



PERSPECTIVES

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Saudi-Moroccan Soccer Spat Symbolizes the New Arab Politics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The spat over Saudi Arabia's refusal to support a [Moroccan bid for hosting rights of the 2026 World Cup](#) tells the tale of the rise of individual country nationalism at the expense of Arab solidarity, Saudi determination to safeguard its alliance with the US at any cost, and creeping Saudi and UAE efforts to strong-arm countries into supporting their 11-month-old diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar.

In the latest round of the Saudi-Moroccan soccer spat, [Turki Al-Sheikh](#), the head of Saudi Arabia's General Sports Authority and a close associate of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, broke with the decades-old – and often farcical – principle of Arab solidarity by suggesting that the kingdom would support a US-led rather than a Moroccan bid for the 2026 World Cup.

Adopting a Saudi Arabia First approach, Sheikh noted that the US “is our biggest and strongest ally.” He recalled that when the World Cup was played in 1994 in nine American cities, the US “was one of our favorites. The fans were numerous, and the Saudi team achieved good results.”

In an [earlier tweet](#), Sheikh, noting that none of the contenders for the 2026 bid had sought Saudi support, said: “if someone ever asks, we will look for Saudi Arabia's interests first.”

Sheikh's Saudi Arabia First stance reflected Prince Muhammad's efforts to emphasize Saudi nationalism as a complement to, if not replacement for, religion as his regime's legitimizing ideology.

Applying the principle to soccer takes on added significance given that few other things parallel the depth of emotion that religion evokes in what is a soccer-crazy part of the world.

Underscoring the importance of soccer, Saudi businessman Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, in one of his first public acts after being released from three months of detention in Riyadh's Ritz Carlton hotel and in a demonstration of fealty to Prince Muhammad, [donated \\$533,000 in February to Saudi soccer club Al Hilal FC](#).

Prince Alwaleed, who was among the more recalcitrant of the hundreds of members of Saudi Arabia's ruling family, senior officials, and prominent businessmen detained last November in what amounted to a power and asset grab in the guise of an anti-corruption campaign, said the donation was in response to a call by the government.

Sheikh's apparent support for a joint US-Canadian-Mexican bid to co-host the 2026 World Cup followed a veiled threat by US President Donald J. Trump against nations that may oppose the US-led proposition. That threat is in violation of guidelines set down by world soccer body FIFA regarding political influence on the sport.

Morocco is the US-led bid's only competitor. FIFA is scheduled to choose the 2026 host on June 13.

"The U.S. has put together a STRONG bid w/ Canada & Mexico for the 2026 World Cup. It would be a shame if countries that we always support were to lobby against the U.S. bid. Why should we be supporting these countries when they don't support us (including at the United Nations)?" Trump said on [Twitter](#).

"We will be watching very closely, and any help they can give us in that bid we would appreciate," Trump added, implicitly linking support for the US-led bid to trade issues.

In his own tweets, Sheikh made clear that Saudi support for the US-led bid was about more than preserving the kingdom's alliance with the US. It appears to be part of an attempt to strong-arm countries into supporting the boycott of Qatar, which has failed to garner international support, and punish those who opposed it.

Morocco, despite [close security, military, and economic ties to Saudi Arabia and the UAE](#), has refused to take sides in the Gulf conflict and has offered to mediate. As Qatar was scrambling last June to ensure food imports in the days

immediately following the declaration of the boycott and the cutting of land, air, and sea links, Morocco sent [several planeloads of supplies to the Gulf state](#).

“Some people went astray. If you want support, you should seek it in Riyadh. What you are doing is wasting your time. Now [ask the pseudo-state to help you](#). A message from the Gulf to the Ocean,” Sheikh tweeted several weeks ago, referring to Qatar in derogatory terms and the fact that Morocco’s shores are on the Atlantic.

Adding insult to injury, Sheikh posted his tweet at the very moment that his aide and namesake, Talal Al Sheikh, was [meeting in the Moroccan capital of Rabat](#) with the president of the Moroccan Football Federation, Faouzi Lekjaa.

The linking of Saudi Arabia’s position on the World Cup came on the heels of the kingdom’s efforts to force prominent multinational financial institutions to take sides in the Gulf dispute. The Saudi push persuaded JP Morgan and HSBC to refrain from participating last month in a \$12 billion Qatari bond sale.

The Saudi-Moroccan spat is the latest incident in which the World Cup has become a battleground in the Gulf crisis.

In an indication of the importance Gulf leaders attribute to Qatar’s ability to garner soft power with its hosting of the 2022 World Cup, Dubai security chief Lt. Gen. Dhahi Khalfan suggested in October that the UAE-Saudi-led [boycott would be lifted if the Gulf state surrendered its hosting rights](#).

That may have been an overstatement by the notoriously bombastic law enforcement official, but it nonetheless reflected thinking about the political importance of sports in Qatar and among its detractors.

The Saudi-Moroccan spat goes beyond the political significance of soccer in the Gulf. It symbolizes the end of a post-colonial era in the Middle East in which Arab states look out for their individual interests rather than perceive themselves as a true bloc. That may be a healthy development, albeit one that promises even greater fracturing in an already deeply divided part of the world.

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