



Abdulrahman Fahad al-Thani became a sensation on Chinese social media during the World Cup opening match between Qatar and Ecuador. Some Chinese netizens called him the real-person edition of La'eeb, the mascot for the World Cup in Qatar.

A recent poll found that more citizens and residents across MENA (Middle East and North Africa) tend to have more positive perceptions of China's image in the region, compared with the United States. The findings come from nine nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted in MENA by Arab Barometer from 2021 to 2022 on the basis of nearly 23,000 interviews.

In these surveys, China turns out to be more favorable than the US in at least seven MENA countries. Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides insight into the social, political and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world.

Such mutually felt good feelings would go a long way toward furthering cooperation and exchanges in all sectors between China and the Arab countries, especially relevant in view of China's sweepingly recent policy readjustments on COVID-19 pandemic control.

For instance, tourist destinations in Arab countries promise to be hot spots, not least due to the spillover effects of the World Cup. "The

Arabian Nights," among the first foreign literary works to be introduced to China, might also help add to the mystique and exotica of the Arab world in general.

There are other reasons for predicting a quick recovery regarding tourist destinations in Arab countries, according to Liu Deyan, associate professor of College of Tourism at Shanghai Normal University. She has been monitoring China's tourism for more than 30 years.

"Arab countries' appeal to Chinese tourists lies in the significant differences in natural scenery and cultures between them and China. As a consequence, from the time Saudi Arabia started issuing tourist visas in 2019 to the outbreak of the pandemic, the number of visitors from China was already the second-largest of all foreign tourist arrivals in the country," Liu observed. "As a matter of fact, tourism in Arab countries owes its rapid development in recent years partly to Chinese tourists' enormous consumption potential."

She said that despite the sustained negative influence of the pandemic on global tourism, Arab countries and

China have been trying hard to mitigate the adverse impact by leveraging international platforms like the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, so as to push for an early recovery of the tourism sector.

Significantly, in 2021, the Saudi Tourism Authority sponsored a promotional campaign in Shanghai about exotic and unique Arab tourist destinations, by entering into ties with Chinese travel entities so as to lay a solid basis for restarting global tourism.

Asked to give her prognostications about the post-pandemic tourist landscape, Liu said both inbound and outbound travel would register explosive growth.

"In addition to Chinese tourists to Arab countries, domestic travel agencies are also designing products catering to the influx of Arab tourists, for instance by creating Arabic language interfaces in major travel platforms like TripAdvisor, Viator and Trip.com. Some local travel agencies have also set up Arab language websites, especially targeting Arab

countries," she explained.

For sports-related tours, soccer and equestrian could serve as a fulcrum to facilitate tourism exchanges in the fields, and beyond. For instance, China has built some top-notch ski resorts in the Altai Mountains in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Changbai Mountains in northeast China's Jilin Province, and some Arab countries boast some of first-rate hospitality talent. This would afford ample room for exchanges in training.

Although Chinese soccer players were absent at the World Cup in Qatar, other "made in China" products were eminently visible.

The mascot plush toys representing the image of Qatar, for instance, were made in Dongguan, south China's Guangdong Province, after being accepted and approved by Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.

Other items include caps, key chains, garage kits, replicas of the trophy and other kinds of official souvenirs.

Prior to the event kicking off in Qatar, 100,000 Arab headdresses adorned with World Cup icons had already

been delivered to the country.

These items were made in a rush, during the two months leading to the World Cup, 7,000 kilometers away in Zhenze, a town in Suzhou of Jiangsu Province, by a company named Sunshine Apparels. As a matter of fact, Zhenze boasts a total of 31 companies specialized in making Arabic headdresses and accessories. The cluster of companies accounts for 70 percent of all headdresses exported from China.

The region became home to a cluster of *ghotra* makers purely by accident. In 1990, a company in the region, in collaboration with the then Shanghai Textile University, successfully developed the technique in making the apparels mechanically. According to insiders, the making of headdresses is technically quite complicated, for the one-sided Jacquard weave would mean significant modifications to existing machinery.

It can be safely predicted that with deepening understanding between Chinese and Arabic peoples, their rapport would lead to ties and exchanges in all spheres of life.