



Football as a Key Component in Saudi Arabia's Sports Strategy

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At the 33rd Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Congress held in Manama, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia was confirmed as the host of the 2027 AFC Asian Cup, which is widely regarded as Asia's most prestigious men's national team tournament. Despite winning the tournament [three](#) times (1984, 1988, and 1996), 2027 will mark the first time the Asian Cup will be held in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Prime Minister HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman applauded the decision for Saudi Arabia to host the Asian Cup, [stating](#), "we commend the results of the bilateral and multilateral cooperation between the Kingdom and the Asian Federation in terms of efforts to achieve the aspirations of our young men and women."

Following the announcement, Saudi Arabia was further chosen to host the 2023 FIFA Club World Cup in mid to late December 2023. Saudi Arabia's Minister of Sport, HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal, [reiterated](#) that the awarding of the FIFA Club World Cup 2023



to the Kingdom is “another important step forward on our journey of transformation in football and as a country and I trust all involved will see for themselves the undeniable progress being made at many different levels... We host international sports for the simple reason that we truly believe in the power of sport to inspire our boys and girls, to create new connections, and build new relationships.” Saudi Arabia is already hosting international tournaments to promote football as a key component in the Kingdom’s overall sports strategy. This includes the Spanish Super Cup (Supercopa de Espana) in January 2023, which witnessed games between global teams, including Barcelona, Real Madrid, and AC Milan. The tournament attracted thousands of fans locally as well as a global viewing audience.

Saudi Arabia has also submitted a bid to host the AFC Women’s Asian Cup in 2026. The Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) President Yasser Al-Misehal [explained](#) that hosting the tournament will open “new horizons for women’s football in the Kingdom and the region.” The Saudi Arabia women’s national team has made significant advances- winning their first-ever championship in January 2023 in the Women’s International Friendly Tournament featuring Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Mauritius, and Comoros. The championship led the team to officially enter FIFA’s international rankings for the first time. Anoud Al-Asmari, Saudi Arabia’s first female football referee, also officiated her first FIFA-accredited match. The Kingdom held its first Saudi Women’s Premier League in February 2023, in which Al-Nassr was crowned champion. Moreover, Saudi Arabia created its third women’s national football team amid the progressive achievements of women’s sports in the Kingdom.

Saudi Arabia hosting numerous tournaments comes at a time when sports, especially football, have been rapidly developing as a primary means to diversify the Kingdom’s oil-dependent economy. Under Saudi Vision 2030, sports is clearly identified as a critical component of the Quality of Life Program, and the Kingdom is making great strides to fulfill this objective through the various tournaments and sporting events held in a wide variety of spectator sports year-round.

One key aspect in improving the quality of life across the country is motivating the youth into entrepreneurial activity. Thus, sports have become a primary vehicle to broaden the overall scope of productive economic engagement in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Sport, HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal, [stated](#) that “hosting major sports events, and

football in specific, plays an integral part in our country's transformative Vision 2030 to increase participation. I do not doubt that this...will inspire young boys and girls across the country to participate in sports and dream of representing their country one day." Additionally, Yasser Al-Mishehal, President of SAFF, also [expressed](#) the Kingdom's excitement to welcome international fans to the "diverse cultures and cities our beautiful country has to offer."

Already, the effects of these developments can be seen and felt throughout the Kingdom. The Saudi Pro League is currently [regarded](#) as one of the "most exciting and high-profile domestic leagues on the continent" due to the consistently strong performance of their clubs in the AFC Champions League. Recently, Saudi Arabia has been attracting global players and teams as well as hosting international games and tournaments to promote and strengthen the Kingdom's positioning. For instance, Cristiano Ronaldo has joined the Riyadh-based Al Nassr football club, where he is expected to help boost the Saudi Football League and assist in developing women and youth sports in the Kingdom. In the Kingdom's bid book to the AFC, fast-tracking the development of women's football and establishing the foundation for a women's football team capable of competing internationally is listed as a critical endeavor in Saudi Arabia.

The hosting of the Asian Cup in 2027 is further seen as a way to strengthen relations between the Kingdom and the rest of Asia. Under the slogan, "Forward for Asia," the Kingdom [aims](#) to carry a new vision for the future of football in Asia that contributes to its growth and progress. Saudi Arabia's Minister of Sport, HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal, [explained](#) that "the Asian cup we deliver will take the tournament to the next level. This will be the most profitable in the history of our confederation for both AFC and its members." In Saudi Arabia's bid book to the AFC, the Kingdom lists offering creative platforms to share ideas and best practices, fostering friendship among AFC Member Associations, and giving Asian football access to new opportunities in a prosperous market as key hosting visions and strategies. This will, of course, lead to more communication and dialogue between the Kingdom and the rest of the AFC nations. Thus, the hosting of the 2027 Asian Cup will also act as a platform to provide new opportunities for increasing ties between the Kingdom and Asian countries such as India, China, and Japan.

For the 2027 Asian Cup, Saudi Arabia has announced plans to build three new facilities: a 22,000-seat stadium in Riyadh that will be located just 700 meters from the metro station,

Qiddiya Sports Stadium, another 22,000-seat stadium, and a 40,000-seat stadium in Damman to accommodate even more fans and visitors to the Kingdom. In a similar manner, the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) also announced plans to [renovate](#) existing stadiums in Riyadh to increase spectator capacity, including the King Fahd International Stadium to 80,015 spectators and the Prince Faisal bin Fahd to 44,500 spectators.

Undoubtedly, in the medium to long term, anticipated visitors are expected to expand the Kingdom's hospitality and retail sectors in turn creating vast job opportunities and contributing significantly to Saudi Arabia's economic diversification plans. The match between Paris Saint-Germain (which featured FIFA World Cup champion Lionel Messi, Kylian Mbappe, and Achraf Hakimi) as well as selected players from Al Nassr and Al Hilal attracted not only a full King Fahd Stadium in Riyadh but also [1.9 million peak viewers](#) on multiple streaming channels worldwide. Those games promoted the goals of Riyadh Season, which aims to support the Kingdom's GDP, expand the entertainment sector, create job opportunities, and attract foreign investments. According to Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Sports [report](#), in 2020, the sports sector created more than 14,000 jobs, brought in around 37 million riyals in ticketing revenue and visitor spending, and increased the percentage of jobs at sports clubs by 129%. In the longer term, Saudi Arabia is preparing to host the 22nd Asian Games in Riyadh in 2034.

Saudi Arabia's sports scene, especially in football, has rapidly developed over the last few years. Not only is the Kingdom enhancing the quality of life through sports, but also creating new relationships and strengthening existing ties internationally. Thus, football is a critical pillar in Saudi Arabia's overall sports strategy to empower young men and women, increase GDP, expand the entertainment and tourism sectors, and enhance international ties. Women's sports, specifically, have gained significant momentum amidst all their achievements. The fruits of these developments are clear: FIFA Club World Cup 2023, AFC Asian Cup 2027, and Asian Games 2034 are just the beginning to a brighter and more exciting future in the realm of sports in Saudi Arabia. One can only be excited about these events.

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