
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Discourse of Defeat: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Arab National Teams at the 2026 World Cup

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| ABSTRACT

"The Arab world" is routinely invoked as a single cultural bloc, and the record eight Arab nations at the 2026 FIFA World Cup were framed as a single collective story. This study asks whether that assumed unity survives the stark exhibition of national identity in defeat, and what the answer reveals about power dynamics. Combining the Discourse-Historical Approach, Hallidayan transitivity, and Appraisal theory with a Gramscian account of hegemony, it analyses how Arab national teams discursively construct their eliminations across coach, player, federation, state, and press sites, in the original Arabic and French. A four-case study encompassing Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia finds not one "Arab" register. Instead multiple registers exist, including externalising grievance, personal honour-and-progress, institutional accountability, and asymmetric capture, and argues that these differences are not merely cultural but political, that is, each register performs legitimation work specific to its structure of rule, from the manufacture of national unity by a legitimacy-contested republic, through the elicitation of dynastic loyalty by an executive monarchy, and the enactment of accountability by a modernising one, to a republic that embraces its team in anticipation and withdraws from the accounting of its defeat. Capture proves calibrated rather than given, states consecrating the record-breaking while letting the merely excellent pass as routine. The discourse fractures even within a single nation, depending on the production site. The authority to voice a loss comes with the liability to answer for it, as demonstrated by a coach being honoured, a federation president resigning, and a foreign technician being dismissed. Consequently, who may speak for a nation, and who may be sacrificed on its behalf, follow one political logic. The study thus offers discourse-level evidence against the essentialist treatment of "the Arab world" and a comparative model of sporting defeat as a site for producing consent discursively, analysing how defeat discourse articulates hegemonic projects rather than whether it secures them.

| KEYWORDS

Critical discourse analysis; Discourse-Historical Approach; hegemony; legitimation; national identity; football; defeat; the Arab world; sport and politics; 2026 FIFA World Cup.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

A record eight Arab nations reached the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq and Jordan qualified for the first forty-eight-team tournament, and regional and international coverage alike converted that arithmetic into a narrative of a collective arrival, a golden generation, and the Arab world's tournament (Al Jazeera, 2026c; beIN Sports, 2026c; FIFA, 2026h). The framing was neither cynical nor unusual. It drew on a long-standing habit in journalism, policy, and public commentary, by which some four hundred million people across two dozen states are addressed as a single cultural and political subject with a shared temperament and a common way of meeting the world.

This article treats that framing as a claim to be tested rather than a context to be assumed, and it tests it at the moment such a claim ought to be most visible. All eight teams were eliminated. Elimination is analytically privileged precisely because it is

unwelcome as it compels coaches, players, federations and states to explain a national failure in public and at speed, under conditions in which diplomatic hedging tends to fall away and the terms in which a nation understands itself are exposed. If a shared Arab manner of meeting adversity existed, the aftermath of eight defeats is where it would surface. The central question of this study is whether it does, and if it does not, what the differences reveal instead.

The answer developed here is that they reveal politics. Across four cases the discourse of defeat resolves into distinct configurations, and those configurations track not culture but the structures of rule they serve. This argument requires a theoretical apparatus that the study assembles from two directions. From critical discourse analysis it takes the Discourse-Historical Approach, together with Hallidayan transitivity for the analysis of agency and Appraisal theory for evaluation, in order to establish at the level of the clause and the topos how each defeat is constructed. From Gramsci it takes the concept of hegemony, rule secured through consent as well as coercion, sustained by the institutions of civil society and requiring continual renewal at moments of strain. Sport is among the most powerful of those institutions, furnishing a national “we” that transcends social division; a defeat is a moment of strain in that common sense; and the discourse that repairs it is, on this reading, legitimisation work. The two directions meet in the study’s method where the political argument is built upward from textual detail, never asserted above it.

Three gaps in the existing scholarship make the intervention necessary. First, the discourse of losing has been comparatively neglected relative to the discourse of winning. Where sport and national identity meet, scholarship has attended overwhelmingly to victory, celebration and the assertion of belonging (Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995). Defeat, where it has been studied, has figured as national myth (Mock, 2012) or as reputational and psychological management (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007), but seldom as contemporary political discourse at the level of the text, and rarely compared across states as legitimisation work, as the literature review sets out below. Second, where the Middle East and North Africa are concerned, the treatment of the region as a single cultural bloc continues most persistently not in area scholarship, which has spent decades dismantling it since Said (1978), but in the media, policy and popular discourse through which international sport is narrated, where “the Arab world” is routinely addressed as one collective subject. This study extends the post-Orientalist critique of that monolith into a domain where the homogenising impulse remains strong, and where the specific literature on the region’s football (Dorsey, 2016) has tended to treat “Arab football” as a unit rather than analyse its internal differentiation comparatively. Third, the study declines a convenience: treating the coach at the podium as though he spoke for the nation. Here that is untenable, since these coaches ranged from national figures to diaspora managers and foreign technicians appointed weeks before the tournament, so that the podium’s relation to the national voice could not be assumed; the speaker is in any case not necessarily the source of what he voices (Goffman, 1981). Who is authorised to speak for a nation is thus not a premise but part of what the analysis explains, which is why it disaggregates each case by production site.

Accordingly, this study analyses four discourses of eliminations at the 2026 FIFA World Cup. The cases were selected to achieve maximum variation in sub-region, exit stage and structure of rule (Egypt, eliminated in the round of sixteen; Morocco, in the quarter-final; Algeria, in the round of thirty-two; and Saudi Arabia, at the group stage). For each case, the study builds a corpus that includes not only the coach’s podium, but also players, federations, state and royal communications, and national press, read in the original Arabic and French, and translation handled as an analytical layer rather than a transparent transfer of meaning. Attending to these sites separately proves consequential, for the discourse fractures not only between nations but also within them.

Four configurations emerge. The first being the Egyptian externalisation, where responsibility for the loss is placed on match officials and on the tournament itself, injustice is abstracted from incident into condition, and the state consummates the grievance in a presidential ceremony that honours a wronged and heroic team. The second is Morocco’s acceptance of and binding to a throne, where its coach places his own side and the opponent in the position of agents, concedes merit rather than claiming it, and reframes elimination through honour and progress, in a discourse whose deference reproduces a formula that entered the national anthem, in 1970, on the occasion of a World Cup, though the throne, having consecrated a semi-final in 2022 at its fullest, marked the 2026 quarter-final with a lesser rite, scaling ceremony to the exceptional. The third is Algeria’s acceptance without embrace, where the same register of honour and progress is voiced by a foreign coach, but the state that had received the squad at the presidential palace on the eve of departure absents itself from the accounting of the defeat and dismisses the coach without any ceremony. And the fourth is Saudi Arabia’s institutionalisation, where its foreign coach speaks in a technical register while the reckoning occurs elsewhere, at the apex of the football administration, in a ritual of declared responsibility, apology and resignation absorbed into a national modernisation project. Read against the political orders they serve, these are not idiosyncrasies but legitimisation logics, namely the manufacture of unity by a republic whose legitimacy is contested, the elicitation of loyalty by an executive monarchy, the calibrated, association-with-glory of a contested republic that embraces anticipation and withdraws from failure, and the performance of stewardship by a reforming monarchy.

Two further findings extend the argument. The states differ not only in how they narrate defeat but in whether and when they embrace the team at all. This is seen in how Egypt received an eliminated squad at the presidential palace, Morocco marked a quarter-final with a lesser rite than the consecration it had granted a semi-final, and Algeria's president received the players on the eve of departure and absented himself from the accounting on their return. In each case, capture is calibrated rather than given. And the question of who voices a defeat is joined by the question of who answers for it, a national-hero coach honoured, a federation president resigned, a foreign technician dismissed, so that the authority to narrate a national loss, and the liability to be sacrificed for it, prove to be distributed by the same political logic.

The contribution is therefore double, and the second half explains the first. The article is an attempt to provide discourse-level evidence against reducing "the Arab world" to a single voice by showing that four nations often treated as one suffer defeat in incompatible grammars. Importantly, it does not just record this fracture but explains it, linking these grammars to different structures of rule. What thus presents itself as cultural variation is, on inspection, the imprint of divergent modes of producing consent. A note on scope belongs at the outset: the analysis shows how these discourses articulate projects of rule, as evidenced in the texts; it does not claim to show that any such project succeeded with its public, which would require reception study of a kind not undertaken here.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section situates the study within the literatures on sport and nationalism, hegemony and discourse, and the politics of football in the Middle East and North Africa. A methodology section sets out the analytical framework, the corpus, and the procedure of analysis. The analysis then develops the four configurations in turn before drawing them together, and a concluding section considers what the comparison implies for the study of sport, discourse and political legitimization beyond this tournament and this region.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study draws together four bodies of scholarship: sport and nationalism; hegemony and discourse; sport and the legitimization of power in the Middle East and North Africa; and the discourse of defeat. The gap left by all four is what this study occupies: none of them offers a comparative, critical account of how losing gets narrated or of the political work that narration does. Here, the discourse of national defeat isn't treated as individual psychology or mere media ritual. It's a site where competing structures of rule try to win consent. This section outlines each scholarly strand and situates the study within them. It moves from the general to the particular: from the established link between sport and national identity, through the terrain of hegemony and discourse on which defeat can be read as legitimization, to the politics of football in the region and the comparatively thin literature on the discourse of losing itself, where the gap this study fills comes into view.

2.1 Sport, Nationalism, and The Imagined Community

National identity finds one of its primary expressions in sport. This claim is recognised as one of the most widely accepted claims in the study of sport and nationalism. Indeed, scholars have long framed international sport as a stage where the nation is felt and performed, and have viewed the national athlete as its living embodiment (MacClancy, 1996; Fox, 2006). This reading draws on Anderson's (1983) conception of the nation as an imagined community and Hobsbawm's (1990) observation that this abstract imagined community of millions becomes concrete in the form of a team of named players. Furthermore, Billig's notion of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) situates international fixtures within everyday flagging of nationhood, including anthems, flags, and the deictic "we" of the back pages, through which national belonging is continually, unreflectively reproduced. The FIFA World Cup is the most significant stage of its kind, concentrating this process to a remarkable degree.

But scholarship has dwelt far more on winning than on losing. Its focus has fallen on celebration and the assertion of identity. Defeat has not been wholly neglected, but where national-identity scholarship has taken it up, it has done so in a particular register: as sedimented collective memory rather than live discourse. Mock (2012) comparatively shows that nations routinely elevate their defeats into founding symbols at the centre of national memory, and Heuser (2017) traces the long cultural work by which a defeat is remembered as a moral victory.

This is an important and cognate literature, and the present study shares its premise that defeat is constitutive of national identity rather than merely incidental to it. But its object is the defeat sedimented into collective memory over decades, read through the symbols and narratives it leaves behind; the object here is the defeat as it is discursively managed in the hours and days after the final whistle, read through the clause and the topos. Where that scholarship examines how a nation remembers a loss, this study examines how a state, in real time, constructs one.

Yet the same premises make defeat analytically decisive. If sport is where the imagined community is most intensely felt, then defeat is a moment of potential rupture in that feeling, a disruption of national common sense that cannot be left unmanaged. It is precisely this discursive management of loss, rather than the easier discourse of triumph, that this study takes as its object.

A further consequence of this constructivist premise bears directly on the present study. If national belonging is made rather than found, so too are the supranational categories under which nations are grouped, and these prove to be relational: the level at which identity is invoked shifts with the comparative frame in play. The point is ordinarily argued theoretically, but Arab football supplies an unusually clean demonstration of it. At the 2025 Arab Cup, staged in Qatar months before the World Cup, the category that organised competition was not “Arab” (every participant was Arab), but the seam between the two confederations from which the sixteen entrants were drawn. The qualifying play-offs were seeded by pairing the best-ranked Asian side against the lowest-ranked African one and so down the list; the governing body’s own coverage previewed the semi-finals as the last surviving African nation against one Asian side and an all-Asian tie between two others; and regional analysis, both then and after the World Cup, set “African Arab teams” against “Asian Arab teams,” explaining the divergence by the presence or absence of world-class players and noting that expectations of Morocco far exceed those of Jordan, Iraq or Qatar. Confronting non-Arab opponents on a global stage, eight teams become one story; confronting one another, the same eight sort themselves into continents, tiers and hierarchies of expectation. “The Arab world,” in short, is not a stable cultural subject that discourse reports but a category that discourse activates or dissolves according to the opposition at hand, which is precisely why the discourse of defeat, and the question of when a Pan-Arab “we” is summoned and by whom, repays close analysis.

2.2 Hegemony and the discursive terrain of sport

The study’s organising concept is hegemony in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci 1971): rule secured through consent as well as coercion, reproduced as the ruling order’s worldview is made to appear as common sense through the institutions of civil society such as schooling, religion and, centrally, the media. Media, on this account, manufacture a sense of national-popular unity in part through coverage of sport, which furnishes a shared identity that transcends social divisions. Crucially, hegemony is never a settled achievement; it must be continually renewed, defended, and modified, especially at moments of strain, which is exactly what makes a national defeat, and its discursive repair, such a productive site of inquiry.

Cultural studies extended this apparatus to discourse. Hall’s theory of articulation (Hall 1996) analyses how ideological elements are made to cohere within a discourse and hooked to particular political subjects, and critical discourse studies inherit the Gramscian concern with the discursive manufacture of consent (van Dijk 1998). This lineage licenses the study’s method: the Discourse-Historical Approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak et al. 2009), Hallidayan transitivity (Halliday, 1985), and Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) are, in this framing, instruments for tracing at the level of clause and topos how a defeat is articulated into (or out of) a hegemonic common sense. Notably, sport has been theorised through Gramsci far less than through Foucault, leaving analytical room the present study occupies.

2.3 Sport and the Legitimation of Power in the MENA Region

In the Middle East and North Africa, football and politics are inextricable. Dorsey (2016) shows that politics was, in his phrase, the midwife of the regional game (clubs founded as pro- or anti-colonial platforms and engines of national identity) and that fans constitute one of the region’s largest and most consequential civic forces. That force has two faces, and the study needs both. The first is counter-hegemonic. The Egyptian Ultras have been analysed as a counter-hegemonic force operating through the very spectacle of sport (POMEPS 2023): central to the street politics of 2011, recast as martyrs after the 2012 Port Said disaster, and subsequently designated terrorist organisations and barred from stadiums under the Sisi government. In Algeria, match-days have long been occasions on which fans voice opposition, including demands for the departure of military leaders (Dorsey, 2016). Football, in short, is a terrain of contention the state has reason to fear.

The second face is legitimating, as states harness the same energy. A substantial literature reads Gulf sport investment through soft power and nation branding (Nye, 2004; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018), and critically through “sportswashing” as a form of authoritarian legitimacy management. This scholarship, however, is largely concerned with the outward international image, whereas defeat discourse works inward, on domestic audiences. Koch’s account of sport and soft authoritarian nation-building (Koch, 2013) points toward that domestic dimension, as do observations that the 2022 tournament became a “World Cup of monarchs,” recalling the Argentine junta’s use of the 1978 finals to shore up its rule. For Morocco specifically, the monarchy’s personal involvement in football governance has been read as consolidating dynastic legitimacy and deflecting criticism of governance, even as the framing of the team as an “Arab” side has drawn contest over the erasure of Amazigh identity (Warshel, 2023; BTI 2026). The present study turns this outward-facing frame inward. It reads defeat discourse as a site at which each regime’s particular production of consent is performed. The Egyptian case is a clear example of the resulting split: a state suppresses football as autonomous mobilisation, going after the Ultras, while appropriating football as national unity when the presidential receives the defeated team.

2.4 The discourse of defeat: existing work and this study’s contribution

Several adjacent literatures touch the discourse of losing without doing what this study does. Sport psychology, through attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), documents a robust self-serving bias, with success attributed to internal factors and failure to external ones; but it treats attribution as universal individual cognition and predicts externalisation everywhere, a prediction that

Morocco and Algeria here directly defy and that only a socially and politically situated account can explain. Communication studies read coaches' post-defeat talk as reputation management, analysing image-repair and crisis-communication strategies such as denial, scapegoating, excuse, apology, and rebuilding (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2007), but at the individual or organisational level, detached from structures of rule and usually case by case.

Discourse analysts have also turned to losing itself, so the ground is not untouched. The talk that follows a World Cup final loss has been read for the communicative resources a defeated side reaches for (Gastaldo, 2009). Behnam and colleagues compare after-match reports of won and lost games and show how the same events are grammatically recast once the result changes (Behnam & Isfahlan, 2015). Rahimi's transitivity analysis of match reports places the winning side in agentive, transactional clauses and the losing side in passive ones that foreground its failings (Rahimi, 2020), the same asymmetry between marked and unmarked agency that this study follows in spoken defeat talk. And Heaney (2013) traces how the English press built an identity for a foreign national-team manager, which anticipates the attention paid here to Ouahbi, Petković, and Donis as outsiders authorised to speak for the nation.

Closer to this study's terrain is Ncube, Mkwendi, and Batisayi (2024), the nearest MENA/Arab-football precedent to the present analysis. Their study examines how Moroccan digital fandom during the 2022 World Cup negotiated competing claims to the team, as an Arab triumph, an African one, and a Moroccan nationalist one, showing pan-African solidarity and Arab exceptionalism as rival discourses among fans online. It shares this study's country and its attention to the layered, contested character of "Arab" identity in Moroccan football discourse, though it examines a competition cycle one edition earlier. Its object, however, is digital fan discourse around victory rather than the coach-to-state chain around defeat, and its question is which collective identity Moroccan fans claim rather than how a state converts a result into legitimation. Where Ncube et al. trace contested belonging among supporters after Morocco's historic 2022 run, this study traces institutional consent-production after Morocco's 2026 quarter-final exit, extending the same terrain from fandom to the apparatus of rule.

What this study adds is not the analysis of defeat discourse as such, but the comparison. The prior work is single-case, mostly built on written media, and read for bias or for identity rather than for political function; none of it sets several national defeats beside one another and asks what the differences reveal about the state that is losing. The contribution here is the cross-national linking of distinct registers of defeat to distinct structures of rule, read as legitimation work whose form tracks political order. In the same movement, the comparison furnishes discourse-level evidence against the essentialist treatment of "the Arab world," whose eight 2026 representatives were narrated in the press as a single collective story.

2.5 Synthesis and position

Bringing these strands together, the study reads the discourse of national defeat as a rupture in the imagined community that each state must discursively repair, and treats that repair as hegemonic labour focusing on the renewal of consent at a moment of strain, performed in a region where football is uniquely charged and double-edged, through the fine-grained analysis of defeat talk that existing work has not brought to bear across national cases. From this follows the study's guiding hegemony question: how does each state's discourse of defeat perform legitimation work that is specific to its structure of rule? And what does the comparison reveal about the relation between football, defeat, and the production of consent across the various Arab political orders? The contribution is, in this sense, doubled. On one side, it offers evidence against the essentialist reduction of "the Arab world" to one voice. On the other, it puts forward a comparative model of sporting defeat as a site for the discursive production of consent. That said, and in keeping with the limits of discourse analysis, the study analyses how defeat discourse articulates hegemonic projects. It stops short of claiming to measure whether they actually secure consent.

3. Methodology

This section sets out the methodological orientation through which this article is built. This study is qualitative, interpretive, and critical. It belongs to critical discourse analysis (CDA), the tradition whose defining commitment is not the description of language in the abstract but the analysis of how discourse reproduces, legitimates, and contests power (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). That commitment is inherited directly from Gramsci. Fairclough's model of discourse builds on the Gramscian account of hegemony, rule secured through consent as well as coercion. Van Dijk's programme, meanwhile, centres on the discursive reproduction of dominance and the manufacture of consent. In treating the discourse of national defeat as legitimation work fitted to different structures of rule, the study occupies this critical core rather than its descriptive margin, its guiding questions concern whose interests defeat discourse serves and how consent is discursively solicited.

The approach is accordingly interdisciplinary CDA, drawing on political sociology (hegemony, legitimation), the sociology of sport, and area studies, and integrating them through discourse-analytic method. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016) is especially suited to this: developed for the study of national identity and designed to integrate historical, institutional, and situational context into textual analysis, it allows the political and the linguistic to be read together without collapsing either into the other.

A single principle governs the reach of every claim. The analysis reads how defeat discourse *articulates* a hegemonic project (how it assigns responsibility, constructs the nation and its adversaries, mobilises repertoires, and serves interests) as evidenced in the text. It does not claim to show that such discourse *secures* consent or stabilises a regime. That would be a claim about audiences and effects, and it would require a reception study that the present design does not undertake. The discipline of articulation without implementation is not a qualification added at the end of the analysis. Rather, it is a structural condition that shapes the design of the questions and the interpretative lens from the outset. It is, in effect, what keeps the study within discourse analysis and prevents it from drifting into political-communication empirics, and it is also what ensures the power reading is drawn out from textual evidence rather than imposed on it. What follows sets out the research design, the data and corpus construction, the analytical framework, the analytical procedure, a brief note on rigour and trustworthiness, and, finally, the reflexive and ethical considerations that frame the work.

3.1 Research design

The study employs a comparative multiple-case design (Yin, 2018), interpretive rather than variable-analytic in spirit, with cases purposively selected for maximum theoretical variation. Four Arab national teams eliminated from the 2026 FIFA World Cup make up the selection: Morocco, from the Maghreb, reaching the quarter-final; Egypt, from the Mashriq, out at the round of sixteen; Algeria, also from the Maghreb, out at the round of thirty-two; and Saudi Arabia, from the Gulf, eliminated at the group stage. Together, they vary across sub-region, exit stage, rule structure, and coach nativity. The aim is analytic, not statistical, generalisation. That said, the cases are instances through which the relation between defeat discourse and structures of rule can be examined, not a representative sample.

The design is deliberately synchronic. Confining the corpus to a single tournament holds format, host region, officiating regime, and global news cycle constant, so that divergence across cases is attributable to nation, structure of rule, and speaker rather than to era. Earlier tournaments, notably the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, enter only as interpretive context, not as part of the analysed corpus. The unit of analysis is the production site within the nation rather than the nation as a whole: because defeat discourse is found to fracture by site, each national case is disaggregated into coach, player, federation, state, and press.

3.2 Data and Corpus construction

The corpus comprises post-elimination public discourse gathered within a window of the elimination day plus seventy-two hours: coach press conferences; player interviews and mixed-zone remarks; federation statements; state and official communications, including heads of state and allied sovereign voices; and national-press framing. Each text is logged with speaker, role, production site (coach, player, federation, state, external-ally, or press), outlet, original language, coach nativity (native-hero, diaspora, or foreign), and exit stage. Only defeat-relevant units (those that attribute, evaluate, explain, or frame the loss) enter the analysis.

Data are gathered and analysed in the original languages: Egyptian, Maghrebi (including Darija), and Gulf varieties of Arabic; French; and English or other languages where foreign coaches speak. Translation is treated as an analytical layer rather than a transparent transfer of meaning: translation-sensitive readings, especially fixed religious formulae, are analysed on the originals and annotated, and the translation decision is made visible in the analysis. All data are the public statements of public figures; no private data are used. Reputable and, where possible, neutral outlets are preferred, and diachronic contextual material is drawn from neutral sources and framed as context, given the political sensitivity of the region.

The primary corpus comprises the post-match statements of the four coaches (Hassan, Ouahbi, Petković, and Donis, representing Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia respectively), together with player's post match interviews, the official receptions, communiqués, and resignation statements that followed each elimination. Statements are taken from the recordings of the post-match press conferences and corroborated against contemporaneous reporting; each quoted phrase is transcribed from the recording in its original language, with the published reports cited alongside as a check on the transcription. The state and federation events, the Egyptian and Moroccan royal receptions, the Algerian pre-departure reception, and the resignation of the Saudi federation president, are evidenced from official communiqués and news reporting. All primary sources are listed under Primary sources in the references.

3.3 Analytical framework

The framework nests three compatible levels of analysis under the DHA. At the macro level, the DHA's discursive strategies, such as nomination, predication, argumentation (topoi), perspectivation, and intensification/mitigation, organise the reading of identity and legitimation. At the micro level of the clause, Hallidayan transitivity (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) supplies the instrument for the question of agency: who or what is made the grammatical actor of the loss, and where passives and nominalisations delete the responsible party. The evaluative layer is analysed through Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005). These are not competing methods but a single apparatus operating at different grains, from which the hegemonic reading is then built upward. The same apparatus underlies a prior critical discourse analysis of United States discourse on Gaza at the

United Nations Security Council, where agent deletion, euphemism, and lexical absence were shown to manage institutional responsibility (Chader, 2026). The table maps each research question to its discursive focus, analytical tools, and the discursive features analysed.

Table 1. Mapping of research questions to the analytical framework

Research question	Discursive focus	Analytical tools	Features analysed
RQ1: Agency and responsibility	Who is made the actor of the loss; how responsibility is hidden	Transitivity (SFL); passive; nominalisation	Actor-type; agentless passive; nominalisation; responsibility-stance
RQ2: Self, other, identity	How the national “we” and its adversaries are constructed	DHA nomination and predication; deixis; perspectivation	Nomination; predication; pronoun deixis; othering; perspective
RQ3: Cultural repertoires	The warrants, faith, and affect that render the loss meaningful	Argumentation/topoi; intertextuality; Appraisal	Topoi (injustice, merit, honour, progress, conspiracy, project, unity, deference); religious and geopolitical intertextuality; affect
RQ4: Critical (interests)	Whose interests the construction serves; where it is produced	Contextual interpretation (DHA context levels)	Production site; interest served (interpretive)
RQ5: Hegemony/legitimation	The legitimation logic fitted to each structure of rule	Aggregate reading against political and historical context	Legitimation logic; expected-absent silences; meta-critique

3.4 Analytical procedure

The analysis works at two levels of unit. Questions of agency (RQ1) are pursued at the level of the clause, where transitivity makes visible who or what is cast as the actor of the loss and where passives and nominalisations delete the responsible party. Questions of identity, repertoire, and affect (RQ2-RQ3) are pursued at the level of the utterance or turn, where nomination, predication, argumentation, and appraisal do their work. Each case is read through this same set of strategies, so that the four are compared on constant analytic ground rather than through categories fitted to each in turn. A legitimation layer is added to this reading: the topoi of unity, of the state project, and of dynastic deference; the significant silences that a case conspicuously leaves unspoken; and the explicit negotiation of accountability. This layer, developed across the four cases, is what carries the analysis from discursive description to the reading of legitimation.

The reading proceeds from the textual grain upward. For each case, the analysis first establishes how agency, identity, the governing topoi, and the expressed affect are constructed across the defeat-relevant material, noting which strategies dominate, which are muted, and, no less telling, which readily available repertoires are conspicuously absent. Recurrence and salience are treated as qualitative characteristics of the reading rather than as tabulated counts, and disconfirming as well as confirming instances are reported, so that no claim rests on a single quotation. The hegemonic reading is assembled last, from the aggregate of these features set against each case’s political and historical context: a register is interpreted as legitimation work fitted to a particular structure of rule only once its discursive construction has been established on the text.

3.5 Rigour and trustworthiness

Because this is an interpretive, qualitative analysis, its rigour is a matter of trustworthiness rather than of measured agreement, and it is pursued along the established criteria for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility rests on reading every text in its original language, on applying the same analytic framework to all four cases so that each is examined against the same discursive strategies, and on triangulating the textual reading against each case’s documented political and historical context.

Transferability is supported by thick description and explicit, reasoned case selection, which allows a reader to judge how far the account might extend to other settings. The framework is stated in advance, and each interpretation shows the reasoning that produced it, so a reader can trace the reliability rather than take it on faith. Moreover, disconfirming instances are reported alongside confirming ones. Hence, the chain of interpretation is open to inspection and could be retraced by a second analyst. The four cases are purposively selected, and no claim is made for statistical generalisation. The account is presented as a disciplined interpretation to be tested, not as a measured result.

3.6 Reflexivity and research ethics

Given the study's anti-essentialist thesis, its claims are disciplined accordingly: it speaks of discursive repertoires and constructions, never of "the Arab mind" or a regional temperament, and it treats a bounded set of statements as evidence about discourse, not psychology. The categories "Arab," "Maghreb," "Mashriq," and "Gulf" are treated as objects of analysis rather than natural kinds, and they are participants' categories before they are the analyst's. The sub-regional distinctions on which the comparison rests operate within the field itself, not only in the analysis; the 2025 Arab Cup seeding and coverage split "African Arab" from "Asian Arab" teams along exactly this line (§2.1). The design therefore traces a grid that operates among the actors rather than imposing one upon them, though the categories remain, for that very reason, discursive constructions to be analysed rather than descriptions to be adopted. Translation is understood as interpretation; the researcher's language competence and standpoint are stated, and translation-sensitive readings are surfaced rather than buried.

The study analyses the legitimization of sitting governments, which is politically sensitive, particularly in this region. All data are public, and the analysis is evidence-based and even-handed: contested characterisations such as government's legitimacy are presented as scholarly readings alongside the state's own account, analysed rather than endorsed or attacked, and decisions about venue and dissemination are made with due care for context and exposure. Finally, and consistent with the governing principle, the study makes claims about what defeat discourse *does* (how it articulates hegemonic projects), and withholds claims about what it *achieves* among its audiences, which lie beyond discourse analysis and are marked as directions for further, reception-based research.

4. Analysis

In what follows, each national defeat is read not as an isolated communicative event but as a form of legitimization work. It is the discursive repair of a rupture in the imagined community, and it is fitted to a particular structure of rule. Losing at the World Cup places a certain strain on national common sense. And the discourse that steps in to manage that strain, by assigning blame, salvaging honour, and positioning the nation and its adversaries, amounts, in Gramscian terms, to an effort to renew consent at a moment of pressure. Reading defeat along these lines does not, however, mean leaving the text behind. The argument developed here builds upward from the fine grain of the discourse itself. It begins with a straightforward question: who is made the grammatical actor of a loss? From there, the reading moves on to the topoi that render defeat meaningful, and then to the affect through which it is coloured. Only at that point does the analysis arrive at the legitimization work that all of this grain is ultimately doing. The aim, in short, is to show how each discourse articulates a project of rule. Nothing more is claimed here. In particular, no attempt is made to measure whether that project actually lands with its audience, since that question lies well beyond the reach of textual analysis as it is understood here.

The occasion for the study is the 2026 FIFA World Cup, a tournament remarkable in that a record eight Arab nations competed. In regional and international coverage alike, these teams were narrated together, as if they formed a single collective story. Commentators everywhere reached for the same phrase: a shared arrival of "Arab football." That's the framing this study pushes back against. If a common "Arab" way of meeting defeat existed, it should show up clearly when national feeling runs highest. This study tests that claim across four Arab eliminated teams (Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia). Their defeats are read across several sites including the coach's podium, the players, the federation, the state behind them, and the national press. Each site is read on its own terms, since the discourse fractures across nations and often within them, too.

Four configurations of defeat emerge as developed in subsections below. Egypt externalises its loss, it converts the grievance into a resource for national unity. Morocco accepts defeat but binds that acceptance to the throne, which captures it for the apparatus of rule. Algeria accepts too, yet its state, having embraced the squad before departure, withholds itself from accounting for the loss once the team is home. Saudi Arabia's accepts institutionally, and that acceptance itself becomes a performance of governance. At the end the four configurations are placed side by side in a closing subsection, these four configurations support a twofold argument: the "Arab" discourse of defeat is not one but several, and these several discourses are not random for it tracks the structures of rule they serve. Hence, what looks like a fractured monolith is really the imprint of divergent modes of producing consent.

4.1 The Blameless Nation: Externalisation in Egypt

Egypt exited at the round of sixteen, going down 3-2 to the reigning champions Argentina after holding a two-goal lead with roughly eleven minutes still to play. The match was refereed by a French official, and Argentina had beaten France in the 2022 final. That chain of associations would be placed at the centre of the Egyptian camp's account. Egypt is treated first for two reasons. In the first place, it is the register most likely to be read, by a reader primed to expect it, as a culturally "Arab" way of meeting defeat. In the second place, it is the register in which the passage from a coach's grievance to the state's legitimization can be observed most openly. Close reading dismantles the first expectation, while making the second all the more visible.

A defining feature of this discourse lies in the outward concentration of agency. Across Hossam Hassan's post-match statements, the grammatical actor of the loss turns out, in the vast majority of defeat-relevant clauses, to be either the match official or, at another level, the tournament itself. Egypt occupies the actor role in one narrow case only: the counter-claim that it was "better in everything." The loss is thereby construed not as something Egypt did, but rather as something done to it. Even when an institution is named, the construction drifts toward the conspiratorial. The forward Mostafa Ziko puts it most bluntly: the trophy "is directed towards Argentina," (Sky Sports, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026a; beIN Sports, 2026b) a process whose director is left unnamed, though the identity of that director could hardly be more obvious to the listener. In the original: *Mabrūk Kās el-Ālam li-l-Arjantin, baṭūla muwajjaha* ('congratulations to Argentina on the World Cup, a directed tournament'), so that they 'do not even need to play the rest of the matches'; *ma-fīsh 'adl fī-l-baṭūla* ('there is no justice in the tournament') (beIN Sports, 2026b).

From here, agent-deletion moves into a second gear, this time through nominalisation. The loss gets repackaged as "injustice." This is a process converted into a moral object requiring no doer at all. Yet, in this instance, the nominalisation does something unexpected: it elevates rather than conceals. Adversaries are named in concrete terms, even while the grievance itself is lifted up into a condition of the competition, and indeed of the world. What the register does is bring together two warrants that, analytically speaking, belong apart. One of these is a topos of injustice. Egypt was wronged. In the original the charge is blunt and code-switched: "not fair, the world is not fair", *ma-fīsh fēr fī-l-kōra, ma-fīsh fēr fī-r-riyāda* ('there is no fairness in football, no fairness in sport'); the loss, he says, came *iḥnā itzalamnā en-nahārdā bi-fī'l fā'il* ('we were wronged today by deliberate action'; FIFA, 2026g, 03:19, 03:52). The other is a topos of conspiracy. In the press conference Hassan states it directly: *ed-dughūtāt illi it'amalit 'alā el-ḥakam qabl el-mubārāh min el-jānīb el-arjantinī najahit* ('the pressures placed on the referee before the match from the Argentine side succeeded'; FIFA, 2026g, 01:25). The result was steered, and steered, in Hassan's own phrase, "to keep the world champions in." In the original interview his words are *āyẓin yikhallū baṭal Kās el-ālam illi fāt yikūn mawjūd, 'āyẓin yikhallū Messi mawjūd* ('they want to keep the winner of the last World Cup around, they want to keep Messi around'; beIN Sports, 2026a). The conspiracy frame does not appear in the other cases with anything like the same force, muted in some and missing altogether in others. That absence elsewhere is what marks the frame as distinctively Egyptian. Even within the squad the register is not uniform: alongside Ziko's grievance, players such as Emam Ashour and Mostafa Shobeir lean toward acceptance and fate, *al-ḥamdu lillāh... ma-fīsh naṣīb* ('praise be to God... it was not our destiny'), so that the aggrieved framing is a selective option rather than an automatic national reflex, and it is this option that the state will amplify (beIN Sports, 2026b).

From that base, two further moves work to anchor the grievance. The first is an appeal to divine judgement. The second is a reach beyond the pitch itself. As for the divine appeal, it too is distributed across speakers. In the manager's register it is a theodicy of the upright, *ṭalamā māshī ṣaḥḥ ḥatit' ab* ('as long as you walk upright you will suffer'), the loss folded into *al-ḥamdu lillāh* as the trial of those who did right (FIFA, 2026g, 00:48, 01:51). The player Ziko goes further, binding the fixed Quranic formula *ḥasbī Allāh wa nī'ma al-wakīl* ('God is sufficient for me and the best disposer of affairs') directly to the charge that the match was *muwajjaha* (beIN Sports, 2026b). What this formula does is install a just arbiter who stands above the corrupt earthly ones already named in the discourse. The reach beyond the pitch takes a rather different shape. The objection attaches itself to the referee's nationality and to "the French situation," in Hassan's words, *in kānū mu'tariḍin 'alā ḥakam wi-'ashān Faransa wi-mush Faransa* ('they were objecting to a referee because of France, and not France...'; FIFA, 2026g, 01:25), and the coach's earlier solidarity with Palestinians is pulled in alongside it (FilGoal, 2024; Yallakora, 2024; Al-Ahram Gate, 2024). A geopolitical intertextuality of this kind lines the several external actors up as a single adversarial bloc standing opposite a national "we" whose effort, Hassan says, the referee has wasted. The construction of the Palestinian question in institutional political discourse, and the grammar of agency and responsibility that surrounds it, is examined at length in Chader (2026). Where does the campaign end? Not in resignation, and not in concession, but in something more pointed. It ends in withdrawal. Hassan announces that he will not watch the rest of a tournament in which, as he sees it, there is no justice.

However, the coach does not carry this register alone, as the federation's refusal to "remain silent" furnishes one echo, while the players' own statements furnish another. What these voices do, taken together, is align the coach, the institution, and the squad around a single externalising line.

This creates a convergence that holds unbroken across the national footballing apparatus, and reaches the highest level of the state itself. Days after the elimination, at an official ceremony, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi received the squad and awarded the

Order of Merit, along with a commemorative "Cup of Pride and Honour," a stadium celebration, and a mass welcome. What the event was doing at the level of meaning was quite precise. An elimination was being reconstructed as a national triumph. It was being presented as something to be recognised, not as a failure that called for explanation. The president, for his part, was explicit about this. Honour was to be detached from result. Sport, on his account, could not be reduced to winning and losing (Xinhua, 2026; The National, 2026a), and the team had earned an esteem that outweighed victory. This is externalisation seen from its productive side. Once blame has been located wholly outside the team, none attaches to its performance, and the squad is received not as a squad that failed, but as one that was wronged and yet came through with honour. That reading, however, was hardly guaranteed. Egypt had reached the round of sixteen once before, in 1934, when the tournament was a straight knockout and that round was simply where every qualifier began. On round attained, 2026 equalled the mark rather than surpassed it, and that is exactly how the reference works record the two campaigns: as a joint best finish. What was genuinely new was narrower: a first passage beyond the group stage under the modern format, and a first knockout victory, ninety-two years after the debut. The record, then, could be read more than one way. In some accounts, 2026 counts as a first true progression. In others, it counts as an equalling. What the state did was pick the reading that made the campaign historic. The externalising register, in the end, works along two axes at the same time. Blame runs outward, and the achievement runs upward. The ceremony consecrates a benchmark, but the discourse had to build that benchmark first.

Once read as legitimation, the structure becomes legible. A regime whose legitimacy is contested, whose leadership had assumed power through the 2013 military removal of an elected president, and which then narrated that event in its own discourse as a popular mandate, has a heightened need for the manufacture of consent. Sport, on this terrain, becomes a privileged instrument. The externalising register, once crowned by the presidential ceremony, converts a contested and painful defeat into an occasion of national unity. The portrait that emerges is that of a wronged-but-heroic nation gathered around its leadership. What is at stake here is not the coach's psychology. It is hegemonic labour. The head of state, in this scheme, is among the principal beneficiaries.

The point becomes sharper still when set against the Egyptian state's wider relationship to football. That relationship is anything but celebratory. It is, on the contrary, ambivalent, and often coercive. The organised fan movements that had been central to the street politics of 2011, and that were then recast as martyrs after the 2012 Port Said disaster, were later designated terrorist organisations and barred from stadiums. The same power the state fears when football operates as autonomous mobilisation gets put to work when football operates as national unity. Read this way, the policing of the terraces and the honouring of the national team turn out to be two faces of a single hegemonic management of the game. The discourse of defeat, converging on grievance and consummated in a state ceremony, is the appropriative face.

From this, two conclusions can be drawn, and the section has been built to reach both. The grievance register is only one of several options. It is not, in other words, a regional signature. The next configuration will show as much. As for the second conclusion, it is that grievance happens to be the option best fitted to a legitimacy-contested republic whose task is to continually manufacture unity.

Register and structure of rule are, in short, of a piece. Morocco, no less "Arab" and no less recently beaten (by the former colonial power, twice), meets defeat by doing the reverse. Rather than externalising blame, the Moroccan register accepts it. Rather than manufacturing unity through grievance, it elicits loyalty through honour. The difference, as the next configuration will show, is not cultural. It is a difference in the structure of rule.

4.2 Heads Held High: Acceptance in the Maghreb

Two of the four teams meet defeat not by contesting it but by accepting it. The coaches of Morocco and Algeria alike place their own sides in the position of agents, credit their opponents, and reframe elimination through honour and the promise of progress; neither reaches for grievance. Read from the podium, the two registers are nearly indistinguishable. Yet the resemblance is a surface. What separates them lies not in how the loss is spoken but in what each state does with the acceptance once it is offered, whether it is drawn into the apparatus of rule, and if so, when.

4.2.1 The Calibrated Throne: Acceptance and Deference in Morocco

The development of football as an instrument of legitimation by the Moroccan crown is well established; the anthem is its emblem. In 1970, Morocco's first-ever World Cup qualification left the country with a national anthem that had no words for its players to sing. King Hassan II commissioned the lyrics, fixing the anthem's closing triad, God, Homeland, and King, the Makhzen's foundational formula ever since. This founding episode places football, from the outset, on the stage where devotion to the throne is performed. The press revisits this narrative at every subsequent tournament, thereby periodically renewing the binding of football to the monarchy as a ritual performance. None of this remains purely historical. The palace's personal hand in football governance has been described as a mechanism for consolidating dynastic legitimacy (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). With

this genealogy in sight, the deference to the King that runs through Morocco's 2026 discourse of defeat starts to look quite different. It cannot be treated as incidental courtesy. What it amounts to, instead, is the reactivation of a decades-old articulation of football, faith, and dynastic authority.

At the level of register, the Moroccan discourse reads as the mirror image of what Egypt produced. The team had just been beaten 2-0 by France in the quarter-final. Moroccan coach Mohamed Ouahbi's response was to take responsibility from the outset. In his statements, the actor role sits either with his own team or with the opponent, and it never migrates onto the referee or the tournament. The concession is direct: "France was stronger." (Sportingpedia, 2026; FIFA, 2026b) In the original: *La France une très belle équipe... aujourd'hui elle a été plus forte que nous et il faut l'accepter* ('France, a very fine side... today they were stronger than us, and one must accept it'). From there, Ouahbi reframes the exit through honour "heads high", and, alongside honour, through progress. The "future will be bright." (FIFA, 2026a; The National, 2026b) Certainties have been gained, and development goes on. In Ouahbi's words, *on veut grandir, on va continuer à grandir* ('we want to grow, we will keep growing'); the players close the same way, *partir la tête haute* ('leave with our heads high') and, as one puts it, *Je ne perds jamais : soit je gagne, soit j'apprends. Aujourd'hui on a appris* ('I never lose: either I win or I learn. Today we learned') (FIFA, 2026b; DimaDimaMaghreb, 2026). Several things are pointedly absent. Nothing plays the part of the nominalised injustice, no conspiracy is invoked, and no grievance is voiced. As for merit, the very thing the Egyptian side had claimed and had seen denied to it, in the Moroccan case it is handed straight to the opponent. Two features mark the register as monarchical rather than merely gracious. The coach's thanks pass explicitly to the King and the federation, channelling a national campaign toward the throne, in the coach's own words, *on a un Roi qui investit énormément... on a une fédération forte* ('we have a King who invests enormously... we have a strong federation'; FIFA, 2026b), so that the squad's future is tied directly to the crown; and the Pan-Arab and religious honour that crowns the defeat arrives not from Morocco's own camp but from an allied sovereign voice. Namely, the Ruler of Dubai's tribute that the team had "raised the head of the Arabs," its future brighter "God willing." (The National, 2026b) The diaspora coach stays in a secular, technical, and conspicuously trans-national register. Ouahbi answers not only in French but slips into Spanish mid-thought, *Quand se acaba como se acaba hoy, como una decepción porque hemos perdido, hay que aceptarlo* ('when it ends the way it ends today, as a disappointment because we lost, one has to accept it'), the idiom of a European coaching career rather than of the nation he leads. That multilingual, professional register reflects a division of labour: the coach supplies competence and composure, and the sacral and dynastic framing comes from above and outside him. The makhzen triad, faith, homeland, and throne, runs through the discourse without the coach ever having to voice it himself. The players keep to the same accepting register and extend it forward: they credit France (*el-khaṣm kān aqwā minnā ṣarāhatan*, 'the opponent was frankly stronger than us'), fold the loss into *al-ḥamdu lillāh*, and turn the horizon toward the tournament Morocco will co-host, *Kās el-'Ālam fi-l-Maghrib in shā' Allāh* ('the World Cup in Morocco, God willing') (Arryadia TV, 2026)

What the register refuses matters as much as what it performs. Morocco has now lost to France, the former colonial power, at two successive World Cups, and neither time has any colonial grievance surfaced in the discourse; France is named only as the stronger side. Egypt, by contrast, imported a France-linked grievance without ever facing France on the pitch. Morocco actually played France and lost, and still said nothing of the kind. Read as legitimation, that silence makes sense: an executive monarchy has little to gain from a discourse of victimhood, which would only raise the question of who is responsible. What it gains instead is a discourse of honour and loyalty that ties a proud, dignified nation to its throne. Egypt's republic manufactures unity through grievance; Morocco's monarchy elicits loyalty through honour. Both are forms of hegemonic labour, shaped to fit different structures of rule.

This legitimation runs through institutions as well as words. Months earlier, Morocco had hosted the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, a tournament dominated by disputes over officiating, in which a narrative shared by several competing nations and by neutral observers, some drawing comparisons with Argentina's 1978 World Cup, held that the host had been favoured. The final result was itself overturned in Morocco's favour after the losing finalists walked off in protest. Morocco and the continental body contest the charge of bias, and this is not the place to settle it. What is not in dispute is the institutional geometry: the president of the Moroccan federation is at once a senior official of African football's governing body and a serving government minister, so state, federation, and continental governance meet in a single office. Morocco narrates its own defeats in honour-laden terms, accepting them with dignity on the pitch, but off the pitch the same federation controls the institutions that decide contested results. Both things are true at once, and Morocco's football power depends on that combination.

The binding remains conditional. In 2022, when Morocco became the first African and Arab nation to reach a World Cup semi-final, the consecration was an absolute display of patriotism: an open-top parade through Rabat, a reception in the Throne Room, the Order of the Throne conferred on the federation president and the coach, and the players received alongside their mothers (Maghreb Arabe Presse, 2022). In 2026, after a quarter-final that made Morocco the only African or Arab side in the last

eight, the consecration was of a markedly lesser order. The squad was received by the King at the royal palace in M'diq on 30 July, folded into the annual Throne Day celebrations rather than granted a dedicated homecoming; the reception took the form of royal congratulations and appreciation, with no open-top parade, no Throne Room, and, on the record of the official communiqués, no Order of the Throne conferred on players or staff (Maghreb Arabe Presse, 2026). The royal voice was not withdrawn, but the ceremony's register changed. The King had telephoned the coach and the captain when the quarter-final was secured, and the head of government credited the run to a football renaissance conducted under the sovereign's vision. In 2022, the semi-final was unprecedented for Morocco, and the state responded with its maximal rite: the parade, the palace, the decorations, the mothers. The 2026 quarter-final drew less. It was excellent, but the response was real without being large, folded into the calendar of the monarchy's own anniversary rather than given its own occasion. The pattern suggests the throne sizes its ceremony to the result, treating a once-in-a-century run at full intensity and a merely very good one at a lower pitch. That gradation could be a calibration of ceremony to benchmark. It could also be an implicit judgement that the last eight now falls within the standard the monarchy claims to have established. Either reading, or some other one, can only be tested by setting Morocco beside Egypt, which is what the synthesis does next.

4.2.2 Algeria: The Withheld Embrace

Algeria appears, at first, to confirm a Maghreb pattern. Eliminated in the round of thirty-two by Switzerland, the coach Vladimir Petković accepts responsibility internally. His side, on his account, "paid the price for our mistakes" (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2026; VAVEL, 2026; FIFA, 2026c). In his own words he takes the blame squarely: *io prendo tutte le responsabilità come sempre* ('I take all responsibility, as always'), and *dobbiamo accettare che ci abbiano battuto* ('we have to accept that they beat us'). He credits the opponent. *Complimenti alla Svizzera*, he offers, before conceding that *l'avversario è meglio di noi questa volta* ('the opponent was better than us this time'). He notes that Algeria created more chances but that "football is like that," and he reframes the exit as "not a disaster", since returning after twelve years was itself a success. He reaches, too, for the language of qualified progress, *il bicchiere mezzo pieno* ('the glass half full'), calling the passage of the group stage for only the second time in the country's history *un ottimo traguardo* ('a very good achievement'). Acceptance, honour, progress, and no grievance. On the surface, then, this is Morocco's register.

Yet the resemblance exposes more than it confirms. Petković is a foreign coach, Bosnian-Swiss, and until recently the manager of Switzerland, the very side that eliminated Algeria. The register he produces is de-nationalised. It is de-nationalised in the most literal sense. Petković answers in Italian and lapses into German, *Wir haben im Moment nicht die Qualitäten und die Erfahrung von der Schweiz* ('we do not have, at the moment, the qualities and the experience of Switzerland'), speaking the languages of the Swiss bench he left to take the Algeria job rather than any language of the nation he now represents (FIFA, 2026c). No throne appears in it, no makhzen triad, no religious formula, no allied sovereign supplying honour from above. The legitimisation apparatus that surrounds Morocco's defeat is simply absent from Algeria's at the moment of elimination. The players keep to the same accepting, technical key, though in French rather than Italian. They credit Switzerland, read their own small mistakes as errors *payées cash* ('paid in cash'), and, where a religious note surfaces at all, it is a conventional personal piety, Mahrez's *al-ḥamdu lillāh*, and not the state-supplied sacral framing Morocco received. In their mouths the register also turns generational. The retiring captain Riyad Mahrez steps aside to 'let the new generation write their own history for our country', and a younger player thanks him for 'transmitting the values of wearing this shirt' (FIFA, 2026d). That absence, though, is not an incapacity. Some three weeks earlier the Algerian state had deployed precisely such an apparatus, and lavishly at that. Shortly before the delegation's flight to its tournament location, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune welcomed the team at the presidential palace accompanied by the sports minister and the federation president (Ministry of Communication, 2026; Algérie Presse Service, 2026a). Moreover, He accepted a national jersey inscribed with his name and autographed by the players, posed for commemorative photographs, and urged the team to honour the national colours. The presidency framed the ceremony as a demonstration of the government's continuing endorsement for national sport. In addition, months earlier, a presidential reception for FIFA's touring trophy had brought together the head of state, the federation, and the nation's footballing legends in a single frame, confirming that the state possessed the apparatus of capture and had recently exercised it. Hence, what is missing at the moment of defeat is a choice of when to activate the apparatus of capture, not a deficiency of means.

This gives the case a distinctive, asymmetrical shape rather than an absent one. Prospective capture on the one hand, and retrospective withdrawal on the other. That is, the Algerian state conspicuously associates itself with anticipated glory, and distances itself from the accounting of failure. While in Egypt, the president appears after the defeat and turns the loss into an occasion for unity, in Morocco, the throne maintains a continuous bond with the team. Algeria's head of state, by contrast, is present at the departure and absent from the return (Algérie Presse Service, 2026b). The consequence that did follow was managerial rather than ceremonial: the coach was dismissed. Saudi Arabia offers a contrast worth noting, since there an institution accused itself at its apex and a federation president resigned. Algeria's reckoning, by comparison, was displaced onto a foreign technician who could be discarded without implicating the state at all. So the foreign coach performs a double service to a project of rule. He narrates the defeat in a technical idiom that commits the nation to nothing. He also absorbs its blame by

being removed. The question of who is licensed to speak for a nation is joined, here, by a further question, namely who may be sacrificed on its behalf.

That the World Cup register was de-nationalised does not mean Algeria lacks a grievance repertoire. It means the repertoire is voiced elsewhere. Consider the same 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, where Algeria was eliminated in the quarter-final, by Nigeria rather than the host. There the Algerian federation lodged a formal complaint over the officiating. Players confronted the referee at the final whistle, and national media pressed a narrative of conspiracy that reached beyond the match to Morocco itself. The grievance was produced by the national apparatus, that is, by federation, players, and press, and it was activated by a charged context, the elimination of a rival in the rival's own country. Set beside the clinical, technical acceptance a foreign coach offered months later after a routine World Cup exit, the difference stands out. Algeria's silence at the 2026 podium shouldn't be read as a missing grievance repertoire. It is, instead, the absence of the national figures who would give those grievances expression at that particular site and in that particular voice. What makes the case instructive is that it is not an anomaly of absence, but one of temporal placement: a matter of which actor speaks, and at which moment, exactly as the speaker-authority reading proposes. It is a reminder, too, that a state's silence at one site is not its silence everywhere. That the Algerian state should prove selective is hardly surprising given the terrain. Its stadiums have long been a site of opposition, including chants demanding the departure of military leaders (Dorsey, 2016). Football, for this state, is a resource to be embraced when it promises glory and held at arm's length when it yields an accounting.

The two Maghreb cases share a register, then, and diverge in how it is captured. What they share is an internal, technical, honour-and-progress account of the loss, and this tracks the type of coach (both foreign or diaspora, both European in idiom) more than any regional culture. What divides them is whether the defeat is pulled into a project of rule, which in turn tracks the structure of the state and the authority of the speaker. Timing matters here as much as degree. The Moroccan throne remains bound to its team in victory and defeat alike, though it adjusts the level of ceremony a given result receives. The Algerian presidency, for its part, embraces the team on its way out and lets it go on its way back.

4.2.3 Diachronic context: AFCON 2025 and the two faces of Maghreb football power

A glance back some six months, to the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations that Morocco hosted and eventually won, can corroborate the synchronic focus on 2026 while also complicating it. What that tournament produced was a discourse of grievance against the host. The grievance was not Algerian, nor Egyptian, but continental. Complaints of a tilted playing field came from Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, and South Africa alike, and neutral observers likened the pattern to the manipulation of the 1978 World Cup (ESPN, 2026). Two cautions follow from that breadth. The grievance was widely shared, and it attached to documented controversies over officiating, so it cannot be read as a culturally specific reflex, still less a distinctively "Arab" one. What it registered instead was a general response to a concentration of power, which is itself a point against essentialism. It has to be handled as context, then, and not as evidence of some fixed national trait. Read with those cautions in mind, the tournament lights up the two Maghreb cases from a second angle.

On the Algerian side, that tournament is the counterpart to the reading advanced in §4.2.2: the grievance capacity absent from the 2026 World Cup podium was fully present at the Cup of Nations, where the federation, the players, and the press mounted a vehement complaint against the officiating after the quarter-final exit. The point need not be restated here; what matters for the diachronic view is that the same repertoire, dormant in a foreign coach's mouth at one moment, is loudly national at another.

What Morocco discloses is what its graceful defeat discourse of 2026 leaves unsaid. As host it advanced to the final amid a set of widely reported advantages. There was contested officiating, and there was the late reassignment of match officials around its fixtures. A stoppage-time penalty arrived in the final. And, after Senegal's players briefly walked off in protest, the result was reversed in Morocco's favour on a disciplinary technicality (BBC 2026). Whatever the merits of any single decision, the structural fact beneath them is the one that matters. The president of the Moroccan federation is at once a senior official of the continental governing body and a serving minister of the Moroccan state (FIFA, 2021; Kingdom of Morocco, 2021). That concentration of state office, national federation, and continental governance in a single figure is the institutional counterpart to the discursive legitimation traced earlier. The monarchy's cultivation of football is not only a matter of anthems, deference, and the honourable framing of defeat. It is also a matter of hard institutional power over the governance of the game. So Morocco accepts defeat with grace. It also engineers advantage through control. The two are faces of one project, one in which football is bound to the throne administratively as much as discursively.

Seen together, the two cases sharpen the configuration in a way the single-tournament view cannot. Beyond the grievance repertoire Algeria left dormant, Morocco holds an institutional grip on the game that its gracious defeat discourse never advertises. In both, the 2026 register is one moment in a longer relation between football and power. For Algeria that relation is contingent on who is authorised to speak. For Morocco it is underwritten by a control that the discourse of honour keeps from view. Egypt externalises and is gathered into unity. Morocco accepts and is bound in loyalty. Algeria accepts and is embraced

only on the way out. Against that patterning a further possibility remains. The acceptance of responsibility may be neither personal nor absent but institutional, and may itself be the legitimating performance.

4.3 The Resigning President: Institutional Accountability in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia went out in the group stage, bottom of its group with two points from draws against Uruguay and Cape Verde and a 4-0 defeat to Spain. Its discourse of defeat neither externalises, as Egypt's does, nor accepts in the first person, as Morocco's does. It accepts, but institutionally, and the acceptance is itself the legitimating performance.

The register splits by site. The coach, Georgios Donis (a foreigner appointed only weeks before the tournament) speaks in a technical, defensive idiom close to the Maghreb coaches': proud of his players, crediting Spain as one of the best sides, locating the loss in a defensive structure that failed "around the edge of our box." Across the two press conferences he works less to explain the defeat than to normalise it. Facing Spain, he recasts the players' collapse as ordinary rather than shameful, turning the charge of 'fear' into mere insecurity ('We are human, and I consider it logical'), and defends his switch to a back five by refusing the premise of the question ('You try to analyse based only on the system; I analyse where the ball reaches'). He then makes a move absent elsewhere, a meta-discursive negotiation with his critics. He accepts that criticism will come ('We are here to endure and accept criticism') while asking that it stay proportionate ('I am always a realist; in the long run, we will build a good national team'), and he meets even the sharpest question, a reminder that Hervé Renard had once been dismissed for a similar formation, with flat defiance ('Do you think they will fire me because I played 5-4-1 against Spain?') (FIFA, 2026e). At the elimination itself, after the goalless draw with Cape Verde, the register shifts from defensive realism to institutional closure. He concedes that the side had been offensively 'poor' and unable to impose a rhythm, thanks the players, staff, and officials, and accepts the exit as a collective shortfall ('It was not what we wanted'), locating the failure in an inability to withstand pressure ('The conditions of pressure made us lose our way in games') rather than in any lack of effort (FIFA, 2026f). It is the speech of a technician managing his own accountability, not of a nation reckoning with a loss.

The reckoning happens elsewhere, at the apex of the football administration and in the register of the state. The federation president, Yasser Al-Misehal, publicly bore "full responsibility" for an exit that fell short of the nation's ambitions, apologised, and resigned (Al Jazeera, 2026b; Arab News, 2026) to open what he called a new chapter. Where Egypt's federation refused to remain silent in grievance, Saudi Arabia's performs a ritual of accountability: declaration of responsibility, apology, resignation, renewal. The nominalised "failure" is owned at the top and answered with an institutional sacrifice.

That ritual is legible only in relation to the project it serves. Al-Misehal had been central to Saudi Arabia's successful bid to host the 2034 World Cup, itself a cornerstone of a state strategy to diversify the economy beyond oil; and the defeat fed a national debate over whether the billions invested in the domestic league have, in crowding rosters with foreign stars, starved the development of Saudi players. Crucially, that critique does not reject the project but argues over its execution (how better to pursue the national ambition) and is thereby absorbed by it. The defeat is metabolised into the discourse of a modernising state: an occasion for rational self-correction in service of a long-term design.

Taken as legitimation work, the Saudi register offers testimony to the competence of the state. Here is an absolute monarchy engaged in top-down modernisation, and its claim to legitimacy runs along an unusual channel. Victimhood does not supply it. Nor does dynastic honour. What supplies it is a display of stewardship that is rational and able to correct its own course. In this reading, the state is understood as a capable manager of a national-level development project. As a consequence, the setback becomes something that refines the project rather than discrediting it. Work on Gulf sport has tended to read this kind of investment as facing outward, a matter of soft power and image management pitched at audiences abroad. The discourse produced in defeat turns that reading around, and exposes an inward face, since the same project is narrated to a home public as evidence of governance that is purposeful and willing to be held to account. The speaker matters here as much as anything said, for it is the institution that voices the reckoning, not the foreign coach. The state speaks through its own administration rather than through a hired technician, and the very capacity to do so is hegemonic.

5. Synthesis: Four Grammars, Four Structures of Rule

Set side by side, the cases yield not one "Arab" discourse of defeat but several, and the differences are not random. Egypt externalises, projecting blame onto officials and the tournament and gathering a wronged-but-heroic nation around its leadership, which illustrates the manufacture of unity by a republic whose legitimacy is contested. Morocco accepts in the first person and reframes the loss through honour and progress, channelling a dignified nation toward its throne, which displays the elicitation of loyalty by an executive monarchy that has bound football to the crown since 1970. Saudi Arabia accepts institutionally, answering the loss with a resignation and absorbing it into a modernisation project, which is understood as the performance of rational stewardship by a reforming absolute monarchy. Algeria accepts and is not gathered, though the apparatus was there to be used: a state that had received the squad at the presidential palace on the eve of departure withheld

itself from the accounting of the defeat and dismissed the coach in place of any ceremony (Sport News Africa, 2026), this is seen as legitimization by association with hope, insulated from association with loss.

Table 2. Grammar of defeat and legitimization logic by case

Case	Grammar of defeat	Legitimation logic (structure of rule)
Egypt	Externalisation; blame projected outward, honour retained	Manufacture of unity by a legitimacy-contested republic
Morocco	Personal acceptance; honour and progress; deference to the throne	Elicitation of dynastic loyalty by an executive monarchy
Saudi Arabia	Institutional accountability; resignation; the state project	Performance of rational stewardship by a reforming absolute monarchy
Algeria	Acceptance without capture at the moment of defeat; a de-nationalised technical register	Asymmetric capture: prospective embrace, retrospective withdrawal; blame displaced onto a dismissible foreign coach

One objection should be met before these readings are accepted, since a simpler mechanism might account for the ceremonies without recourse to legitimization at all. States, it may be said, hold receptions when a team surpasses its national benchmark and not otherwise; Egypt's campaign was its best; Morocco's quarter-final fell short of the 2022 semi-final; and no further explanation is required. The rule is parsimonious and fits the pattern, but it does not withstand scrutiny against the records it invokes. Egypt's 2026 result equalled rather than exceeded the round reached in 1934, and the reference works divide over whether to treat the two as joint-best or the later as the first true progression; the campaign was unprecedented on some measures and an equalling on others. Morocco's quarter-final, meanwhile, was the best performance by any African or Arab side at the tournament, and the only such run to the last eight, a benchmark of a different kind, marked but at a deliberately lower key. Thresholds, in short, are not found in the record but made from it. Which measure counts, and whether a result is to be called historic, is settled in discourse rather than before it, and the two states settled it in opposite directions. Egypt consecrated the ambiguous, converting a contestable record into a national triumph; Morocco scaled the excellent, marking a superior result at a lower key. Both operations are legitimization work, and each fits its logic. A republic that must manufacture unity has every reason to declare a record and gather the nation around it. A monarchy whose narrative is one of systematic footballing renaissance loses nothing by marking the last eight in a lower key, and gains the implication that Morocco belongs there as a matter of course, where a full consecration would concede that reaching it remains exceptional. The benchmark objection, then, does not displace the analysis. Properly examined, it delivers the sharpest evidence for it, since it holds the occasion constant and lets the divergence in construction stand out.

That the category should fracture under analysis is, on reflection, unsurprising, since it fractures in the field whenever the comparative frame turns inward, as the Arab Cup seeding showed six months earlier (§2.1). Facing the world, eight teams are narrated as one story; facing one another, they sort themselves into continents and tiers within weeks. The unity dissolved in this study's findings is therefore not a unity its subjects themselves consistently maintain: it is summoned when the opposition is external and set aside when it is not, which is what one would expect of a category that does political work rather than describing a temperament.

The comparison thus answers its question twice. Against the essentialist reduction of "the Arab world" to a single voice, it shows four teams routinely narrated as one collective story meeting defeat in four distinct grammars, namely externalisation, personal acceptance, institutional accountability, and asymmetric capture. And it explains the difference rather than merely cataloguing it: the grammars track structures of rule. Each register performs legitimization work fitted to its political order, so that the fracture of the monolith is, on inspection, the imprint of divergent modes of producing consent.

The fracture runs not only between nations but within them. Saudi Arabia holds two registers at once, a foreign coach's technical self-defence and an institution's ritual of accountability, so that "the national discourse of defeat" is itself internally plural, differentiated by the site at which it is produced. And across all the cases, who is licensed to voice the loss (a national-hero coach, a diaspora technician, a foreign manager, a resigning federation president, a head of state) proves to be a fact about how

far each state's apparatus can speak through its team. The authority to narrate a nation's defeat is a hegemonic capacity, unevenly distributed and revealingly so: a monarchy speaks through deference and a genealogy reaching back to its anthem; a president through a ceremony; a reforming monarchy through an institution; and a contested republic, at the podium, hardly speaks through the team at all.

Two limits frame these claims. The analysis reads how each discourse articulates a hegemonic project; it does not, and on this evidence cannot, measure whether that project secures consent, the uptake of these registers among their publics is a further, empirical question. And the sample is small, and its axes in the 2026 field are entangled, so the account is offered as an interpretation to be tested rather than as a law. However, the study makes a twofold contribution as it provides discourse-level evidence against the essentialist treatment of "the Arab world," and a comparative model of sporting defeat as a site where different political orders produce consent. The discourse of losing, on this evidence, is not where a shared Arab temperament reveals itself but where divergent political orders each set about the production of consent.

6. Conclusion

This study began from a framing it set out to test. At the 2026 FIFA World Cup a record eight Arab nations competed, and the regional and international press narrated their campaigns as a single collective story. A shared "Arab" manner of meeting adversity, if it existed, would be noticed at the moment of elimination, when national feeling is most exposed and diplomatic hedging falls away. It did not. Across four eliminated teams the discourse of defeat resolved into distinct configurations, and the differences were substantive and patterned.

Each elimination met that test differently, and the analysis has traced those differences. Egypt externalised its loss and was gathered by the state into a ceremony of unity; Morocco accepted, and its acceptance was drawn toward the throne; Saudi Arabia accepted institutionally, answering the defeat with a resignation; and Algeria accepted too, yet its state, having embraced the squad on the eve of departure, withheld itself from the accounting on the team's return.

The double contribution and its limits were set out in the synthesis and need no rehearsal here. What deserves emphasis in closing is the direction of the argument: the fracture of the monolith is not the finding but the point of departure, and its explanation, that each grammar of defeat performs the legitimation work its structure of rule requires, is what carries the study beyond description.

Two findings extend the argument beyond the four cases. The first is that "national" defeat discourse is not one voice but several, differentiated by the site at which it is produced: Saudi Arabia held a foreign coach's technical self-defence and a federation's ritual of accountability at the same moment, and Morocco's sacral and Pan-Arab framing arrived from an allied sovereign rather than from its own camp. The second follows from it. Who is authorised to voice a nation's loss (a national-hero coach, a diaspora technician, a foreign manager, a resigning administrator, a head of state) proves to be a measure of how far each state's apparatus can speak through its team. Algeria is the instructive case here: its World Cup defeat was voiced by a foreign coach and left, at the podium, a footballing matter, though the same federation and press had mounted a full grievance, months earlier in a different arena, and the same presidency had embraced the squad three weeks before in a ceremony of departure. The state possessed the apparatus of capture and declined to use it at the moment of loss, dismissing the coach in place of any reckoning of its own. To the question of who may speak for a nation the analysis therefore adds a second: who may be sacrificed on its behalf, the foreign technician proving useful precisely because he can be discarded without implicating the state. Silence at one site is not silence everywhere, and the capacity to narrate a defeat as national is itself a hegemonic capacity, unevenly distributed and revealingly so. Methodologically, this vindicates disaggregating the analysis by production site rather than treating the nation as the floor: a coach-only corpus would have missed most of what the discourse was doing.

The limits of these claims should be stated as plainly as the claims themselves. The analysis shows how each discourse articulates a project of rule; it does not show that any of these projects succeeded with its public. Whether such registers are believed, resisted, or ignored is a question of reception that textual analysis cannot answer and that this study has deliberately not attempted. The design is synchronic, confined to a single tournament, so it makes no claim about change over time. The cases are few and purposively chosen, and their explanatory axes are entangled: in the 2026 field the one nationally-rooted coach was also the Mashriq case, so sub-regional repertoire and speaker authority cannot be fully separated within this sample. As a single-analyst qualitative reading, the interpretation has moreover not been subjected to inter-coder reliability testing. The account is offered as an interpretation disciplined by textual evidence, not as a demonstrated law.

Those limits mark the openings. A reception study, of press commentary, fan discourse, and social media responses to these same eliminations, would test whether the registers analysed here find uptake, resistance, or indifference among the publics they address. A native-coached Maghreb or Gulf case, or a foreign-coached Mashriq one, would begin to disentangle repertoire from speaker authority. A diachronic design tracking a single nation across successive tournaments would ask whether a state's grammar of defeat shifts as its legitimation needs shift. And the framework itself is portable: nothing in it is proper to Arab

states, and it invites application wherever football is bound to political authority, from Latin American populisms to European federations under commercial and governmental pressure. The analytic framework could also be formalised into an explicit coding scheme and tested for inter-coder reliability across a larger corpus, extending the qualitative reading offered here into a form that could be validated at scale.

Football's losers are unusually talkative. A defeat obliges a nation to say, quickly and publicly, what went wrong and who is answerable, and in answering it discloses the terms on which it is governed. The four teams examined here were narrated, before their eliminations, as a single story. In their manner of losing they proved to be several, and the several were not accidents of temperament. The discourse of defeat is not where a shared Arab character reveals itself, but where the machinery of rule, briefly and under strain, shows its hand.

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