

# Mohamed Salah and fellow Arab stars must step up in Africa Cup of Nations knockout stages



- **Riyad Mahrez and Algeria in surprise exit amid mixed results for Arab teams and individuals**

The group stages of the delayed 2021 Africa Cup of Nations ended with two big surprises — the exit of defending champions Algeria and another of the favorites, five-time title-holders Ghana.

A record seven Arab nations started the tournament, but only four have booked a place in the round of 16: Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and, most surprisingly, Comoros.

Morocco's was perhaps the cleanest of qualifications, winning group C with seven points from two wins and a draw. The team looked to be on song and were led with distinction by Achraf Hakimi, who scored what may well be the best goal of the tournament so far against Gabon.

The Paris Saint-Germain player has been ably backed by Yassine Bounou, the excellent Sevilla goalkeeper, especially in the opening match of the campaign against Ghana.

It was a match settled by a winning goal from substitute Sofiane Boufal, who plays for French Ligue 1 side Angers. Despite being benched in all three group matches, Boufal has shown his worth for coach Vahid Halilhodzic's team.

Seven-time winners Egypt got off to a poor start with an awful performance in the 1-0 loss to Nigeria and after that scraped two narrow wins to progress to the knockouts stages.

Star forward Mohamed Salah, fresh from being nominated for the best FIFA men's player award alongside Lionel Messi and eventual winner Robert Lewandowski, has often looked isolated and scored just one of Egypt's paltry two goals at the tournament.

There seems to be a lack of understanding between the Liverpool star and fellow forward Mustafa Mohamed and Omar Marmoush, an issue that needs to be resolved before Wednesday's clash with a formidable Cote d'Ivoire team.

Egypt recently took part in the FIFA Arab Cup in Qatar without any of their European-based stars, but the return of the players does not look to have improved the team visibly.

Another that has disappointed is Arsenal's Mohamed Elneny, and he and Salah have rarely been subjected to this much criticism from their own fans and media. Coach Carlos Queiroz has yet to find the right formula despite the two wins over Guinea-Bissau and Sudan.

Tunisia also were far from impressive, missing three penalties against Mali, Mauritania and Gambia on their way to scraping through the group stages by finishing as one of the best third-placed teams.

The missed kicks came from Zamalek's Seif El-Din Al-Jaziri, Saint-Etienne's Wahbi Al-Kharazi — who both partially redeemed themselves with one and two goals, respectively -- and captain Youssef Al-Masakni, who plays for Al-Arabi Club in Qatar and had recently recovered from testing positive for COVID-19.

The young Manchester United star Hannibal Mejbri, one of the standout players at the Arab Cup, was again expected to take center-stage, but has so far failed to replicate his performances in Doha.

The biggest shock of the tournament has been the exit of champions Algeria. Manchester City star and talisman Riyad Mahrez entered the tournament with expectations of becoming the historical top scorer for his country at the AFCON, equaling Lakhder Belloumi's tally of six goals.

However, Mahrez and his colleagues were humiliated in the group stage, gathering only one point from a draw and two losses. Algeria's star man even missed a penalty in the comprehensive 3-1 loss to Cote d'Ivoire.

Lack of preparation for most teams has been a feature of the early part of the tournament, and Mahrez and rest of coach Djamel Belmadi's squad have failed to adapt to the pace of the competition, perhaps due to their late arrival in Cameroon.

Incredibly Algeria's defeat in their final group match, coupled with other results, helped unheralded Comoros become the fourth Arab nation to qualify for the knockout stages.

The scenes of celebrations that followed their sensational 3-2 win over Ghana — one of the results of the competition so far — will live long in the memory, and showed just what this tournament means to fans and players.

While the Pharaohs' clash with Cote d'Ivoire is the pick of the round-of-16 matches, Morocco will have a somewhat easier confrontation against Malawi, while Tunisia, with a host of players missing after testing positive for COVID-19, will face a thankless task against Nigeria, arguably the tournament's best team.

For Comoros, the party continues against hosts Cameroon on Monday. Whatever happens from now on, it has been an unforgettable experience for them.

Individually, stars such as Salah and Mahrez rarely caught then eye in the group stage. Instead, it is the Cameroonian Vincent Aboubakar, who plays for Al-Nassr in the Saudi Professional League, who has been one of the stars, grabbing five

goals in the three matches to top the goal-scoring table.

But teams and individuals have a habit of strongly emerging throughout a tournament. A slow start often ends up being a prelude to a star turn in the knockout stages.

We await Salah and co catching fire in the coming days.

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