

《China held by war-torn Syria, World Cup hopes bleak》

The chances of China's top male footballers impressing their devoted fans at the 2018 World Cup in Russia have now dwindled to near none after the national team was held to a 2-2 draw by war-ravaged Syria on Tuesday.

Syria's Ahmad Al Salih equalizes with an injury-time free kick during the 2018 World Cup qualifier with China on 13 June, 2017, at the Hang Jebat Stadium, Malacca City, Malaysia. /CFP Photo

China fell behind to a 12th minute penalty by Mahmoud Al Mawas, but its supporters' hopes were rekindled by an equalizer from Gao Lin about 20 minutes into the second half. Wu Xi then put China ahead, but a second victory in the group was denied by a spectacular free kick in the last minute of injury time from Syria's Ahmad Al Salih.

Chinese fans were shocked after Syria's late equalizer on 13 June, 2017, at the Hang Jebat Stadium, Malacca City, Malaysia. /CFP Photo

China now lies fifth in Group A with six points, lagging behind Iran, South Korea, Uzbekistan and Syria. Currently mired in a diplomatic crisis, the 2022 World Cup host Qatar is rooted to the bottom. Only the top two teams qualify automatically, while the third-placed side will enter a play-off.

The draw has rendered it a long shot for China to appear in the 2018 tournament, although Uzbekistan's 2-0 loss to Iran means third-place remains mathematically possible. China will play Uzbekistan and Qatar in its last two games, but would have to make up six points and four goals in goal-difference to take the play-off spot.

Disappointment was evident on the faces of Chinese fans after their team failed to secure a victory over war-torn Syria on 13 June, 2017 at the Hang Jebat Stadium, Malacca City, Malaysia. /CFP Photo

Tears were shed and excitement was cooled among the Chinese footballers and fans at the Hang Jebat Stadium in Malacca City, Malaysia. Feng Xiaoting, the Chinese captain, was "choked" after the game, saying he and his team would "fight to the last."

China's coach Marcello Lippi on the sidelines during the 2018 World Cup qualifier with Syria on 13 June, 2017 in Malacca City, Malaysia. /CFP Photo

Hopes for China's qualification to Russia 2018 were revived after veteran Italian coach Marcello Lippi took over the team last October and helped to secure a 1 – 0 win over South Korea, China's long-time footballing foe, in March.

China has not qualified for the finals of the World Cup since the country's only appearance in 2002.