



Game Changer: Opportunities and Challenges for Saudi Arabia's Sports Diplomacy

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I. Introduction

Throughout history, sports have played a crucial role in diplomacy by bridging political and ideological gaps between nations. Events such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup have provided platforms for dialogue and engagement beyond traditional political settings. One of the most well-known instances of sports diplomacy is the “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” between the United States and China in the early 1970s, which helped ease decades of diplomatic estrangement and paved the way for President Nixon’s historic visit to Beijing. This example highlights the ability of sports to open doors where politics alone have faltered. Scholars and policymakers today refer to sports diplomacy as the strategic use of sports as an instrument of soft power to influence international perceptions and foster political goodwill.

While the concept of sports diplomacy is nothing new, it is underexamined in academic literature, particularly within the context of the Gulf region. The term “soft power,” coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, refers to a country’s ability to achieve its objectives through attraction and influence rather than coercion. Nye identifies culture, political values, and foreign policy as three primary sources of soft power. Sports, as a cultural expression with mass appeal, fit squarely within this framework and have become a powerful tool for countries seeking to enhance their international standing.

Saudi Arabia has recognized the diplomatic utility of sports and has incorporated it into its broader foreign policy strategy. The Kingdom not only leverages sports to gain visibility and credibility on the global stage but also to

reinforce national pride, foster youth engagement, and support regional solidarity. It is, therefore, essential to distinguish between sports as a business, a key component of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 economic diversification plan, and sports as a diplomatic tool used to promote the Kingdom’s global image and engage in international political and cultural dialogue. This paper will explore both dimensions.

Vision 2030 is a comprehensive initiative aimed at reducing Saudi Arabia’s dependence on oil, diversifying its economy, and improving the quality of life for its citizens. Saudi Arabia seeks to achieve one of its key pillars, economic diversification, in part by generating revenue through sports tourism, investments, and sponsorships. The Kingdom aims to boost tourism by attracting sports enthusiasts to major events and newly developed facilities, as evidenced by its recruitment of top global athletes and construction of world-class sports infrastructure. Another central goal is to attract foreign investment by encouraging multinational corporations to participate in Saudi Arabia’s growing sports industry.



Source: [Soul of Saudi](#)



At the domestic level, the expansion of the sports sector is seen as an element that provides Saudi youth with constructive outlets for personal growth, community participation, and skill development, fostering not only healthier lifestyles but also encouraging leadership, teamwork, and national pride. Additionally, the vision seeks to improve public health by promoting a more active lifestyle among citizens, particularly women and youth, as part of a broader effort to cultivate a vibrant society.

Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Sports has spearheaded numerous initiatives, focusing on the accessibility of sports to the public. These initiatives include the establishment of sports academies, fitness programs, and national sports events designed to engage the youth and increase participation in various disciplines. For example, the "Sports for All" program aims to encourage citizens, especially the younger generation, to embrace sports as part of a healthier and more active lifestyle.



Source: [Argaam](#)

Moreover, the promotion of sports serves as a platform for cultural diplomacy, enabling the Kingdom to host international events that both celebrate Saudi heritage and demonstrate its reputation for hospitality. These events not only strengthen cross-cultural understanding but also significantly contribute to positioning Saudi Arabia as an attractive global destination and projecting a positive image of the Kingdom on the world stage.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has made significant progress toward achieving its goals by hosting high-profile sporting events, establishing new sports leagues, and constructing world-class sports infrastructure.

The Kingdom's commitment to its ambitious sports agenda is clearly evident; however, the scale of investment required to achieve these goals has raised questions by some about the long-term sustainability of this endeavor. A key challenge will be ensuring that current investments provide not only a return but also remain financially viable over time, especially as global economic conditions fluctuate.

Furthermore, the global sports landscape is highly competitive, with many countries investing heavily in their sports industries to gain international prestige and economic benefits. The Kingdom is also balancing between appealing to wider audiences through relaxing various restrictions while also honoring Islamic and cultural values (such as upholding its current ban on alcohol during the 2034 World Cup).



Source: [Arab News](#)

As a result, Saudi Arabia must find the right balance between providing unique events, maintaining global relevance, and ensuring that its investments result in both soft power influence and tangible economic returns.



While the current strategy involves broad-based investment across various sports and disciplines, future success may require more focused prioritization. As the sector matures, the Kingdom might need to assess which sports and initiatives will yield the most significant cultural, social, and economic advantages. This will enable a more targeted allocation of resources and establish a clearer pathway to sustainability.

This paper will outline key developments in the field of sports in Saudi Arabia and the motivations behind them. It will argue that despite criticisms from many, especially in the West, regarding Saudi Arabia's motives behind its sports investments, the country's engagement with international sports is in fact a strategic move designed not only to accelerate economic diversification but also to enhance the Kingdom's global influence and strengthen its diplomatic ties. While critics argue that these efforts serve as a distraction from human rights concerns, the long-term benefits of sports diplomacy and economic transformation remain undeniable. As Vision 2030 progresses, Saudi Arabia's commitment to sports will continue to shape its international standing, diversify its economy, and improve its society's quality of life.

II. Saudi Arabia's Sports Strategy

As part of the Vision 2030 framework, Saudi Arabia has embarked on an ambitious and multifaceted sports strategy designed to position the Kingdom as both a regional and international player in sports. This strategy is anchored in significant investments across several key pillars: acquiring global sports assets, hosting high-profile international events, enhancing the Kingdom's role within international sports governance bodies, and developing domestic sports infrastructure.

Beyond the financial and reputational returns, the strategy is closely tied to the Kingdom's social transformation objectives, through fostering youth engagement, promoting gender inclusion, and strengthening national identity through sports. The following subsections will outline the steps taken so far in this arena, from investments and strategic hosting of events to the advancement of international cooperation and the evolution of its domestic sports culture.

Investments

One of the most significant aspects of Saudi Arabia's sports strategy is its investment in global sports assets. The Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) has played a crucial role in this strategy. In 2021, the PIF completed a high-profile acquisition of Newcastle United, one of England's most pre-eminent football clubs. This move elevated Saudi Arabia's influence in European football while being the first demonstration of the Kingdom's commitment to integrating itself into the global sports economy.

Since the PIF acquisition, Newcastle United has experienced substantial financial growth. For the financial year ending June 2024, the club reported a [28% increase in revenue](#) from 2023, reaching [£320 million](#), boosted mainly by its return to the UEFA Champions League, which alone contributed nearly [£30 million](#). "Returning to the Champions League for the first time in more than 20 years was hugely memorable for everyone connected with the club, and it has clear upside financially as we continue to grow," [stated](#) Newcastle United CEO Darren Eales.

Moreover, commercial income saw a dramatic [90% surge, rising from £43.9 million to £83.6 million](#), thanks to new sponsorship deals with global brands like Adidas and Fenwick, as well as Saudi-based companies such as Sela and Noon.



Perhaps most notably, the club managed [to cut its after-tax losses by 84%, reducing them from £71.8 million to just £11.1 million](#). This turnaround reflects both tighter financial management and the successful expansion of the club's commercial footprint under Saudi ownership.



Source: [Arab News](#)

In the realm of golf, Saudi Arabia has made advances through the establishment of LIV Golf, a professional league launched in 2022 and funded by the PIF. LIV Golf rapidly established itself as a formidable challenger to the PGA Tour by attracting elite players with highly competitive contracts. This initiative positioned the PIF at the center of global golf governance and highlighted the Kingdom's ambition to reshape international sporting institutions in line with its Vision 2030 goals.

Saudi Arabia has also extended its influence into emerging disciplines like Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and e-sports. In January 2022, the PIF announced the launch of Savvy Gaming Group (SGG), with an investment of [\\$38 billion](#) to establish Saudi Arabia as a global leader in gaming and e-sports. As part of its strategy, [SGG](#) has acquired and merged industry giants ESL and FACEIT to create "ESL FACEIT Group." In addition, the acquisition of mobile gaming firm Scopely for \$4.9 billion in 2023 has helped cement Saudi Arabia's footprint in competitive gaming.

In 2023, the PIF established SURJ Sports Investments, a specialized sports investment company aimed at accelerating the growth of the sports sector in Saudi Arabia and the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. As part of this strategy, SRJ acquired a minority equity stake in the Professional Fighters League (PFL), expanding into the rapidly growing MMA sector. This partnership includes the creation of a dedicated regional league, PFL MENA, launched in 2024, alongside hosting PFL Pay-Per-View "Super Fights" in Saudi Arabia. The initiative is designed to nurture regional talent and position the Kingdom as a hub for MMA in the MENA region.

These investments are not only emblematic of Saudi Arabia's broader Vision 2030 strategy but are equally driven by a deep-seated national enthusiasm for sports. Danny Townsend, CEO of SRJ Sports Investments, emphasized the transformative power of this vision in a report titled "[Beyond the Game: The Rise of Saudi Sports](#)." In it, he [stated](#): "that investment under the ambition of Vision 2030, fueled by the raw Saudi passion for sport, is what has transformed the country's standing in sport, and earned it the right to host the biggest event in world sport[s]. As participation numbers among men, women, and children continue to rise across all sports, and as on-ground investment and resultant success stories continue to come, we expect the trajectory and impact of sport in Saudi Arabia to maintain its already steep rise. The next ten years promise to be incredibly exciting from a growth perspective."

Hosting Major Sporting Events

Beyond football club ownership and investments, Saudi Arabia has also pursued the strategy of hosting major sporting events, representing a symbolic and calculated effort to leverage sports as a platform for national transformation across economic, social, and diplomatic domains.



First, hosting global events supports Saudi Arabia's broader goal of reducing reliance on oil revenues by stimulating non-oil sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and hospitality. Such major events attract thousands of international visitors, significantly boosting local economies through hotel occupancy, retail spending, and hospitality services. These events serve as catalysts for job creation and private sector growth while also contributing to the development of a sustainable sports economy.

Second, through strategic engagement with prestigious international competitions, the Kingdom is able to enhance its global image and exercise soft power. Associating Saudi Arabia with elite sporting events and personalities projects a narrative of openness and international integration. This repositioning is crucial for strengthening diplomatic relations and fostering foreign direct investment.

Third, by hosting globally recognized tournaments and exhibitions, Saudi Arabia promotes community engagement, national pride, and active lifestyles, particularly among youth and women. Public access to these major sporting experiences fosters a participatory sports culture and supports Vision 2030's emphasis on improving the quality of life for all citizens.



Since the launch of Vision 2030, the Kingdom successfully secured the rights to host the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, held in Jeddah, which became part of the Formula 1 calendar in 2021. The race has drawn global attention and increased tourism revenue while also showcasing Saudi Arabia's capacity to organize world-class sporting competitions. Saudi Arabia's Minister of Sports and President of the Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee (SAOC), H.R.H. Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki bin Faisal, emphasized the importance of these events by [stating](#), "We are proud to host Formula 1 competitions again, and this confirms the Kingdom's distinction in organizing the largest sporting events and activities, as such unprecedented progress is due to unremitting support and follow-up from the Saudi wise leadership."

Saudi Arabia has also expanded its engagement with sports entertainment, particularly through its partnership with WWE. The country has hosted several WWE events, such as Crown Jewel, bringing some of the biggest names in professional wrestling to Saudi audiences. H.E. Turki Alalshikh, Chairman of the General Entertainment Authority (GEA), [expressed](#) that "Saudi Arabia's hosting of the Royal Rumble for the first time outside North America reflects the General Entertainment Authority's ongoing commitment to bringing the world's largest and most important entertainment events to the Kingdom."

In recent years, the Kingdom has partnered with the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) and secured a multiyear deal with the Women's Tennis Association (WTA). Rafael Nadal, a 22-time Grand Slam champion, was appointed as an ambassador for the Saudi Tennis Federation. The collaboration adds more than just symbolic value, as the Spanish tennis legend directly promotes youth sports by leading a children's clinic at [The Racquet Space](#), a state-of-the-art facility in Jeddah.



This involvement, therefore, connects the two strands of youth development and international cooperation. Nadal reaffirmed his commitment, [stating](#), “Everywhere you look in Saudi Arabia, you can see growth and progress, and I’m excited to be part of that. I continue to play tennis as I love the game. But beyond playing, I want to help the sport grow far and wide across the world, and in Saudi there is real potential. The kids here today are looking to the future and have a real passion for all sports.”



Source: [Arab News](#)

International Cooperation

Beyond hosting sports events, Saudi Arabia has also sought more significant influence in international sports governance. This engagement is rooted in a desire to shape global sports policy, strengthen international alliances, and institutionalize the Kingdom’s presence in global decision-making forums.

By taking on leadership roles within major international sporting bodies, the Kingdom is able to shape much of the agenda as well as align global governance structures with its own domestic sports transformation effort. In October 2022, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) [announced](#) the renewal of three memberships for key personnel, including that of:

1. H.R.H. Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Sport and President of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee (SOPC), as a member of the IOC’s Marketing Commission.
2. H.R.H. Prince Fahd bin Jalawi bin Abdul Aziz, SOPC Vice President, as Vice President of the Commission for Public Affairs and Social Development.
3. H.R.H. Princess Reema bint Bandar, Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to the United States, IOC member, and SOPC board member, who was appointed to three IOC commissions: the Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Commission, the Coordination Commission for the Brisbane 2032 Olympics, and the Sustainability and Legacy Commission.

These appointments allow for Saudi voices to contribute to shaping policy on gender equity, sustainability, and global Olympic planning, all areas that align with Vision 2030’s goals.

In the realm of football, H.E. Yasser Al-Misehal, President of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF), has been serving as a member of the FIFA council since February 2023, as well as a member of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). H.R.H. Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal has been the president of the Islamic Solidarity Sports Association (ISSA) since April 2019. The ISSA, which organizes the quadrennial Islamic Solidarity Games, offers an important platform for Saudi Arabia to lead regional sports cooperation within the OIC community. The upcoming 2025 edition of the Games, set to be held in Riyadh, will reinforce Saudi Arabia’s leadership in fostering solidarity, mutual development, and engagement through sport among Muslim-majority nations.



Another key figure in this expansion is PIF Governor Yasir Al-Rumayyan. Beyond his chairmanship of Newcastle United and oversight of LIV Golf, Al-Rumayyan serves as chairman of both Golf Saudi and the Saudi Golf Federation since 2018 and was named president of the Arab Golf Federation in 2021. The Arab Golf Federation, a body that represents 19 nations, promotes golf development across the Arab world through coordination with entities like the R&A and the Arab Olympic Committee. This extensive network reflects how Saudi sports leadership often overlaps with investment priorities.

Domestic Developments

While its international sports investments have drawn global attention, Saudi Arabia is equally focused on developing its sports sector domestically, reflecting Vision 2030's ambitions to foster a healthier, more inclusive, and globally engaged society. The emphasis on local sports development is not merely about entertainment or prestige; it serves a broader policy objective of national capacity building, economic diversification, and social cohesion.

The report by SRJ Sports Investments illustrates the tangible domestic impact of Saudi Arabia's sports investment strategy. The [report](#) highlights that the young nation is more active in sports than ever, with investments driving that forward: participation in sports has significantly increased, with nearly 50% of Saudis now engaging in some form of weekly physical activity, a dramatic rise from just 13% in 2015. The number of multi-sport clubs in the Kingdom has expanded from only 9 in 2019 to 126 by 2024, while the number of national sports federations has grown by 200% to reach 98. In addition to fostering greater public health and youth engagement, such developments also create new opportunities for regional athletes on the global stage.

Hattan Alsaif, Saudi Arabia's own rising star in PFL MENA, underscored the impact of these investments. "I'm really proud and happy to have SURJ helping us, giving us opportunities to showcase our sport and our love for it. 2024 has been a year full of surprises... 2025 is going to be a huge year for the sport – Saudi Arabia will become the capital of MMA," she [said](#).

Football, as the Kingdom's most popular sport, has been central to this vision. The expansion and professionalization of the Saudi Pro League (SPL) have gone hand in hand with the Kingdom's drive to raise the quality and competitiveness of domestic sports institutions. High-profile signings such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar, and Karim Benzema are not only intended to increase international visibility but also to transfer expertise, elevate performance standards, and attract commercial sponsorships to local clubs. These moves also aim to inspire young Saudi athletes by exposing them to elite talent and training methods.



Source: [Forbes](#)

It is important to highlight that football culture in the Kingdom is nothing new. It is deeply entrenched, long predating recent developments. Since the establishment of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation in the 1950s and the creation of the national league, football has grown into the most widely followed and celebrated sport in the Kingdom, and a key source of national identity and community engagement.



The Saudi Pro League has become a source of immense pride, with club rivalries, historic matches, and fan culture for Saudi nationals. Whether Al-Ittihad, Al-Ahli, Al-Nassr, or Al-Hilal, the loyalty to these clubs runs deep and often transcends generations. Al-Nassr, for example, traditionally had a large fanbase even before Cristiano Ronaldo's commitment to the club.



Source: [Roshn Saudi League](#)

In June 2023, the PIF [announced](#) its Sports Clubs Investment and Privatization Project that transformed those four teams into companies, each owned by PIF (75% ownership) and the respective non-profit foundations for each club (25% ownership). According to the [announcement](#), the transfer of the four clubs will attract and enable further investment and sponsorship, raise the private sector's contribution to the Saudi sports sector, and create new job opportunities in sports. Moreover, the privatization procedures support Vision 2030's economic and social goals, [including](#):

1. Economic Growth and Diversification (Privatization Program): The transition to increased private sector ownership and investment in sports clubs is designed to enhance operational efficiency, strengthen governance structures, and improve overall competitiveness. These improvements are expected to drive revenue growth, streamline expenditures, and foster a financially sustainable sports ecosystem

aligned with the long-term objectives of Saudi Arabia's economic diversification strategy.

2. Promoting a Vibrant and Healthy Society (Quality of Life Program): Encouraging private sector involvement in the sports sector aims to reinforce the community role of sports clubs, elevate fan engagement, and expand grassroots participation. This initiative supports the broader national goal of fostering active lifestyles, cultivating local sports talent, and embedding sports as a key component of societal well-being.

The reality on the ground shows that Saudi citizens are happy about the privatization project. "Privatization is a major shift for our league in the world of professionalism and to create an attractive environment and competition to become one of the best leagues in the world," [said](#) Ayman al-Hatami, a social media influencer.



Source: [Al Jazeera](#)

Furthermore, the Saudi national team has long been a source of pride, particularly with the Kingdom's frequent appearances in the FIFA World Cup, including during the 1994 debut, when the Saudi team reached the knockout second round for the first time and was nicknamed "the Green Falcons."



After their upset victory against Argentina in the 2022 World Cup, the Kingdom declared a public holiday, underlining the depth of the love of sports in Saudi Arabia. Yet, this aspect of Saudi culture often does not receive global recognition, particularly when compared to more high-profile footballing nations.

What is equally important to acknowledge is the promotion of sports among women, a domain that has undergone transformational change in recent years and has become a key indicator of broader social reform in the Kingdom. Historically, women's participation in sports was limited by societal expectations and cultural norms that often relegated female athleticism to private spaces. However, under Vision 2030, the landscape has changed dramatically.

The Saudi government has prioritized gender inclusion across sectors, and sports have emerged as one of the most visible arenas for this reform. Over 400,000 women now participate annually in sports activities, with a [149% increase](#) in female participation in sports since 2015. In addition, there are over [330,000](#) registered female athletes, alongside thousands of female coaches, mentors, referees, and sports doctors. These figures reflect not only participation but also growing professionalization and institutional support for women in sports.



Source: [NEOM](#)

The structural reforms underpinning this progress include the establishment of women's departments in national sports federations, the licensing of female gyms and sports clubs across the Kingdom, the creation of women's leagues in football and basketball, and the appointment of women to leadership positions in sports governance. Notably, women now compete internationally under the Saudi flag. Similar to the other areas discussed here, this effort is not only symbolic; it is strategic.

Women's inclusion in sports is viewed as a catalyst for social cohesion, community well-being, and youth empowerment. It also plays a critical role in redefining international perceptions of Saudi Arabia by highlighting the Kingdom's commitment to modernization and gender equity. As H.R.H. Princess Reema bint Bandar aptly stated on [X](#), "Women in sports are breaking barriers like never before. With Saudi Vision 2030, we are unlocking new opportunities, empowering athletes, and shaping a future where every woman can thrive, whether on or off the field."



Source: [Inside the Games](#)

To support the growth of domestic football, Saudi Arabia has undertaken numerous investments in its sports infrastructure. Saudi Arabia's successful bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup includes plans for 15 stadiums across five host cities: Riyadh, Jeddah, Al Khobar, Abha, and NEOM.



Notable venues such as the King Salman International Stadium in Riyadh, designated for the opening match and the final, and the futuristic NEOM Stadium exemplify the Kingdom's stated commitment to building state-of-the-art facilities. These developments are expected to increase in the next decade as the Kingdom is also preparing to host both the AFC Asian Cup in 2027 and the Asian Winter Games in 2029 ahead of the World Cup.

Taken together, the above developments should be seen as part of a cohesive national strategy that seeks to use sports as a catalyst for social development, economic diversification, and global engagement. The establishment of professional leagues expanded access to training facilities, and an increase in female sports leadership are also emblematic of a broader commitment to gender equality and youth engagement. The domestic sports agenda is therefore as critical as international investments: it ensures that transformation begins at home, resonates with the Saudi public, and builds a lasting foundation for international ambitions.

III. The Strategic Importance of Saudi Arabia's Hosting of the World Cup

The announcement of Saudi Arabia as the host nation for the 2034 FIFA World Cup marks a significant milestone both in the Kingdom's overall agenda as well as its evolving sports diplomacy. It signifies not only an acknowledgment of Saudi Arabia's growing global sports profile but also a culmination of years of strategic investment in infrastructure, international cooperation, and domestic transformation under Vision 2030. While the bid was not without its critics, it garnered significant global endorsement, securing the support of over 200 FIFA member associations.

This endorsement followed FIFA's official evaluation of the Kingdom's proposal, which received an impressive average score of 4.2 out of 5, making it the highest-rated World Cup bid in FIFA's history. Saudi Arabia will be the first nation to host a 48-team World Cup, an expansion that will include 16 additional teams for the first time since Qatar's World Cup in 2022.



Source: [Saudi Press Agency](#)

From the Kingdom's perspective, hosting the World Cup represents far more than a sporting milestone; it is a vehicle for advancing foreign policy goals, catalyzing economic diversification, and reinforcing national identity. The tournament is expected to have a far-reaching impact across various sectors of the Kingdom, including infrastructure, economic development, social cohesion, cultural exchange, and tourism. Yet, despite a largely positive evaluation, scrutiny remains, echoing the discourse surrounding Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup. Drawing on lessons from Qatar 2022, Saudi Arabia's bid represents a strategic effort to reshape global perceptions of the Kingdom, as well as advance its domestic goals.



Enhancing Saudi Arabia's Global Influence

For decades, global narratives in the media surrounding Saudi Arabia have focused mainly on political and religious issues and have been portrayed in a negative light. Most recently, the claim that Saudi Arabia is “sports-washing” its image by investing in and developing sports is one of the primary allegations leveled against the country. However, when viewed through the lens of Vision 2030, it becomes evident that sports must be recognized as an integral aspect of the Kingdom's multifaceted goals.

Already, there has been a [shift](#) in the global narrative towards Saudi Arabia. While the international community often viewed the Kingdom as a mystery for decades, Saudi Arabia's sports strategy provides an avenue to challenge outdated stereotypes and redefine its image on the global stage. As athletes, fans, and media share their experiences within the Kingdom, a more nuanced, dynamic, and positive narrative about Saudi Arabia has been gaining ground.



Source: [CNN](#)

Qatar's successful staging of the 2022 FIFA World Cup offers essential insights into the strategic significance of holding such a significant event. Despite initial scrutiny, Qatar emerged from the tournament with enhanced visibility, elevated prestige, and stronger diplomatic ties.

Notably, Qatar used the World Cup to project a narrative of cultural authenticity coupled with modernity, positioning itself as a bridge between East and West. Saudi Arabia is expected to emulate and expand upon this model, not only matching Qatar's success but amplifying it through broader regional integration. In the Gulf context, the 2034 tournament will provide another chance to showcase GCC solidarity, with the potential for co-hosting training camps, friendly matches, and fan engagement initiatives across neighboring states. This directly aligns with Saudi Arabia's recent efforts to stabilize intra-GCC relations and bolster cooperation in areas of shared strategic interest. If Qatar's 2022 bid is any indication of what to expect, the rest of the GCC states will witness positive spill-over effects from Saudi Arabia's hosting of the tournament.

By the time the first ball is kicked in 2034, Saudi Arabia will have had almost a decade to demonstrate the success of its sports strategy further. The successful staging of events such as the Formula 1 Grand Prix, the 2027 AFC Asian Cup, and the 2029 Asian Winter Games is part of this credibility-building effort. The cumulative effect of these events is likely to enable Saudi Arabia to demonstrate its culture of hospitality, shifting the negative international perceptions that have predominated in years past.

Economic Diversification and Tourism Growth

Drawing on data from previous tournaments, including Qatar 2022, the economic impact of hosting a World Cup extends well beyond the event itself. Infrastructure development, tourism, foreign investment, and job creation all serve as long-term drivers that help lay the foundation for sustainable economic growth. Qatar's approach to legacy planning provides a useful template.



Ahead of the 2022 tournament, Qatar invested over \$200 billion in infrastructure, including new metro systems, roads, hotels, and stadiums. While some of this investment was met with skepticism, the long-term impact is increasingly visible. Following the 2022 World Cup, Qatar's upgraded infrastructure has proven central to its tourism and economic diversification strategy: visitor numbers rose by 157% year-over-year in mid-2023 and exceeded [4 million in 2023 overall, a 58.4% increase from 2022](#).

In Saudi Arabia's case, the tournament is viewed as supporting various sectors. The construction and renovation of 15 stadiums across Riyadh, Jeddah, Al Khobar, Abha, and NEOM are expected to drive employment in construction, engineering, and logistics. A [report](#) by the Kingdom's Ministry of Sports indicates that Saudi Arabia has already created over 14,000 jobs in the sports industry to date, aimed at Saudi nationals under the Saudization program, a number that is most likely to increase to over 100,000 jobs in the next decade as the Kingdom is also preparing to host both the AFC Asian Cup in 2027 and the Asian Winter Games in 2029 ahead of the World Cup.



Source: [ABS-CBN](#)

[Overall](#), there has been a 129% growth in sports club employment driven by new programs, a 114% rise in career opportunities in sports from 2018 to 2021, and a 156% increase in administrative roles during the same period.

The [report](#) also highlights a projected \$16.5 billion in annual contributions to GDP by the sports industry by 2030, equating to 1.5% of GDP. These figures align with the trends observed in Qatar's experience, where hosting the World Cup produced a tangible short-term uplift in its economic activity. According to the [IMF](#), visitor spending, including air travel, accommodation, match tickets, dining, shopping, and media rights, generated between \$1.6 billion and \$2.4 billion, roughly equivalent to 0.7-1.0 percent of Qatar's 2022 GDP. [PwC](#) also asserts that Qatar is "still experiencing the success of the FIFA World Cup 2022 (which helped Qatar's economy expand 8% in the fourth quarter of 2021) and is building on its legacy to continue thriving as a significant regional and international player."

Saudi Arabia appears to be following a similar trajectory. In the tourism sector, according to [Saudi Arabia's Official FIFA World Cup 2034 Bid Book](#), "The Kingdom has become one of the world's most promising and attractive tourism destinations. It topped the UN's global list of growth in the number of international tourists in 2023. The Kingdom's capital, Riyadh, was chosen by the international community to host the World Expo 2030." Moreover, in 2024, Riyadh was listed among the world's top 50 sports cities in [Burson's 2024 Ranking of Sports Cities](#). Standing at number 42 globally, Riyadh jumped 23 spots from its 2023 ranking of 65th place.

While precise economic projections for the 2034 World Cup remain speculative, several industry experts estimate that the influx of tourists and fans worldwide will also enhance the tourism sector, increase revenues, and further support economic diversification. The anticipated spending by visitors is projected to boost the national economy, building on the Kingdom's recent milestone of attracting [100 million visitors](#) in 2023, seven years ahead of the scheduled goal in 2030.



[Experts](#) have explained that Saudi Arabia could expect a gross domestic product boost of between \$9 billion and \$14 billion from the event.

Social Development

Beyond economic metrics, the World Cup presents a meaningful opportunity to foster social cohesion and cultural exchange. It is a platform for Saudi Arabia to showcase both its sporting achievements and cultural heritage. Since 2015, sports participation in the Kingdom has [surged](#) by 350%, with notable growth among women and youth. Women's participation in sports has grown by 149% since 2015, parallel with women's greater participation in the labor force, according to the Kingdom's [Bid Book](#).



Source: [Arab News](#)

Moreover, with [63%](#) of Saudis aged under 30, the Kingdom considers the youth “[its] greatest asset and a catalytic force for innovation, ideas, and progress.” Moreover, funding for Saudi youth football has increased by [350%](#) since 2021, and 17 regional training centers have opened, with SAFF already collaborating with FIFA, the AFC, and over 100 other national football federations on development programs aimed at enhancing various aspects of the game, such as coaching, refereeing, and youth development.

These initiatives are designed not only to meet the operational needs of the tournament but also to provide transferable skills that enhance long-term employability and innovation. The World Cup, thus, should be seen as creating pathways for young people to participate in national transformation efforts.

IV. Challenges and Criticisms

As Saudi Arabia expands its ambitions to become a global sports and entertainment hub, its efforts have attracted both admiration and criticism. While the Kingdom's approach has been praised for its strategic clarity, bold investments, and rapid pace of reform, it has also drawn increasing scrutiny from international observers. Two themes in particular have come to dominate the global discourse: allegations of “sportswashing,” which question the motive behind the Kingdom's international sporting investments, and concerns over the scale of financial outlays relative to the anticipated return on investment. In response, the Kingdom has increasingly embraced dialogue and transparency, emphasizing that its sports investments are part of a comprehensive, domestically driven reform process under Vision 2030. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has reiterated its commitment to aligning national sports strategies with international norms on sustainability, inclusion, and governance.

Global Reactions and the Sportswashing Debate

Despite all of the above, the Kingdom's expanding presence in global sports has not been without controversy. Some international commentators have characterized Saudi Arabia's strategy as “sportswashing,” a term used to suggest that countries invest heavily in sports to divert attention from human rights concerns, political restrictions, or social inequalities.



This narrative, often advanced by Western media and advocacy organizations, has framed Saudi Arabia's strategy as an attempt to improve its global image rather than a genuine commitment to athleticism and transformation. Instead of celebrating the Kingdom's steps in promoting its sports sector, the Kingdom continues to face great scrutiny. Moreover, many outside the region classify the Kingdom's achievements as "disrupting" the sports industry as a whole, rather than appreciating the opportunities and constructive role these developments offer, both within the country and abroad.

Criticism has come from a range of actors, including unsuccessful World Cup bidders, human rights organizations, and segments of the international press. In particular, concerns have been raised regarding environmental sustainability, particularly given the scale of planned construction, the carbon footprint of mega-events, and the projected water and energy usage in regions such as NEOM. Further areas of criticism center on social issues, such as women's rights. Although substantial progress has been made, particularly in terms of women's participation in sports and public life, observers note that some areas still face challenges that must be addressed to meet global expectations for inclusiveness and openness.

These concerns echo the scrutiny Qatar faced during its preparation for the 2022 World Cup. Since winning the bid, the Gulf country has faced increased scrutiny on numerous issues from international news outlets, including the situation of migrant labor in the country. For example, a controversial media [report](#) surfaced in February 2021, alleging that over 6,500 migrant workers have died since Qatar won its bid to host the World Cup a decade ago. However, the report failed to identify the reasons behind the deaths and was quickly dismissed by Qatar as "[baseless](#)."

Nevertheless, Qatar has implemented many historic labor reforms to improve workers' standard of living.

These debates are not limited to political values but also extend to cultural practices. For instance, Saudi Arabia's reaffirmation that alcohol will not be permitted during the 2034 World Cup has sparked discussions about the balance between respecting cultural and religious traditions and meeting global fan expectations. These reactions reflect a broader tension between national sovereignty and international norms, a challenge faced by any host nation but especially pronounced for countries seeking to reintroduce themselves on the global stage.

Saudi Arabia's Response to the Criticism

In the face of such criticism, Saudi Arabia has opted for a combination of dialogue and transparency to address concerns while reaffirming its national values. One of the most evident signs of this approach is the increased transparency and responsiveness of Saudi officials and institutions, as sustainability and human rights continue to be integral to the Kingdom's Vision 2030. Importantly, Saudi Arabia has framed these developments not as concessions to foreign pressure but as organic components of Vision 2030, driven by domestic aspirations for modernization and empowerment.



Source: [Saudi Gazette](#)



H.R.H. 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, H.R.H. Prince Faisal bin Bandar, Chairman of the Saudi Esports Federation, [stated](#) 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, H.R.H. 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,” and that instead, it is vital to understand that the Kingdom is working for “evolution, not Westernization.”



Source: [Olympics](#)

Already, Saudi officials have emphasized that the 2034 World Cup will be “inclusive and safe for all,” with security, hospitality, and event operations designed to cater to a diverse global audience. In the Kingdom’s [Bid Book](#), Saudi Arabia outlined its commitments to labor protections, environmental standards, and gender equality in sports.

Moreover, the government has intensified efforts to align sports initiatives with recognized global frameworks, such as FIFA’s sustainability benchmarks. On the labor front, for example, Saudi Arabia has implemented several reforms to enhance working conditions and improve worker protections. More specifically, the Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development has introduced several measures aimed at strengthening labor rights, including the launch of the Labor Reform Initiative (LRI) in 2021, which enhanced labor protections, improving workers’ protection of fundamental principles and rights at work, and the Wage Protection System to ensure timely payments. Socially, the Kingdom has taken meaningful steps toward inclusion. While traditional norms still guide many aspects of public life, the expansion of women’s participation in sports, the presence of female leaders in sports governance, and the introduction of mixed-gender sporting events reflect a trajectory of gradual reform.

One other persistent criticism directed at Saudi Arabia’s sports strategy concerns the question of return on investment. The Kingdom’s expenditure across football, motorsports, golf, esports, and infrastructure has prompted analysts and commentators to question whether these outlays are economically justifiable in the long run. In particular, critics wonder whether such large-scale spending will yield proportionate economic, social, or reputational dividends. The LIV Golf venture stands as a prominent example. The league reportedly committed over \$2 billion in funding to attract top talent and establish a rival platform to the PGA Tour. This included record-breaking prize purses, appearance fees, and high-profile acquisitions such as Phil Mickelson, Brooks Koepka, and Dustin Johnson. While LIV has succeeded in elevating Saudi Arabia’s influence in global golf, critics question whether the investment will generate sustainable returns.



However, it should be noted that such calculations cannot be assessed purely through traditional financial metrics. Much like investments in national branding, infrastructure, or culture, the returns are partially intangible, including improved international standing, increased soft power, institutional capacity-building, and societal transformation. Ultimately, the value-for-money debate reflects Saudi Arabia's dual intent: designed to generate direct commercial profit and to create a catalytic effect across sectors, stimulating tourism, improving quality of life, elevating regional leadership, and reshaping its global identity.

As with any bold transformation, outcomes will likely vary by sector. What is clear is that the Kingdom has entered a phase where strategic prioritization, institutional efficiency, and long-term planning will be essential to converting visibility into sustainable national benefit. While criticism is likely to persist, the Kingdom's approach suggests an evolving capacity to respond constructively. Rather than dismissing criticism outright, Saudi Arabia has incorporated it into a mature policy-making process, striking a balance between international expectations and domestic values.

V. The Future of Saudi Arabia in Sports

In conclusion, while the 2034 FIFA World Cup represents a landmark achievement, it is only one milestone in a much broader national agenda. Saudi Arabia's sports strategy is designed not as a short-term campaign, but as a sustained effort to position the Kingdom as a global hub for sports, a regional center for collaboration, and a model for socio-economic transformation through sport.

This vision is reinforced through deepening partnerships with regional and international stakeholders, encompassing not only event hosting but also athlete development, institutional leadership, and global sports diplomacy.

Domestically, the social impact of these reforms is already evident. Shifts in public attitudes, greater youth engagement, and the remarkable rise in women's participation underscore how sports are reshaping Saudi society. These developments are fostering healthier lifestyles, strengthening community ties, and challenging long-standing norms, while simultaneously reinforcing a renewed sense of national identity. As sports become further embedded in everyday life, the continuation of grassroots initiatives, particularly school-level programs and broader access to public facilities, will be vital to sustaining this momentum.

Looking ahead, the Kingdom is also focused on ensuring that its substantial investments yield a durable economic and infrastructure legacy. The growth of the sports sector is not an end in and of itself, but a catalyst for broader development, stimulating tourism, diversifying the economy, creating employment opportunities, and enhancing public infrastructure. Projects linked to the 2034 World Cup, alongside other mega-events, are already contributing to the modernization of cities, expansion of services, and increased international visibility. In sum, the true measure of success will lie not only in hosting world-class events but in embedding them as a permanent pillar of national progress.

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