

Saudi Arabia's Sports Promotion is a Win-Win for the Kingdom

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Feb 16, 2023

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Brief Analysis

Saudi Arabia's increased investment in sports represents an effort to empower youth and expand the economy, rather than "sportswashing."

Editor's note: This article is by an official government representative. Fikra Forum seeks to publish a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives, and those interested in continuing the dialogue are welcome to submit articles for consideration on this topic or other current events issues [here \(https://airtable.com/shrbhVfz4arkKuM1r\)](https://airtable.com/shrbhVfz4arkKuM1r). We plan to publish another perspective on this issue shortly.

On January 15, Dalia Adel—a forward on the Saudi women's national soccer team—scored a goal against Comoros during the maiden Women's International Friendly Tournament, hosted by the kingdom. Her reaction was priceless. Upon confirming that the ball had gotten past the opposing team's goalkeeper, she covered her face with her hands, ran up the field, let out a scream, and burst into tears as her teammates hugged her in the middle of the field.

The stadium was perhaps only a third full. Nor was the match being broadcast to over a billion people around the world, as had the men's World Cup soccer tournament had been just a few weeks prior. But none of that mattered to Dalia and her teammates, who went on to win the tournament. They were elated that they finally had an opportunity to pursue their dream; to play the sport they love and to proudly represent their country. Facilitating these kinds of experiences is one of several reasons why Saudi Arabia is investing in and promoting sports.

At a press conference in Riyadh in January announcing that Portuguese soccer superstar Cristiano Ronaldo had signed a contract with local club Al Nassr, the team issued a statement [saying \(https://www.cnbc.com/2022/12/30/cristiano-ronaldo-signs-with-saudi-arabian-club-al-nassr-for-reported-record-breaking-salary.html\)](https://www.cnbc.com/2022/12/30/cristiano-ronaldo-signs-with-saudi-arabian-club-al-nassr-for-reported-record-breaking-salary.html), "This is a signing that will not only inspire our club to achieve even greater success but inspire our league, our nation and future generations, boys and girls to be the best version of themselves."

For his part, Ronaldo added that he had "won everything" in Europe and that he was looking forward to this new challenge. His direct response suggested that he was aware of the controversy surrounding his signing. Critics have

argued that he, or any athlete who participates in sporting events hosted in Saudi Arabia or sponsored by a Saudi entity, is engaging in “sports washing”—the notion that a country is investing in its sports sector mainly to detract from other issues or challenges. In the case of Saudi Arabia, however, this could not be further from the truth.

As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, investing in and promoting the sports sector is a win-win. For starters, sports, much like music and film, have universal appeal. They transcend language, borders and politics. In addition to being essential to good health, playing a sport and attending sporting events improves the quality of life of those involved.

Ensuring that Saudis and expatriates living in the kingdom have a wide selection of leisurely activities and can engage in these quality of life activities has been one of the main objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. Broadly speaking, the Vision, unveiled by HRH Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, is a wide array of economic and social reforms to diversify Saudi Arabia’s economy, dramatically improve the delivery of government services, and redefine the kingdom’s place in the international community.

As the Vision was being devised, it became evident that one of the sectors that had tremendous yet largely untapped potential was entertainment, including sports. After all, Saudi Arabia’s population has just crossed thirty-five million, making it one of the biggest markets in the Middle East. Our population is also predominantly young, with some 70 percent being under the age of 35. While soccer has always been the most popular sport in the kingdom, Saudi youth of both genders have also been flocking to attend events for sports with which they were previously unfamiliar.

Whether it was the Formula E race, the Dakar Rally, WrestleMania, golf, or tennis championships, it is abundantly clear that Saudis relish the opportunity to see world-class athletes at the top of their game. The popularity of these events is not only evident by how quickly many of them sell out but also by the fact that thousands of young Saudi men and women have begun competing with fellow athletes around the world, proudly carrying the Saudi flag. For example, **[thousands \(https://gulfnews.com/sport/football/saudi-arabia-continues-investment-in-womens-football-by-launching-new-under-17-team-1.93673861\)](https://gulfnews.com/sport/football/saudi-arabia-continues-investment-in-womens-football-by-launching-new-under-17-team-1.93673861)** of young Saudi women and girls registered for training camps when the national women’s soccer team was announced.

Just as importantly, sports have generated millions of Riyals for the Saudi economy and thousands of good-paying jobs, just as they have in the United States and other countries for decades. The newfound interest in sports has resulted in thousands of Saudis looking to pursue careers as coaches, trainers, event promoters, agents, and a host of other jobs that generate any time a sporting event is held.

The so-called “sports washing” charge also belies a troubling level of ethnocentricity that is seemingly lost on those making it. It suggests that Saudi Arabia is investing billions of dollars into sports primarily to improve its image in the eyes of others—especially the Western world. The reality is that every policy, project, or initiative that Saudi Arabia has implemented or pursued is done mainly to advance the interests of the Kingdom or to improve the lives of Saudi people.

That doesn’t mean that the Kingdom has not embraced the fact that it is part of an increasingly interconnected world. On the contrary, the kingdom is often seeking to lead the Middle East and the broader international community in finding solutions to the most pressing contemporary challenges, many of which are global in nature.

We have led efforts to stabilize international energy markets and have been at the forefront of the international community’s effort to push back against militant groups. In its capacity as the president of the G20 group in 2020, Riyadh also played a central role in advancing collaborative efforts to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Saudi Arabia’s main policy focus is on ensuring that our youths are empowered to compete with their counterparts around the world and that the Saudi economy is growing and thriving.

Ronaldo’s decision to join Al Nassr is one of many initiatives that has allowed Saudi Arabia to create entertainment

and tourism sectors from the ground up in just a few years. We are seeking to attract the best of the best in their various fields so that they can inspire Saudi men and women as they lead this exciting stage in our development process forward. In other words, Saudi sports investments are about us, not how others see us. ❖

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