement to the senior clerics of the realm who warned Saudi Arabia's rulers that the siege, which was staged by the followers of Juhayman al-Otaibi had been caused by Saudi Arabia's steady drift towards an 'infidel culture', that is, what they considered to be the adapting of Western practices in Saudi society.

By now, the days when Egypt had actively provided a counter-weight ideology of secularism to the Muslim world were long gone.

For decades, Egypt's rulers, beginning with Sadat and continuing with Hosni Mubarak, have largely played second fiddle to the Saudis. And under General Abdul Fattah el-Sisi, this state of affairs has arguably become more pronounced. It is an open secret that el-Sisi was brought to power in 2013 by a coup which was financed by Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, the ceding by Egypt to the Saudis of the Red Sea Islands of Tiran and Sanafir in June 2017, provoked widespread outrage in Egypt. Although both Islands are largely uninhabited, the transfer of sovereignty was interpreted by many Egyptians as an abject surrender to Saudi suzerainty. It was a pact that many believe was reached because of Egyptian need for Saudi aid.

There are likely to be many Egyptians whose pride will be sorely dented by a sporting loss to the sparsely-populated desert kingdom to whom their leaders have increasingly become beholden.

A football match, it appears, has come to mirror the loss of Egyptian geopolitical power and influence relative to that gained and wielded by the Saudis.

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Adeyinka Makinde is a writer based in London, England.

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