



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

World cup - battlefield and peace conference



Diego Maradona considered his two goals and victory over England at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico to be revenge for Argentina's defeat in the Falklands War four years earlier. "It was like beating a country, not a football team," wrote Maradona in his autobiography *I am El Diego*, in 2000, explaining how their quarter-final tie with England was more than a game of football for Argentina.

When East Germany beat West Germany at the World Cup in Hamburg in 1974 it was more than a football victory. They celebrated it as a victory of socialism over capitalism.

Back in 1996, London's *The Times* paraphrased Clausewitz's maxim that "war is a mere continuation of policy by other means" with the words "football is the continuation of war by other means". The world of football is aware of the influence it has on politics. FIFA estimated that around five billion people would watch the matches. But at the same time, the world of politics is also aware of this influence. And it won't miss the opportunity.

Long before it even began, the World Cup in Qatar was grounds for gaining political influence, on a global scale, as well as providing a place to resolve local conflicts between countries, and even conflicts within a country.

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The first "political" stars of the Qatar World Cup were the Iranian football players, who, with a silent protest, refused to sing their national anthem, expressed their support for the protesters in their country and opposition to the actions of the regime. In the very next game, they half-heartedly sang their national anthem, which made some of their fans in the stadium cry.

According to BBC, on Friday - at Iran's World

Cup game against Wales - some protesters had Persian pre-revolutionary flags snatched from them by pro-government fans at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. Insults were also reportedly hurled at some people wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the words "women, life, freedom" - a phrase that has become a rallying cry among protesters against Iran's authorities. One Iranian spectator alleged that Qatari police ordered her to wash off the names of protesters killed by Iran's security forces from her arms and chest after pro-government fans complained.

The match against the US is welcomed in Iran as a showdown with the "force of evil", and the football players are under pressure to achieve an historic victory, not only in football, but also in politics.

Russia and Ukraine are not participating in the World Cup, but Russian aggression against Ukraine is still present. A few days before the start of the World Cup, FIFA's boss Gianni Infantino said that the World Cup could be a "unique platform" for a "temporary cease-fire" between Russia and Ukraine. "My plea to all of you is to think on a temporary cease-fire, for one month, for the duration of the World Cup - or at least the implementation of some humanitarian corridors or anything that could lead to the resumption of dialogue as a first step to peace," he said.

Qatar is also a stage for resolving the conflict in the Balkans, and FIFA, according to Reuters, opened proceedings against Serbia's football association after a flag which showed Kosovo as part of their country was allegedly hung in the dressing room when they faced Brazil at the World Cup.

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For the entire duration of the World Cup, there will be a "war between civilisations" - the West and the Arab world - due to a series of cultural and political differences that have

burdened the World Cup when FIFA decided 12 years ago to grant its organisation to Qatar, the first Arab country to host the World Cup.

“I think that the Western media is biased because they don’t want to see an Arabic success, a Muslim success in the delivering and hosting of a global cup for football in a third [world country],” Najd Al-Mohanadi, a 20-year-old Qatari, told CNN.

But some in the Western media have also spoken out against stereotyping and alleged biases. Ayman Mohyeldin, an MSNBC host who previously worked for Qatar’s Al Jazeera, said recent coverage of Qatar shows “the depths of Western prejudice, performative moral outrage and, perhaps most significantly, gross double standards.”

But, regardless of its "highly spectacular nature", we should not expect the World Cup to resolve any conflicts in the world. “Football is a reflection”, wrote Pascal Boniface, the founding Director of the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs – IRIS. “A football match will not spark conflict between two countries that enjoy good relations, nor will it bring peace to states that wish to separate. Football did not cause the war between El Salvador and Honduras, just as it alone will not reconstruct diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran. But it can forewarn of a situation which is deteriorating or bring tidings of one that is improving. It provides a way for players on the international stage to split apart or draw closer together. So its importance must not be over or underestimated”.