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## **Saudi Arabia's Journey from 2026 to 2034: FIFA World Cup Edition**

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## Saudi Arabia's Journey from 2026 to 2034: FIFA World Cup Edition

Saudi Arabia's successful bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup marks an important moment in the Kingdom's ambitious national transformation strategy, Vision 2030. This commentary and analysis will explore the preparations, strategic objectives, and broader implications of this major event. The 2034 World Cup is not merely a football tournament; it is a key element of Saudi Arabia's drive towards economic diversification, global engagement, and societal modernization.

### Strategic Context: Vision 2030 and Sports

The 2034 World Cup is intertwined with Saudi Arabia's broader national transformation strategy, Vision 2030. As outlined in this ambitious blueprint, sports are being utilized as a powerful tool to achieve several strategic objectives: diversifying the economy, expanding tourism, generating employment, strengthening youth and women's participation, and positioning the Kingdom as a leading destination for international events. Furthermore, sports play an important role in generating revenue through tourism, investments, and sponsorship opportunities, while also fostering national pride and youth engagement.

Domestically, this strategy is evident in the expansion of multi-sport clubs, the professionalization and privatization of major Saudi Pro League teams, the recruitment of global football stars, and the growth of women's sports participation. These investments are not solely for financial returns but are closely connected to social transformation objectives, promoting gender inclusion and strengthening national identity. For instance, between 2022 and 2023, there was a notable [52%](#) increase in registered female athletes, with over 90 women's football teams competing across more than 40 clubs in three tiers.

Additionally, over [1,000](#) coaches are now involved in women's sports, and more than 70,000 female students participate in the National School League. The Kingdom projects a substantial economic impact, with the sports industry contributing an estimated \$16.5 billion annually to GDP by 2030, equating to 1.5% of GDP. Some estimates suggest the sector could even exceed [\\$22.4](#) billion by the end of the decade as private sector participation and institutional expansion continue to accelerate.



## A Growing Global Sporting Destination and Preparations for 2034

The 2034 World Cup builds upon Saudi Arabia's rapidly expanding experience as a global sporting destination. Since 2018, the Kingdom has hosted over 150 international sporting events, strategically integrating sports into the core pillars of Vision 2030. This includes leveraging sports for tourism, economic diversification, infrastructure development, and international engagement. The 2034 tournament is also aimed at positioning Saudi Arabia as a bridge between the Global North and South, as the Kingdom's bid is supported by over 100 active football partnerships with other FIFA member associations. This strategy is significant given that approximately 60% of the world's population lives within an eight-hour flight of the Kingdom. By concentrating the event within different host cities, Saudi Arabia aims to minimize travel fatigue for teams and fans while maximizing the visibility of its diverse regional landscapes.

In light of criticisms leveled against the 2026 FIFA World Cup regarding high ticket prices and overall accessibility, Saudi Arabia addressed these concerns in its preparations for 2034. The 2026 tournament, co-hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, has faced significant backlash due to dynamic pricing strategies that have seen ticket costs soar, with some reaching as high as \$6,730 and general public entry starting at \$120. Responding to such issues, H.R.H Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Sport, has publicly committed to ensuring an affordable, accessible, and safe World Cup in 2034. The Kingdom plans to collaborate closely with FIFA to enhance ticket accessibility and streamline international travel through e-visas. "This is something that we're going to work with FIFA on. Nobody wants to see a tournament such as the World Cup where people are struggling to come," he [explained](#). The Minister also [stated](#) that the Kingdom has "more than 60 [countries whose citizens can get] e-visas on arrival and hopefully more to come."

H.R.H Prince Abdulaziz also elaborated that the Kingdom "hosted more than 150 international events. All fans that have come have enjoyed [them], have found ease of access. So that's definitely one of the things that we really focus on to make sure that everyone has accessibility." These efforts are designed to mitigate the financial barriers observed in previous tournaments and ensure a more inclusive experience for participants and visitors alike. This proactive stance aims to differentiate Saudi Arabia's hosting approach from recent controversies, emphasizing a commitment to broad fan engagement and a secure environment for visitors from around the world.



## Football as a Source of National Identity

When Saudi Arabia was announced as the host for the 2034 FIFA World Cup, it faced immediate scrutiny, particularly from Western commentators, regarding its football culture. Critics often draw parallels to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, arguing that the Kingdom lacks a genuine, deeply rooted football tradition and that the bid is primarily a strategic exercise in "sportswashing." This narrative suggests that the enthusiasm for the sport is manufactured rather than organic, raising questions about the authenticity of the fan base and the long-term viability of the tournament's legacy.

However, this criticism overlooks the historical significance of football within Saudi Arabian society. Football has long functioned not only as a sport but as a major cultural and social phenomenon. The Saudi Arabian Football Federation was established in the 1950s, and since then, football has grown into the most widely followed and celebrated sport in the Kingdom. The Saudi Pro League (SPL) has cultivated intense club rivalries, historic matches, and a passionate fan culture that transcends generations. Clubs like Al-Ittihad, Al-Ahli, Al-Nassr, and Al-Hilal have cultivated deep loyalties among Saudi fans across generations, demonstrating that the nation's engagement with football is deeply entrenched and predates recent high-profile investments.

The enthusiasm surrounding the 2026 FIFA World Cup, despite its geographical distance and challenging broadcast times, is another example that demonstrates the profound extent to which football influences daily life across the Kingdom. The current 2026 World Cup, hosted in North America, presents a significant logistical challenge for Saudi fans, with matches airing between 1 AM and 5 AM Saudi time. Yet, this has not deterred them from tuning in. Instead, it has prompted widespread reorganization of daily routines. Fans are adjusting their sleep schedules, and companies are allowing flexible working hours to ensure employees do not miss important games. Establishments across the Kingdom, such as cafes and lounges, are extending their operating hours and introducing special World Cup menus and late-night promotions to accommodate crowds of supporters eager to watch matches together.

To counter the "sportswashing" accusations, Saudi Arabia continues to highlight its domestic football culture and integrate it into its broader national transformation strategy. The Kingdom's approach involves not just hosting international events but significantly investing in grassroots participation and the professionalization of local leagues.



The recent privatization of major SPL clubs and the recruitment of global stars like Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar are aimed at elevating performance standards and inspiring young Saudi athletes. Furthermore, domestic participation in sports has surged, with nearly [59.1%](#) of Saudis now engaging in weekly physical activity in 2025, up from 13% in 2015, surpassing the target set for 2027. 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.

By emphasizing these domestic developments, Saudi Arabia aims to demonstrate that its 2034 World Cup bid is built on a foundation of genuine national passion rather than merely financial capability. The Kingdom's strategy is to showcase a vibrant, existing football culture that is being amplified, rather than built from scratch.

### **Beyond Football: A Legacy of Global Engagement**

The successful delivery of the 2034 World Cup will extend far beyond the realm of football. It represents a significant opportunity for Saudi Arabia to showcase its organizational capabilities, modern infrastructure, and commitment to international cooperation. Additionally, by prioritizing accessibility, safety, and a lasting legacy, and by strategically integrating sports into its economic and social development plans, the Kingdom is set to host an event that will not only captivate the world but also accelerate its journey towards a diversified, modern, and globally connected future. While challenges and criticisms persist, Saudi Arabia's proactive approach to addressing these concerns, coupled with its consistent commitment to national transformation, suggests a promising trajectory for the 2034 World Cup and beyond.

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