

Sport Politics

The Gulf nations' investments into sports have attracted significant global attention recently with the establishment of a new golf league by Saudi Arabia called the LIV Golf Invitational Series. The Western media have accused Saudi, UAE, Qatar and other Gulf nations of 'sportswashing,' where one uses sports to improve one's tarnished reputation, through hosting a sporting event, the sponsorship of sporting teams or by participation in a sport itself. Gulf nations have hit back by outlining how their sports investments are part of their plans to diversify their economies away from fossil fuels.

Sporting events have long been used by nations around the world as entertainment to keep people busy and attention away from domestic challenges. Today sports is a multi-billion dollar industry and it has significant economic impact. Saudi Arabia was the first Muslim nation to make use of sports to deflect its people's attention. The Post-WW2 situation created many challenges for the Arab rulers, who were relatively newly established states, from Arab nationalism to the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser, with the infiltration of Western ideas due to Western energy companies setting up in the region in order to bring the region's new found oil and gas to global markets. The tensions between King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal saw rising demands to transform the Kingdom into a constitutional monarchy. In 1956, Saudi created the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, which today has more than 150 football clubs. It was set up back then to deflect the public attention away from politics. Two annual football tournaments: the Crown Prince Cup in 1956 and the King Cup a year later were established for this.

However, it was the Arab Spring in 2011 that really worried the Saudi monarchy. Uprisings in Yemen and Bahrain and the possibility of these could spread to the Kingdom, saw them dramatically increase funding for sporting events. King Salman and the Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman (MBS) created the Saudi Super Cup and the Prince Muhammed bin Salman League to add to the growing list of major football events in the Kingdom.

Regional Rivalries

Whilst the Gulf Nations have been marketing their investments as economic opportunities to diversify their economies, the undeniable fact is that all the Gulf Nations have long-standing and deep rooted rivalries amongst each other. Regional integration was amongst the aims of the GCC when it was launched in 1981. But the historical rivalry saw them continue competing with each other. When Saudi Arabia invested in oil refineries, the other Gulf Nations built similar facilities, even when economically they would never make a profit due to their small populations. This competition in the region eventually spread to building ports, luxury airlines, international airports, universities and now sports.

Qatar's Aspire Zone, a 250-hectare sporting complex in Doha and its 2010 victory to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, triggered intense competition from Saudi Arabia and the UAE as Qatar was attracting global attention and both nations then began making huge investments in the sports world. Abu Dhabi via its Sovereign Wealth Fund and Dubai through Emirates Airlines, as well as the national carrier, Etihad, acquired some of the world's most lucrative football teams in the world. Saudi Arabia on the other hand launched an ambitious sports policy around its NEOM City project, a huge initiative under construction that features a modern new city with an ultramodern sports city. Just last year, Saudi Arabia acquired Britain's Newcastle United for which Saudi Minister of Sports Abdulaziz Bin Turki said, "The

sky's the limit when it comes to hosting sports events.”[1] Saudi officials have also proposed holding the FIFA World Cup every two years in the Kingdom.[2]

Sports washing?

Western media outlets and human rights groups accuse Saudi Arabia of using sports to deflect from its human rights record. The grisly murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi tarnished the Saudi Crown Prince's image and there is no doubt he is on a campaign to improve his public image. But Saudi Arabia's image has been problematic well before the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Saudi Arabia has for long been viewed by much of the world as backward, conservative, the oppressor of women, supporter of terrorism as well as spreading Wahabism around the world for decades. Criticism against Saudi Arabia is not new and many of the claims are decades old and go well beyond human rights.

Many of Saudi Arabia's sports investments, including the LIV Golf league, are funded through its Sovereign Investment Fund. Established back in 1971, the fund manages \$480 billion in assets. Its major investments are not sports, but include the Saudi National Bank and the Saudi Telecommunication Co. The fund is also in charge of the country's mega-development project Vision 2030, at the centre of which is the NEOM initiative. Saudi investments in LIV Golf, which total \$2 billion, are part of the Vision 2030 campaign. Western companies, associations, sponsors and sports leagues can only wish they had such resources. The controversy around LIV Golf mostly stems from the fact that it has abundant financial resources that enable it to outbid its rivals in attracting the world's best players. To put the LIV into perspective, Phil Mickelson won \$94 million in total prize money over his two-decade PGA career. He is reportedly being paid up to \$200 million to join the LIV![3]

Whilst golf is a popular sport in the developed world, unlike football, it is seen as a luxury sport associated with the rich. LIV Golf's real threat is in its ability to disrupt the status quo in this established industry. By attempting to attract the golf world's best players as well as its fans and communities, LIV Golf threatens to monopolise the sport. With Saudi and its gulf rivals targeting football, entertainment and other sports, they threaten the status quo across the sports world. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE are reshaping the world of international sports and are looking to dominate the environment in which professional players compete.

This controversy over sport investment shows the Gulf nations have ample resources to dominate global industries in order to build their own image and protect their rule. This use of power, however, is absent when it comes to political issues or protecting the ummah across the world. Western corporations complain when the Gulf nations use their wealth, as they cannot compete with their wealth, but this same strategy is not used against the West on other issues. What this episode shows is when it comes to defending their monarchies and rule, they will spend the Ummah's wealth and challenge Western organisations. When it comes to politics and issues such as Syria, Palestine and other issues, these same rulers will implement Western political plans and become tools for them.

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[1] See, <https://twitter.com/danroan/status/1202698026906791936>

[2] [Saudi Arabia's proposal for FIFA World Cup every two years gaining support in Asia | Arab News](#)

[3] [Phil Mickelson Just Took a \\$200 Million Gamble to Try and Revolutionize Golf \(sportscasting.com\)](#)