

**Saudi Arabia and Sports:
Sportswashing or economic development?**

Christian Vanhoek

PSCI 355: Politics of the Middle East & North Africa

October 16, 2024

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a nation well known for its incredible wealth, most of it coming from the extraction and sale of oil. Recently the Kingdom has been seeking to diversify its economy. Saudi Arabia has made significant investments in sports including hosting well-known sporting events, purchasing professional sports teams, and promoting sports for its citizens. However, criticism is levied on the Kingdom for using sports to improve its soft power and international image. This is a tactic called sportswashing, and this paper seeks to examine whether Saudi Arabia is engaging in this tactic or if there are other factors at play driving their investment into sports.

Sportswashing is defined by Britannica as “the use of an athletic event by an individual or a government, a corporation, or another group to promote or burnish the individual’s or group’s reputation, especially amid controversy or scandal.”¹ This can come from hosting significant sporting events like the World Cup or investing in globally recognized teams. Saudi Arabia has made substantial investments into building up their sports empire. In the realm of football (soccer) it is making deals to host the Spanish Football Federation Super Cup and that of the championship of the Italian Federation to drive tourism to the Gulf.² This is accompanied by purchasing Premier League football team Newcastle United and heavily sponsoring highly viewed football matches.³ This has been part of a larger effort to repaint Saudi Arabia as a sports and entertainment tourism destination.

However, there is evidence that Saudi Arabia is engaging in sportswashing. This can be seen in its partnership with the professional wrestling company World Wrestling Entertainment

¹ Fred Frommer, "Sportswashing," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified August 1, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/money/sportswashing>.

² Sarath K. Gangji. "The Rise of Sportswashing." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 2 (2023): 69, doi:10.1353/jod.2023.0016.

³ Ganji, "The Rise of Sportswashing," 70.

(henceforth WWE). More specifically it is argued that Saudi Arabia has used its relationship with WWE to increase their soft power and influence with a Western audience. Professional wrestling is branded by WWE as sports entertainment, as the bouts maintain the illusion of being a legitimate competition but have characteristics of television such as characters, storylines, and predetermined match outcomes. In 2018 WWE and Saudi Arabia signed a ten-year deal to host internationally broadcast events in the nation.⁴ This deal was signed during a period in which Saudi Arabia was receiving international condemnation because of Saudi intervention in the Yemeni Civil War, harsh crackdown on protestors, and the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi.⁵ Criticism accused the Saudis of using WWE as a platform to spread propaganda during a period of controversy.

During the first internationally broadcast event held in Saudi Arabia, the *Greatest Royal Rumble*, WWE wrestlers dressed in traditional Saudi garb and competed over title belts adorned with Saudi Arabia's national colors and insignia.⁶ Video segments aired in between the wrestling matches that highlighted progress made by the Saudi Arabian regime such as the then-recent ruling allowing women to drive.⁶ A segment during the show involved wrestler Ariya Daivari, an American-born wrestler of Iranian descent, being portrayed as a villainous wrestler and declaring "real athletes ... come from the strongest nation in the world- Iran!"⁷ He was promptly topped by a pair of Saudi Arabian wrestlers. The show also excluded female wrestlers, usually a mainstay on WWE shows, being specifically prohibited from performing by the Saudi government.⁶ The

⁴ Jonathan Grix, Adam Dinsmore, and Paul Michael Brannagan, "Unpacking the politics of 'sportswashing': It takes two to tango," *Politics*, 0, no. 0 (2023): Origins of a Sportswashing Partnership.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957231207387>

⁵ Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan, "Unpacking the Politics of 'Sportswashing'," Origins of a Sportswashing Partnership.

⁶ Grix, Dinsmore, and Brannagan, "Unpacking the Politics of 'Sportswashing'," The First WWE Saudi Shows.

⁷ Dan Gartland, "Ariya Daivari Says He Received Death Threats After Heel Segment in Saudi Arabia," *Sports Illustrated*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2018/05/01/ariya-shawn-daivari-greatest-royal-rumble-saudi-arabia-death-threats>.

highlights were noteworthy as the Saudi government inserted its own political and cultural views into a broadcast primarily targeted toward a Western audience.

The professional Wrestling event hosted in Saudi Arabia is one of many events hosted in the nation. Between 2018 and 2020 Saudi Arabia hosted 50 global sporting events and received more than 2 million visitors.⁸ These events received massive media attention, reaching up to 190 countries.⁸ When examining publications in the U.K., as more events were hosted coverage of Saudi Arabia increased.⁹ With increased coverage of sporting events taking place in Saudi Arabia, the number of articles with positive coverage increased as well.⁹ Positive coverage associated with sports events tended to highlight achievements made by the Saudi regime. This coverage highlighted the construction of stadiums, UNESCO World Heritage sites, and social progress.¹⁰ It is noted that much of this coverage portrays Saudi Arabia as a growing sports and tourism hub in the Gulf.¹⁰ The negative portrayals of Saudi Arabia center around accusations of sportswashing.¹⁰ Despite sportswashing being mentioned in the media regarding Saudi Arabia's growing sports endeavors, negative coverage of Saudi Arabia is decreasing in British media.

While heavy Saudi investments in sports and other entertainment properties are having the desired effect of rehabilitating the Kingdom's international image, sports are also a central tenet of diversifying their economy. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan, the official development plan of the Saudi government, calls for transforming Saudi Arabia into "a world-renowned sports and entertainment location."¹¹ The program seeks to create new economic sectors and investment opportunities to diversify the economy.¹¹ The report boasts that Saudi Arabia has received 94

⁸ Yazeed Abdullah Almahraj, "British Press Coverage of International Sports Events Hosted by Saudi Arabia: Content Analysis Study in Light of Country Concept Model," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, no. 742 (2023): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02266-w>.

⁹ Almahraj, "British Press Coverage," 6.

¹⁰ Almahraj, "British Press Coverage," 7.

¹¹ "Quality of Life Program," *Vision 2030*, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/explore/programs/quality-of-life-program>.

million visitors since launching their tourism visa in 2019.¹¹ Sports is a major factor driving tourism to the Kingdom, which is becoming a big source of non-oil revenue.

As countries put more effort into addressing the issue of climate change, and by doing so intend to move away from fossil fuels, oil revenues are increasingly threatened. The Kingdom is highly dependent on oil revenues and the Saudi government, facing fluctuations in revenue, is increasingly trying to diversify its economy.¹² According to the Saudi Arabian Vision 2030 annual report for 2023, non-oil GDP grew 4.7% in 2023, and now makes up 50% of the nation's total GDP.¹³ This represents a continuing growth of the non-oil sector of the Saudi Arabian economy. It is unclear in the report exactly what percentage of GDP is comprised of sports, but sports are mentioned as a force to help drive investment in industries such as tourism and hospitality.

In addition to helping the international image of Saudi Arabia and aiding the diversification of an oil-dependent economy, sports are being used to address public health issues. Saudi Arabia's population is an unhealthy one with a large percentage of citizens being obese or morbidly obese. The female population of the Kingdom is worse off with about 35% of women being obese, with over half of the population not partaking in any exercise.¹⁴ Men in Saudi Arabia are almost as unhealthy with 24% identified as being obese, with around 15% suffering from diabetes.¹⁴ These numbers represent a public health issue with lack of physical activity being cited as a problem. Saudi Arabia's interest in sports and the development of sports leagues is for the benefit of its domestic population, as well as the economic benefits it brings.

¹² Victor Olivereau, "Investing in Sport: A Comparison of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia," in *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East*, ed. Daniel Ryche and Paul Michael Brannagan (London: Routledge, 2022), 306.

¹³ "Vision 2030: Annual Report 2023," *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 2023, 21.
<https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/annual-reports>

¹⁴ Simon Chadwick, Paul Widdop, "Saudi Arabia and Sport in the 21st Century," in *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East*, ed. Daniel Ryche and Paul Michael Brannagan (London: Routledge, 2022), 235.

When examining Vision 2030, it is plain to see that sports play a huge role in the government's commitment to improving the quality of life for its citizens. The Saudi government has invested in promoting domestic athletic programs and sports clubs. This includes the development of physical activities for its citizens, as well as the building of infrastructure to facilitate it. Vision 2030's annual report for 2023 highlights some of the achievements made by the government in promoting physical activity. The report boasts that as of 2023, the nation has developed 110 sports clubs in multiple disciplines, including a women's volleyball league.¹⁵ Within the development of the sports sector, the government claims to place great importance on encouraging youth to participate in physical activity. They claim to have had great success with initiatives encouraging physical fitness. The report states that the nation exceeded its planned goal of having 51% of the population participate in at least 150 minutes of activity per week, with over 62% achieving this metric.¹⁶

Sports is receiving massive investment from the Saudi Arabian government, and much of the attention regarding these initiatives is rife with accusations of sportswashing. Saudi Arabia is certainly guilty of using sports to improve their international reputation, particularly in the wake of controversies. But that is not the sole intention behind their investments, the Saudis also expect sports to help drive tourism to their nation. In addition, they are using sports to diversify their economy and cut down their dependence on oil revenue. But they also see sports as a way to aid in combating the high rate of obesity their citizens face. So, while the Saudi Arabian government is certainly aware of the positive effect that sportswashing can have on their international standing, their investment into sports is a far more complex issue than one of just sportswashing.

¹⁵ "Vision 2030," 88.

¹⁶ "Vision 2030," 87.

Bibliography

- Almahraj, Yazeed Abdullah. "British press coverage of international sports events hosted by Saudi Arabia: content analysis study in light of country concept model," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, no. 742 (2023): 2-7, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02266-w>.
- Chadwick, Simon, Widdop Paul. "Saudi Arabia and Sport in the 21st Century," in Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East, edited by Daniel Ryche and Paul Michael Brannagan (London: Routledge, 2022), 235.
- Frommer, Fred. "Sportswashing." Encyclopedia Britannica, Last modified August 1, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/money/sportswashing>.
- Ganji, Sarath K. 2023. "The Rise of Sportswashing." *Journal of Democracy*, 34, no.2: 69-70. doi:10.1353/jod.2023.0016.
- Gartland, Dan, "Ariya Daivari Says He Received Death Threats After Heel Segment in Saudi Arabia," Sports Illustrated, May 1, 2018. <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2018/05/01/ariya-shawn-daivari-greatest-royal-rumble-saudi-arabia-death-threats>.
- Grix, Jonathan, Dinsmore, Adam, and Brannagan, Paul Michael. "Unpacking the politics of 'sportswashing': It takes two to tango," *Politics*, 0, no. 0. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957231207387>.
- Olivereau, Victor. "Investing in Sport: A comparison of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia," in Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East, edited by Daniel Ryche and Paul Michael Brannagan (London: Routledge, 2022), 306.
- "Quality of Life Program," Vision 2030, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/explore/programs/quality-of-life-program>.
- "Vision 2030: Annual Report 2023," *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 2023, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/annual-reports>.