



It's Not Sportswashing, It's Just Sports

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LeBron James and Saudi basketball players, Riyadh, September 2023

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In April 2016, Saudi Arabia launched its Vision 2030 not only to diversify its economy away from oil but also to implement changes that would enhance its citizens' and residents' quality of life. One of the ways the Kingdom is accomplishing this is through investing in its own sports sector. Two of Vision 2030's key objectives include "promoting sports activities in the community" and

“achieving excellence in several sports regionally and internationally.” Since then, Saudi Arabia has witnessed great transformation and progress across the sector, from hosting international tournaments to local Olympic-style competitions known as the Saudi Games. However, despite numerous achievements for Saudi Arabia, particularly for women and youth, the Kingdom continues to be faced with great scrutiny questioning the overall motives.

Instead of celebrating the Kingdom’s steps in promoting its sports sector, the questions on everyone’s mind are: How will the Saudi Pro League affect European football? Should the NBA fear the Saudi Basketball League? Will Saudi sports sabotage the sports industry? Public perceptions predicted failure even before the leagues started. Moreover, people outside of the region classified the Kingdom’s achievements as “disrupting” the sports industry as a whole instead of looking at the opportunities these developments offer, both in the country and abroad.

Of course, Saudi Arabia and the GCC region, as a whole, are not strangers to this type of criticism. Qatar, the first Arab country to host the World Cup, was the subject of international criticism after it won the bid to host back in 2010 all the way through to (and after) the event in 2022. Accusations ranged from maltreatment of migrant workers to lack of accommodations, among others. In the Kingdom, the claim that Saudi Arabia is “sportswashing” its image by investing in and developing sports is one of the primary allegations against the country since its recent major investment in LIV Golf. Nowadays, with the recent signings of top global football players Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar, to name just the most prominent, the accusations of sportswashing were amplified once again.

The process of signing international players is not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to Saudi Arabia; leagues around the world across all different sports recruit players from different nationalities, based on contractual agreements between the player and the team. The Premier League, for example, has spent [over one billion dollars](#) in two consecutive summers (\$1.390bn in 2023 and \$1.440bn in 2022, to be exact), and the total this year would have been even higher (estimated at \$1.72bn) without the Saudi Pro League, which recorded a net spend of [\\$950m](#) this summer. Yet somehow, Saudi Arabia faces backlash for taking the same positive steps to develop its own leagues.



The criticism seems to know no bounds. The announcement that NEOM won its bid to host the 2029 Asian Winter Games in the mountains of TROJENA, which is set to be the region's first outdoor ski resort, has equally raised questions about whether the event will be compatible with global climate requirements. On a broad scale, NEOM has taken significant measures to transform the future of water and build a sustainable environment [through](#) recycling 100% of wastewater, a net-zero footprint, renewable energy, and seawater mining, as part of its strategy to meet the climate requirements. Moreover, NEOM has also implemented a fully integrated resource recovery seawater treatment (FIRRST) in order to conserve the Red Sea ecosystem and launched its subsidiary company ENOWA to accelerate sustainable living. All of these steps illustrate how the Kingdom, through sports, is not only enhancing the quality of life within the country but also striving to set a benchmark for sustainability both regionally and abroad.

Most recently, four-time NBA champion and all-time leading point scorer LeBron James' first visit to the Kingdom yielded mixed reactions after he held a clinic for young Saudi players, including notable players from the women's national team. On the one hand, the visit was dubbed as another achievement for sports in Saudi Arabia. In an interview with the Gulf Research Center (GRC), Deema Fatani, point guard of the Saudi National Team and captain of Jeddah United's basketball team, explained that "LeBron's involvement will bring significant positive impact. Historically, soccer has been the dominant and more popular sport in Saudi Arabia, but with LeBron's visit, basketball could gain momentum and become equally popular." "The success of basketball can lead us to the international stage, influence the young generation, and have a positive influence on Saudi Arabia's global image," she added.

Moreover, Reem Almaiman, a Saudi National Team, and Al-Ahli Team player, explained that LeBron's visit underlined Saudi Arabia's commitment to encouraging healthier, more active lifestyles, as well as promoting the Kingdom as a worldwide destination for global events, saying that "immediately after his visit, we felt motivated to have a healthier lifestyle. We are very lucky that the Ministry of Sports is working on [promoting] basketball in Saudi Arabia, where there is great potential for the sport to grow day by day, and we are getting there. We have the opportunity to host and participate in major basketball events, such as the FIBA 3X3 World Tour, which was held three times in the Kingdom. We are seeing a bright future with the Ministry of Sport."



On the other hand, sports pundits framed the Kingdom as a “legitimate threat” to the NBA even before LeBron’s visit. After the visit, there was another round of accusations of “sportswashing” which the Kingdom rejected on numerous occasions, [noting](#) that such criticism is “off the mark.” HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki, Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Sports [explained](#) that the country is witnessing historical changes, remarking that “we’re progressing, we’re moving towards a better society, we’re moving towards a better quality of life, a better country, for the future.” Moreover, HRH Prince Faisal bin Bandar, Chairman of the Saudi Esports Federation, [explained](#) that “one of the things I think that people misunderstand is that the change that’s happening is that we, as a community, we as a population, are looking for, are behind, and are excited about.” At the World Economic Forum in 2018, HRH Princess Reema bint Bandar, the Kingdom’s Ambassador to the US, addressed the world’s negative criticism and the media’s double standards by [explaining](#) that “there is a determination not to allow us to create a new narrative... You ask us to change, and then when we exhibit change, you come to us with cynicism,” which is “destructive” and “detrimental” on a daily basis. Rather, it is vital to understand that the Kingdom is working for “evolution, not Westernization.”

It is essential to note that Saudi Arabia, through sports, is enhancing its quality of life, forging new international ties, and strengthening existing ones. The backing of various countries for the Kingdom hosting the 2027 AFC Asian Cup and the 2034 Asian Games are great examples of this. It is also worth highlighting that sports in the Kingdom are nothing new. Football, in particular, has always been more than just a sport in the region; it has been one of the most significant contributors that have shaped national identities. It is only that recently accessibility and variety of sports have been expanding and have thus been put in the spotlight. When seen through the lens of Vision 2030, it becomes evident that sports must be recognized as an integral component of the Kingdom’s goal to empower women and youth, diversify its economy, expand the entertainment and tourism sectors, and enhance international ties. This is just the beginning of a brighter and more exciting future in Saudi Arabia’s sports realm.

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