

Arab nations set sights on footballing glory as World Cup nears



- Saudi Arabia on course for automatic place at Qatar 2022, while Egypt are among favorites for upcoming Africa Cup of Nations

RIYADH: After a year that gave us the excellent FIFA Arab Cup, the region's football fans are now turning their attention to the conclusion of the qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the Africa Cup of Nations in Cameroon.

With the final round of Asian qualifiers approaching, the Saudis are on the verge of qualifying for a second successive World Cup. Top of Group B with five wins and a draw, coach Herve Renard's side are looking increasingly elegant and balanced, and only a final collapse can stop them booking their place in Qatar.

The Arab Cup in Doha was a chance for Renard and his assistant Laurent Bonadei — who took charge of the team for the event — to try out his U23 squad. Despite exiting at the group stage, with just one draw and two losses, the tournament will have given the French coach a clear idea of which of his young pretenders can be drafted into the senior team for the rest of the qualifiers and beyond.

Of the AFC's Arab nations, only Saudi Arabia look like they will make it to Qatar 2022 with an automatic spot. The best that any of the rest — Lebanon, the UAE, Syria, Iraq and Oman — can hope for is a play-off place.

Meanwhile, the African Confederation is guaranteed five spots in Qatar and Arab nations Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt will all be in the hunt when the group phase concludes in March.

Before that is the much-delayed 2021 Africa Cup of Nations, which begins on Jan. 9 and runs until Feb. 6.

The Egyptian team will welcome the return of Mohamed Salah and other Europe-based players for the tournament — and the qualifiers — having performed commendably to reach the semi-finals of the Arab Cup without them.

Despite a cruel stoppage-time loss to Tunisia, coach Carlos Queiroz will have been impressed by how his young players performed and will be looking forward to adding other rising stars such as Hamdi Fathi, Hussein Faisal, Mohamed Abdel Moneim and Ahmed Abdel Al-Futuh to his squad. Add one of the world's best players in Salah, and Egyptian fans can expect 2022 to be a landmark year.

Algeria failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup but righted that wrong by winning the 2019 African Nations Cup in Cairo. The team looks formidable and more than ready for the double challenge ahead of them.

The Desert Warriors have excelled in the qualifiers so far, and claimed the FIFA Arab Cup title in large part due to the brilliance of forward Yacine Brahimi, goalkeeper Raif Mbolhi and other home-based stars. The Africa Cup of Nations

and World Cup qualifiers will no doubt see the likes of Manchester City's Riyad Mahrez return to strengthen the ranks.

Tunisia lost the final of the Arab Cup to Algeria in Qatar but produced one of the players of the tournament in Manchester United's Hannibal Mejbri, who stole the hearts of his compatriots and all Arabs with his performances and distinctive looks.

The bushy-haired youngster was both elegant and aggressive in midfield and will be hoping his impact in this tournament will catapult him into first-team contention at Old Trafford alongside superstars such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Bruno Fernandes and Paul Pogba.

Finally there is Morocco, who shone in the group stages of the Arab Cup before getting knocked out on penalties in the quarter-finals by Algeria.

Of particular interest is 28-year-old defender Badr Benoun, whose excellent form at Egypt's Al-Ahly has made him a wanted man across the Middle East, with Emirati club Al-Ain showing strong interest in recent weeks.

Besides being a successful year for Arab nations at international level, 2021 also saw Arab club sides Al-Hilal of Saudi Arabia and Al-Ahly of Egypt win the Asian and African Champions League competitions.

Fingers crossed, 2022 might just be the year that sees five Arab nations reach the World Cup for the very first time.