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Abstract:

The Impact of the 2022 FIFA World Cup on Iran: A Clean Sheet for Scoring Political Points

In this discussion, I examine the impact of Iran's qualification in the 2022 FIFA World Cup on the Iranian community. With the event being hosted in Qatar, a nation with which Iran has favourable diplomatic relations, Tehran has built on bilateral ties by offering closer logistical cooperation in air and sea transport. A two-hour flight from Tehran to Doha, the Iranian government announced that it will waive visa fees for World Cup spectators in the hope of drawing tourists to the country. However, as this chapter demonstrates, Iran's qualification in the sporting mega-event transcends commercial and touristic initiatives. Given the magnitude of the high-profile sporting tournament, there are several interdisciplinary vectors of analysis. From boosting bilateral cooperation between Iran and the host country, to reinforcing national unity, to raising social and gender issues, to rekindling geopolitical rivalries – the 2022 FIFA World Cup brings with it both challenges and opportunities that extend far beyond the event itself.

It has long been established that the achievements of Iran men's football teams in major sporting events have led to feelings of joy and patriotic sentiments. One of the main occasions during which the Iranian people unite in jubilant street demonstrations and festivals, football achievements in major international sporting events represent a moment of national pride and international recognition. For the Iranian state, the national team's qualification in the World Cup is not only a moment of glory, but also an occasion to reinforce Iranian national unity. Through the use of political and historical references, state media coverage of the event reinforces group cohesion by reinscribing and reproducing Iranian national identity in the context of the tournament.

While the football event is a formidable unifying factor, it can also provide the backdrop against which societal fissures become apparent. One of the controversies that has surfaced is the question of Iranian female football fandom. During Iran's qualifier match against Lebanon, hundreds of ticket-holding Iranian women were blocked from attending the match. The incident rekindled a dormant debate on the right of Iranian women to attend male football matches as spectators and served as a catalyst for wider debate on the symbolic representation of the female body in the public sphere in Iran.

Football in Iran will always be intimately intertwined with politics and with deep patriotic sentiments, and this is what fuels passion for the sporting event – the idea that somehow, success on the pitch can translate into success on the international stage. From an Iranian angle, the World Cup is very much a political construct, with the football pitch serving as a site for the projection and the perpetuation of enduring nationalist sentiments. In the build-up to the tournament, the draw for this year's World Cup generated some headline-grabbing fixtures. The draw conjured up the most dramatic and politically-charged of matchups, pitting Iran against the United States and England (and a third, undetermined country) in Group B. While laced in geopolitical undertones, the managers of both teams have downplayed the politics of the match. The chance draw created a flurry of reactions among Iranians – mostly excitement over settling old scores through a potential win.

Football is unpredictable, you can score in the first second and you can concede in the last second. The beauty of the sport is that the “underdog” always has a chance. To Iranians, there is much more at stake than a football match. The event presents the country with an opportunity to defeat political-footballing contenders on the pitch and to score some much-needed political points. The world’s biggest sporting event also presents opportunities to foster broader engagement, and to enhance people to people relationships and networks. Indeed, football is unpredictable, which is why there is always hope that these fixtures may turn out to be more diplomatically fortuitous than expected. This would signify an even greater national victory for Iran and a win-win situation beyond the pitch and the stadium.

Bio:

Ghoncheh Tazmini recently completed her term as Visiting Fellow at the Middle East Centre at the LSE, where she carried out research on Iran-related themes. She is the author of *Khatami’s Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (I. B. Tauris, 2007, 2009), and *Revolution and Reform in Russia and Iran: Politics and Modernisation in Revolutionary States* (I.B. Tauris, 2012). Her recent published articles include, ‘Parallel Discursive Fields in Pre-Revolutionary Russia and Iran: The West as a Model or an Anti-Model,’ (BJMES, 2021). Formerly, an Iran Heritage Foundation Fellow at SOAS, and a British Academy grantee, Ghoncheh’s research is positioned at the nexus of modern Iranian history, comparative politics and global history. In her previous research, she has focused on the processes of modernisation and reform in Iran. The second strand of her research focuses more specifically on Iran’s domestic politics and state-society relations. Finally, her research negotiates the tension between Iran and the west further back in history by adopting an integrative approach that appreciates the intense linkages and exposures of the country to global historical trends. Currently, she is authoring a book on Russian-Iranian relations.