

After the Match, Saudi Arabia Makes the Real Play

by [Danya Rubenstein-Markiewicz \(/experts/danya-rubenstein-markiewicz\)](/experts/danya-rubenstein-markiewicz/)

Jul 13, 2018

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alswdyt-wkrt-qlqdm-akthr-mn-mjrd-lbt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alswdyt-wkrt-qlqdm-akthr-mn-mjrd-lbt/)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Danya Rubenstein-Markiewicz \(/experts/danya-rubenstein-markiewicz\)](/experts/danya-rubenstein-markiewicz/)

Danya Rubenstein-Markiewicz is a research intern for Fikra Forum at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. She attends Barnard College at Columbia University, where she studies international relations.



Brief Analysis

As the FIFA World Cup final approaches, a highlight this year was the four Middle Eastern countries participating for the first time in years. Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia each succeeded in qualifying, though their respective teams did not make it further than the first round of the Cup. However, like many countries, Saudi Arabia has gained more through its participation in the games than its team's performance would suggest. The kingdom has used the Cup to gain political traction and further its tourism initiatives, while broadcasting the country's new image of modern progress and fomenting the Saudi-Qatari diplomatic war.

The Saudi national team "the Falcons" arrived in Russia after not having qualified for a FIFA Cup since 2006. Moreover, the Saudis have historically been uninterested in tournaments and have not made soccer a priority. Although formed in the 1950s, the Falcons did not enter a competition until the 1984 AFC Asian Cup. This sudden interest in international tournaments coincided with Saudi Arabia's economic boom from a rise in oil revenues. The Falcons' participation in this World Cup similarly corresponds with a recent rise in Saudi visibility due to efforts to reform socially and economically. Thus, tournament participation appears to be tied to domestic development, partially explaining why Saudi Arabia has succeeded in reaching Russia this year.

The renewed focus on the World Cup reflects a shift in Saudi priorities: Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) has started pushing his Vision 2030 plan for a post-oil economy and a government billed as more transparent and technologically driven. Vision 2030 is designed to revamp the country's image abroad, attract foreign investment, and position itself as a regional leader. Given the ubiquitous popularity of the World Cup, MbS's apparent vision for the tournament has been just as strategic.

Training a team able to qualify for the World Cup is a serious investment, especially for countries that lack existing modern facilities and reliable coaches. Saudi Arabia has struggled with both issues; cycling between three coaches in the last year and lacking domestic infrastructure for a world-class team. But at this Cup, the Saudi government clearly viewed the Falcons as a worthwhile investment, paying for athletes to play in Spanish clubs starting in October of last year—a costly venture that promoted Saudi-Spanish relations.

These investments appear to have paid off, at least on the foreign policy level. The Crown Prince made his first public appearance in two months to sit with President Vladimir Putin as they watched their respective teams play the World Cup's opening match. The Falcons suffered the biggest defeat at this year's tournament, losing 5-0. However, MbS took advantage of the occasion to talk about the June OPEC meeting with Putin, and the two leaders continued the discussion at the Kremlin later that same day.

The following week, OPEC agreed to a partial lift on their production cap that analysts say could increase oil output by 600,000 barrels per day. Hoping to see an increase their oil revenue, many countries opposed this move, including Iran, which is facing impending U.S. sanctions.

Saudi Arabia's play to expand relationships with foreign countries through the politics of sports has not stopped at Russia. In an effort to tie itself to global powers, Saudi Arabia backed the North American bid for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, with the head of the Saudi General Sports Authority, Turki al-Sheikh, leading the campaign. However, most Middle Eastern countries promoted the Moroccan bid, including Qatar, which Saudi Arabia cut ties with last year for allegedly financing terrorism. Al-Sheikh criticized Morocco for not siding with Saudi Arabia on the Gulf Cooperation Council rift and praised the United States on Twitter throughout the last year. When asked by CNN this May, al-Sheikh voiced support for the United States to host the 2026 World Cup.

This year's World Cup has allowed for the Gulf state to present itself on the international stage in a positive light. Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a new enthusiasm for foreign tourism beyond its traditional role as the destination of the Hajj and Umrah, and the World Cup plays right into those plans. The country has just started issuing general tourist visas for the first time in seven years, making Saudi Arabia more accessible. In the past, visas were reserved for businessmen and pilgrims traveling to Mecca.

The Crown Prince's tourism initiative in Vision 2030 involves new hotels, residential units, resorts, and transportation. One of the resort destinations, titled the Red Sea Project, may not follow Saudi Arabia's laws on alcohol and dress, a decision designed to make the country more enticing to foreigners. Despite the Falcons' dismal showing in this World Cup, continued exposure and increased success of the team could help create and sell new stadiums, soccer gear, advertising rights, and ticket sales. This plan, however, has not been successful for countries attempting to follow the same path as Saudi Arabia. But the kingdom differs in that they are using soccer to boost a new tourism industry that is already supported financially.

Being part of the tournament is a component of MbS' ambition to be one of the top seven leagues in the world by 2020. The fact that Qatar is holding the 2022 World Cup will make it difficult to continue this plan if the rift between the two countries persists. Nevertheless, capitalizing on participation in the tournament will depend on the improvement in the Falcons' performance.

While advancing foreign relationships, Saudi Arabia has used the World Cup to further deepen its schism with Qatar. Al-Sheikh has even made legal threats against Qatar for their pointed reporting of the Falcons' first game, tweeting that the Qatari soccer broadcasting network, beIN Sports, wronged Saudi Arabia, its athletics, and its sports officials by "exploiting sports to achieve political goals." Tensions over the game have also caused financial loss for Qatar: while beIN acquired rights as the single registered broadcaster of the World Cup for the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has refused to broadcast the Qatari channel and pirated beIN to create the network beoutQ, which is now the single domestic broadcaster of the World Cup in Saudi Arabia. BeoutQ is heavily promoted domestically and is reported to have received the "tacit consent" of authorities, even as both FIFA and Qatar have unsuccessfully tried to shut beoutQ down.

On July 11, FIFA released a statement that they are working with beIN to shut down beoutQ, calling on Saudi authorities to help them. The Saudi Ministry of Media responded the next day, welcoming the investigation to stop beoutQ and piracy in the kingdom. The Saudi government claimed that the pirated network was not located in their country and that Qatari news site *Al-Jazeera* was behind the miscommunication. Saudi Arabia blamed the piracy accusations on Qatar's embarrassment of their "technological shortcomings," since beIN had been unable to protect their network. The announcement also drew attention to allegations of fraud by FIFA and beIN, attempting to debase the organization's allegations.

So far, Saudi Arabia's plays have shown the government's new interest in sports as a political tool, a tactic that did not seem to appeal to the country previously. And while the Gulf kingdom is capitalizing on both soccer and the World Cup, the reality is that Saudi Arabia is coming late to the game, joining the many countries who have exploited soccer for boosting their own economies and political weight; recent hosts Brazil, Russia, and South Africa's bids were intertwined with the hopes for a rise in their tourism industries and economies—and these dreams were not always fulfilled. Those teams have also historically done better than the Falcons. Therefore, even if Saudi Arabia performs well at the World Cup, their plans to turn athletic success into touristic gains may be limited. Examining the serious investments of politics into soccer reflects the paradox that a sport beloved for its affordability and team spirit has become a costly, possibly ineffective, means for governments to vie for influence and prestige on the world stage. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)