

# Sport and the Gulf: When Saudi Arabia Leads the Way

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In September 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted the African Supercup. On the lawn of the modest Taïf stadium, this summit match of African football pitted two of Africa's greats against each other. Al-Ahly SC of Cairo, the continent's most successful club, faced the Algerian side Union Sportive de la Médina d'Alger (USMA). This new partnership signed between the Confederation of African Football (CAF) and Riyadh meets several agendas. From a demographic point of view, it is a reminder that since the second half of the 20th century, Saudi Arabia has been a prime migration destination for many African populations. Basically, the five-year agreement between African football's governing body and Riyadh symbolizes an agreement of circumstances. On the one hand, it responds to Saudi Arabia's need for power. On the other, it aims to consolidate the stature of CAF's influential president, businessman Patrice Motsope (Aarons & Molina, 2023). This partnership punctuates the good relations maintained between the brother-in-law of the South African President and the Saudi authorities. It bears witness to Riyadh's keen interest in African markets.

## **Sport, the Product of a Kingdom in Search of Immediate Solutions**

Seen from Riyadh, this agreement more broadly symbolizes the policy of seduction developed by the regime with key institutions on the international sporting scene and with regard to influential players.

For the monarchy, the aim is to respond to the need for socioeconomic reforms aimed at developing a model that is less dependent on oil revenues, and to regain its position as a power through the use of new languages. Sport is an integral part of this project. This movement is the result of the enthronement of King Salman bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud in 2015. Unlike his predecessor, his half-brother King Abdullah, who was already projecting a reformist vision in the management of the kingdom's affairs, the new monarch benefits from the power of his clan and, what is more, from his stature developed as the governor of Riyadh for more than forty years. The most influential prince of the dynasty still alive, now monarch, is in a strong position to drive this vital transition for the kingdom. In practice, this new dynamic is based on a change in the form of decision-making at the head of the country. Since the death of the kingdom's founder, Abdelaziz bn Abdelrahman Al-Saud, in 1953, decision-making has been based on a collegial sharing of power, but with King Salman it is now concentrated in the hands of the monarch and his inner circle. The aim is to establish a strong foundation for the reforms needed to renew Saudi power. For Riyadh, stability remains the watchword. With this in mind, King Salman is using his legitimacy to introduce his favourite son, Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud (MbS), into the political arena. Minister of Defence in 2015, he was promoted to the rank of Crown Prince in 2017, before being elevated in 2022 to the title of Prime Minister, a title generally given to the monarch. The young prince needs to be recognized as a man of reform in order to increase his political legitimacy in the eyes of the ruling family and Saudi society in general. Mohammed bin Salman must have the political capital to dominate, in order to appear as the future master of Saudi Arabia, in preparation for his accession to the title of king.

For the King, by appointing his son as his successor, he is choosing to make a generational leap in order to preserve political stability and strengthen the power of the regime. In line with these strategic manoeuvres, the autocratic nature of the regime was accentuated against a backdrop of neo-liberal reforms. This transition enabled the new strongman to shed the moral burdens required by the religious establishment in order to accelerate the liberalization of the Saudi economic system. The Vision 2030 presented with great fanfare by MbS in 2016, is the very expression of this. The aim of this plan is to give the kingdom a new direction, establishing a guideline for breaking with its vital but “sickly” dependence on oil resources, making the sustainability of its economic model nil, by encouraging the kingdom to open up to investors. The aim is to make the Saudi fabric more attractive and diversify the areas that generate wealth. In a kingdom where sport is very popular, but under-financed, between the need for legitimacy on the national scene and international appeal, this sector appears strategic for the new men in power, as it conveys such a glamorous image.

### **A Major Turning Point, the Kingdom's Modernization Stopped Dead in Its Tracks**

If Saudi Arabia is obliged to spend such sums to join the leading circuits of the sports industry, it is because the religious essence of the kingdom has had an impact on the Al-Sauds' desire to modernize. This yawning gap is the result of the hostage-taking in Mecca in 1979. While the Al-Sauds wanted to fully benefit from the financial spin-offs of hydrocarbons by modernizing the country and shedding the religious precepts that had given them their political strength and legitimized their plan for a kingdom, some of their young people, educated along these lines, chose to revolt. Once the offensive had been put down, the Al-Sauds began to have doubts, in order to preserve their power they granted numerous prerogatives to the religious establishment. After a period of openness, the kingdom turned in on itself. The tightening of public mores increased the popularity of football with a male audience. The princes who kept control of the sporting system used it as a means of maintaining social peace and promoting an area that could flatter national pride, without daring

to see it as an area of openness. It is against the backdrop of this conservative turn of events that we need to understand the financial power that Saudi Arabia is deploying in the sports industry at the turn of the 2020s. In stark contrast to the events of 1979, in order to exist and rapidly gain prominence, Riyadh finds itself obliged to strike hard. For its authorities, its project was to revive an unexploited field by creating the foundations of a sports market on its territory.

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At the same time, they see the sports industry as one of the cornerstones of their hub policy, a tool to enhance their appeal. For Riyadh, the use of sport is fundamentally about changing the language of international relations in an attempt to regain its status as a power.

### **A Sports Showcase, a Pillar of Vision 2030**

The integration of the sports industry into Saudi Arabia's political agenda began in 2018, with the country's leaders approaching the sports industry to make it more attractive. Investment intensified from 2020 onwards, marking a real turning point in Saudi Arabia's approach to sport. Against the backdrop of the global pandemic, under the impetus of its sovereign wealth fund, while the kingdom is negotiating to acquire Newcastle United, its power marks its desire to break with the established order of the international sports industry. The launch of LIV Golf, a golf circuit competing with the sport's historic institutions, reflects Riyadh's desire to dominate the world sporting scene and use it to its own advantage. The 2022 World Cup, and the end of a decade marked by Qatar's omnipresence in the media, was further evidence of Saudi Arabia's assertiveness. A month before the launch, Saudi Arabia made headlines around the world with an extraordinary announce-

ment: the country will host the 2029 Asian Winter Games at its Trojena site. This winter sports resort, which is part of the Neom project, the emblematic city of tomorrow's Saudi Arabia, is a tribute to Vision 2030. With the Qatari chapter out the way, Saudi Arabia's ambitions have only become more pronounced. Cristiano Ronaldo's first steps in the colours of Riyadh club Al-Nassr SC set the tone. Saudi Arabia is moving a step closer to its goal of overturning the hegemony of world sport by acquiring big names in football in order to increase its centrality on the world sporting stage, while continuing to consolidate the foundations for the launch of its sports market. The next transfer market, in the summer of 2023, was a historic one for the kingdom. No fewer than five players in the top 25 of the Ballon d'Or list, awarded each year to the world's footballing elite, will join the ranks of the kingdom's leading teams.

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With a population of 35 million, unlike its neighbouring monarchies which are characterized by low demographics, Saudi Arabia has the opportunity to build a wealth-generating sector through the sporting arena. With its world-class stars, Riyadh is above all buying itself the means of asserting its symbolic power to stand as a serious candidate for the organization of the World Cup. FIFA and its president are not immune to this demonstration of power. By cleverly dividing up future editions of the World Cup between the confederations, Gianni Infantino has ensured that Saudi Arabia will host the global event in 2034. Australia, the only rival left on the sidelines, having preferred to withdraw in the face of Saudi Arabia's strike force. After a sporting year in 2023 that was, in more ways than one, Saudi Arabia's year, in 2024, the effervescence of its policy has subsided somewhat. In the shadow of the repeated horrors of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the fear

of its regional expansion, behind the scenes in sport, Saudi Arabia continues to invest to keep up the pace in terms of image to maintain its sports hub. Its base continues to grow and spans multiple sports to appeal to audiences from different cultural areas, in order to internationalize the kingdom's draw. Its offer is the very expression of this: after football, golf, horseracing, Formula 1, cycling, rallying, boxing and e-sport, the kingdom wishes to assert its domination in cricket, mixed martial arts (MMA) and tennis, to globalize its offer even further.

But this policy comes at a cost. Behind the marketing and the opening up of the kingdom, it is still difficult to see clearly because business in this sector is changing so fast. On the sporting scene, however, Saudi Arabia's massive investment in football is a good indicator. Despite spending \$957 billion in the kingdom in 2023 (Deloitte, 2023), according to the first figures published in 2024, the attractiveness of its new showcase is not good. In its first prestigious season, the Saudi Pro League saw a 10% drop in attendance (Abuljadayed, 2024). This effect may seem surprising, but it can be analyzed as the backlash of an image policy tempered by measured sporting interest on the field. However, we must avoid jumping to conclusions. Far from the polished clips of the communication agencies, it nevertheless testifies to the structural weaknesses of Vision 2030, and the uncertainties of its possible success remain numerous given its reliance on a foreign clientele. This case illustrates the extent to which reconciling national and international agendas remains a difficult challenge for all GCC countries.

### **GCC Countries in the Shadow of Saudi Hyperactivity**

With the exception of Kuwait, which was stopped dead in its tracks by Iraq in 1990, Saudi Arabia was thirty years behind its neighbouring monarchies. Saudi hyperactivism gives the impression that this yawning gap is now a thing of the past. It is in the shadow of Riyadh that its monarchies continue at their sporting pace to keep their political project afloat. Every autumn, the sporting circuits make a comeback in the region. In Dubai, high-profile events take place in the city to perpetuate the appeal of the emirate's neoliberal project. Qatar maintains this

part of its active influence in order to remain a serious contender to host new major championships and preserve this cog in its web of soft power. It preserves its role as a player. In 2024, when it hosted the Asian Cup of Nations football tournament, Qatar once again cultivated its reputation as a protector of Arab societies by promoting the Palestinian cause. The Asian Cup was won again by its team after their slump at their World Cup. In Abu Dhabi, sport continues to assert itself as one of the driving forces behind its network, enabling it to increase its economic power through new markets. In 2023, it will be in Brazil, in the state of Bahia, where its financial sports apparatus has taken root through the acquisition of a refinery and the city's football club. Finally, in Bahrain, as in the Sultanate of Oman, the use of the sports industry is still part of the agenda, with the aim of increasing the attractiveness of countries weakened by a continuous fall in oil production.

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In 2024, sport remains a means of exerting influence in line with the geopolitical aims of each mon-

archy, which are largely dependent on their financial and demographic base. In the Gulf, from local to international level, since the 1970s, sport has been the expression of the power of authoritarian systems. Even if sportwashing is not the intended aim, the positive image conveyed by the sports industry benefits the Gulf states, and tends to make the harm done to human rights less visible. However, in an area rife with climatic extremes, from aridity to sudden bouts of heavy rain, the main threat remains climate change, which could become increasingly apparent in the future and make the Gulf a hostile area for any intensive physical activity, and even, according to scientific projections, for human life (Dutton , 2023). As a sign of these climatic limitations, in February 2024, a stage of the Tour of Oman had to be curtailed due to flooding caused by the heavy weather.

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