

Resilient Tunisia looking to upset formidable group opponents at Qatar 2022



- The Carthage Eagles have failed to progress to the knockout stages in five previous World Cup appearances

Tunisia will enter the 2022 World Cup with one clear target: to make the knockout stages of the competition after trying six times.



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The previous five participations — 1978, 1998, 2002, 2006 and 2018 — have produced a very disappointing return of two wins from 15 matches, especially when you consider that Tunisia became the first Arab or African nation to ever win a World Cup match when they beat Mexico 3-1 in Argentina 44 years ago.

In many ways, however, they have already exceeded expectations by simply qualifying to Qatar 2022.

Going into the African World Cup qualifiers, not many people fancied the chances of the Tunisian team, at least in comparison to neighbors Morocco, Algeria and Egypt.

But the Carthage Eagles confounded the doubters, securing qualification with minimum fuss and a squad made up of players who ply their trade in European and Arab leagues.

Now they have been placed in Group D with defending champions France, Denmark and Australia. And while Tunisia will have their work cut out to reach the round of 16, their opponents will not be taking them lightly either.

“The Tunisian team deserves respect, and just getting here means they have something to offer,” said French coach Didier Deschamps, who no doubt will have done this homework on the dangerous trio of Youssef Msakni, Wahbi Khazri and Naim Sliti.

Two factors that should prompt Tunisia, led by coach Jalel Kadri, to enter this World Cup with more confidence than previous editions are that they possess more quality players and a clearer playing style this time around.

Kadri has relied more than his predecessors on players from Middle East leagues instead of only going down the tried and trusted road of looking toward European ones and having to convince dual nationals to commit to Tunisia.

Exceptions are the likes of Elias Al-Sakhiri (Cologne), Khazri (Montpellier), and Manchester United midfielder Hannibal Mejbri, who refused an invitation extended to him by the France U-21 team in September of last year.

Mejbri in particular is a major talent. At only 19, he was among the last three nominees for the 2022 Young African Player of the Year and was present in the Tunisian squad at the 2021 Arab Cup in Qatar and the 2022 African Cup of Nations in Cameroon.

Trusting the players participating in the Middle East leagues has provided results, with Kadri stressing that he needs a group with the necessary tactical understanding and harmony to play under different circumstances and that their ages should range between 27 and 30 years.

This has been highlighted by the tactical maturity the squad has reached led by captain Msakni and Ferjani Sassi, who both play in the Qatar Stars League, as well as Egypt-based Ali Maaloul and Seifeddine Jaziri, and Sliti of Saudi's Ettifaq.

The team certainly rely heavily on the contributions of Sliti and Sassi, who led them to victory in the Kirin Cup Soccer in Japan last June, beating the home team 3-0 in the final.

Meanwhile, Tunisia's playing style has been refined over the last few years, with defensive solidity and tactical maturity added to offensive strengths.

Still, there are issues to fix. The goalkeeping situation has recently become a major talking point, with opinion split on whether Aymen Dahmen, who conceded five goals in the friendly against Brazil, should keep his place or make way for the returning Bechir Ben Said.

When the two factors — Middle East-based players and new defensive solidity — have come together, the results have been impressive.

Tunisia impressed at the 2021 Arab Cup in Qatar, where they reached the finals only to lose to 2-0 Algeria after extra time, having earlier beat Egypt 1-0 in the semifinals with only two European-based players.

Can Tunisia repeat such performances and surprise their more successful opponents in Qatar? Will playing on Arab soil for the first time in World Cup have a positive impact on Kadri's team? And can they finally break their knockout stage jinx?

They will have to do what their predecessors have failed to do in five previous World Cup campaigns if history is to be made.