



Saudi must overcome challenges of the past at the 2026 World Cup

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Salman Alfaraj of Saudi Arabia scores a penalty for his first goal during the 2018 FIFA World Cup

When the Saudi national team takes to the pitch at the [2026 World Cup](#) they will carry a weighty legacy of both glory and anticipation.

In the same country that witnessed its greatest World Cup moments more than three decades ago, the [Green Falcons return](#) to reclaim a story that has remained unfinished since the summer of 1994. In 1994, Saudi entered the tournament for the first time and emerged having put their name on the map of world football.

Since that extraordinary American summer, generations have come and gone, and teams and managers have changed, but that achievement remains a solitary entry in the annals of Saudi [football](#)

Today, as the World Cup returns to the US, the same question returns with it: will America once again be Saudi Arabia's gateway to the knockout stages?

Saudi: The newcomers who became a phenomenon

No one expected much from a team making its World Cup debut. However, the Saudi Arabia side at the 1994 World Cup refused to be just another number in the tournament.

In a group featuring the Netherlands, Belgium and Morocco, the Green Falcons managed to write one of the most inspiring stories in the history of Arab and Asian participation. The team secured a place in the Round of 16 with two historic victories, most notably their famous win over Belgium.

Thanks to a goal by Saeed Al-Owairan, he became an enduring icon in [World Cup](#) history.

The achievement was not limited to the results alone but also to the character the team displayed. A brave, confident side, capable of competing against opponents who surpassed them in experience and history. Even after their elimination by Sweden, Saudi Arabia left the tournament carrying the respect of the entire world.

Since that day, the 1994 World Cup has become a constant reference point in any discussion of Saudi football at the World Cup.

Three decades in search of the elusive breakthrough

The Saudi national team took part in the 1998, 2002 and 2006 tournaments without managing to progress beyond the group stage, before missing out on the 2010 and 2014 editions. They then returned for Russia 2018 with a late victory over Egypt, but it was not enough to keep them in the tournament.

As for Qatar 2022, it seemed as though history was poised to write a new chapter. A historic victory over Argentina, who went on to become world champions, gave the Saudis a legitimate dream of qualification. But losses against Poland and Mexico brought the team back to square one.

This is where Saudi Arabia's World Cup dilemma lies: the ability to create a defining moment is there, but the ability to turn that moment into a lasting achievement has remained elusive.

A group testing ambition and realism

The draw was not kind to Saudi Arabia for the 2026 World Cup. The presence of Spain, Uruguay and [Cape Verde](#) in the group presents the Saudi team with a series of varied challenges.

Spain represents a style that dictates the tempo through possession and technical quality, whilst Uruguay embody one of the world's most resilient and fierce sides in major tournaments.

As for Cape Verde, they may lack the star quality of their rivals, but this match appears to be the most crucial in the qualification calculations, as it could prove to be the difference between staying in the competition and being eliminated.

Nevertheless, the difficulty of the group does not mean the task is impossible. In 1994, too, the odds were not in Saudi Arabia's favour, but the team managed to turn the tables and secure their place among the qualifiers.

Where can Saudi Arabia make the difference?

The clash against Spain looks the toughest from a technical standpoint. The Saudi team will need great tactical discipline and the ability to close down space and deny the opposition complete control of the game's tempo.

Against Uruguay, the battle will be completely different. Physical intensity, one-on-one duels and second balls will dominate the match, making concentration and mental resilience crucial factors.

As for the clash with Cape Verde, it could be the match that decides the fate of the entire group. Such matches leave no room for hesitation as they often determine which teams will remain in the race and which will exit early.

The victory over Argentina at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar remains fresh in Saudi's memories as one of the greatest triumphs in Arab football. The victory carries an important lesson as well being a source of pride.

The World Cup does not reward the team that wins a single match but rather the team capable of maintaining its balance throughout the tournament. For this reason, Saudi Arabia in 2026 needs more than just a resounding surprise.

It needs consistency, the ability to manage difficult moments, and the capacity to come away from every match with the best possible outcome, be it three points, a single point, or even a defeat with limited damage.

Donis faces a different test

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On the bench, Georgios Donis will face one of the biggest challenges of his coaching career.

His deep knowledge of Saudi football is a significant strength, but it will not be enough on its own in a tournament of the World Cup's stature. What is required is not merely to prepare a competitive team, but to build a squad capable of handling shifting pressures, reading the big games, and capitalising on the opportunities afforded by the new format.

Donis's real task is to turn memories into a competitive project, not a psychological burden that haunts the players. The return to the US carries a symbolism that is hard to ignore. It was there that Saudi Arabia's greatest World Cup dream was born, and it was there that the finest chapter in the history of the "Green" team's participation was written.

But modern football does not recognise memories alone. What happened in 1994 may inspire, but it does not confer any advantage on the pitch. Past achievements light the way, but they do not walk it on behalf of those who achieved them.

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