

Sports As Soft Power : Saudi Arabia As A Case Study (2015-2024).

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by
JONATHAN MORRIS AZUBUIKE in the department of
History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of
Benin, under my supervision

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my Heavenly Father, the Almighty God, whose strength lifts me and carries me forward.

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My sincere gratitude is to God almighty, for his unfailing, unwavering and ever present love, support, guidance and empowerment. It is ONLY by his grace and strength that I have been able to bring this work into fruition. And all I say that may his name ALONE be praised forever, Amen.

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CHAPTER ONE

Sports As Soft Power : Saudi Arabia As A Case Study (2015-2024).

Background to the Study

The concept of diplomacy has become a vital tool for states in the international system, enabling them to achieve their foreign policies through peaceful means.¹ Unlike resorting to wars, countries are now leveraging diplomatic means to promote their interests, and this is evident in the Middle Eastern region, where countries like Saudi Arabia have adopted diplomatic strategies to engage with the world.² Saudi Arabia's diplomatic history is deeply rooted in its strategic location, vast oil reserves, and Islamic significance, which have collectively shaped its interactions with other nations.³

The kingdom's diplomatic path started to take form in the early 20th century, following its establishment in 1932 by King Abdulaziz Al Saud.⁴ Its early diplomatic efforts were focused on securing its independence and authority and gaining recognition from the global community.⁵ To accomplish this, King Abdulaziz set up diplomatic ties with the United Kingdom in 1927 and later on with the United States in 1931, aiming to develop his country and protect its borders through strategic partnerships.⁶ These early diplomatic efforts laid the groundwork for Saudi Arabia's future relations with other countries.

After World War II, Saudi Arabia strengthened its diplomatic ties with the United States, especially regarding oil interests and regional security.⁷ In 1945, the Kingdom became a founding member of the United Nations, marking a significant landmark in its diplomatic history.⁸ This membership allowed Saudi Arabia to take on a more active role in both regional and global matters, using its position to defend its interests and connect with other nations. During the Cold War, the Kingdom maintained a close relationship with the United States, and often supported American interests in the region.⁹ The country also played a key role in regional organizations, such as the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which further established it as a leading power in the Middle East.¹⁰

A turning point in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy came with the discovery of oil in 1938 by the California-Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC).¹¹ The discovery of oil in 1938 transformed Saudi Arabia's economy and elevated its diplomatic influence. Its vast oil reserves enabled the kingdom to become a founding member of key organizations such as OPEC and the Arab League, strengthen its international presence, and safeguard its national interests.¹² In addition to its oil reserves, Saudi Arabia's geographical location has also had a lasting impact on its diplomatic relations.¹³ Located at the crossroads of the Middle East, the kingdom has used this strategic location to strengthen ties with diverse nations across the globe.¹⁴ Saudi Arabia's strategic location has enabled it to play a crucial role in

regional affairs, and its diplomatic efforts have been shaped by its desire to promote stability and security in the region.

In recent years, sports diplomacy has become a key element of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, highlighting its wider goals to diversify the economy, boost tourism, and strengthen its global soft power.¹⁵ Through organizing international sports events, investing in worldwide sports franchises, and collaborating with well-known athletes and sports organizations, the kingdom aims to enhance its international profile, encourage economic growth, and advance its national interests.¹⁷ Saudi Arabia's commitment to using sports to demonstrate its influence to the world is clear, and its activities in this area cannot be overlooked. Through these efforts, the kingdom has become a key player in the international system, using its oil reserves, strategic location, and Islamic significance to promote its interests and interact with the world.¹⁸

This research seeks to explore more about Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a tool for soft power and a strategy in modern diplomacy.

Aim and objectives

The aim of this work is the study of Sports as soft power using Saudi Arabia as a case study, and the specific objectives are:

1. to conceptualize soft power and sports diplomacy

2. to examine the history of sports in Saudi Arabia
3. to examine Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy.
4. to assess the impacts and effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's sports soft power.

Scope of the Study

This study examines the period from 2015 to 2024. The year 2015 was selected as the starting point because it represented a key change in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, with a greater focus on soft power and public diplomacy.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a historical methodology, drawing on both primary and secondary sources to provide a comprehensive analysis.

Primary Sources

The research will utilize primary sources such as academic journals and research studies, data from sports governing bodies, annual reports from sports organizations, as well as news articles and press releases.

Secondary Sources

Secondary materials, including books, scholarly journal articles, newspapers, and credible online resources, will also be consulted to gather broader insights and contextual understanding of the subject matter.

Literature Review

Over time, research on Saudi Arabia and its use of soft power has increased. These studies provide the foundation for this research. However, it is important to note that none of them offers a complete and detailed analysis of the topic. Therefore, this study aims to go beyond what has already been explored. The first work considered is Oleg Shaltaev's master's thesis, *Sport and Soft Power: The Case of Sport as a Tool of Immigrant Integration in Sweden*.¹⁹ This thesis examines how sports can help integrate immigrants into Swedish society, promoting social cohesion and building soft power. Using examples such as Dalkurd Football Club and Zlatan Ibrahimović's career, the study demonstrates how sports foster mutual understanding and strengthen society. While Shaltaev's research is insightful, it does not specifically explore how a country like Saudi Arabia employs sports to enhance its influence. This study will expand on Shaltaev's ideas but focus specifically on Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a tool of soft power, an area that has not yet been thoroughly examined.

Another important work is Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall's book, *Power in International Politics*.²⁰ This book examines how power works in global politics and international relations. The authors argue that power is more than just control or domination, and they divide it into four forms: compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive power. This framework helps explain how power works in different settings and how it shapes global outcomes, relations among states, and interactions between institutions and social groups. While the book gives a broad and useful understanding of power, it does not give much attention to the idea of soft power or show how Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, have used it to gain attention and respect worldwide. This research aims to fill that gap by providing a detailed study of Saudi Arabia's soft power strategies, especially through sports.

Additionally, the book by Nicholas Burton and Michael L. Naraine, *Sport and Saudi Arabia: Mimetic Isomorphism, Soft Power, and Disempowerment*,²¹ will be useful for this research. The book explores the close connection between sports, soft power, and society in Saudi Arabia. It demonstrates how the country uses sports to enhance soft power and improve its international image, while also highlighting potential negative effects on local communities and groups. The book further discusses how Saudi Arabia's sports policies follow and align with global trends. However, it does not examine the actual impact or effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's sports-based soft power, which is the focus of this study.

Similarly, Najwa AlSaeed's article, "Sports Diplomacy in Arab Countries: Sports as Soft Power in Foreign Policy,"²² will also form a foundation for this research. The article illustrates how sports can serve as a soft power tool within the foreign policies of Arab nations, showing how it promotes national interests, fosters partnerships, and strengthens international reputations. It also examines how sports diplomacy can encourage dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding between countries, providing examples of successful sports diplomacy initiatives in the Arab world. However, the article does not fully explain the concepts of soft power and sports diplomacy, which this research aims to clarify.

Additionally, Aaron Ettinger's article, "Saudi Arabia, Sports Diplomacy and Authoritarian Capitalism in World Politics,"²³ examines how Saudi Arabia uses sports as a means of diplomacy and soft power in international relations. It explores the intersection of sports, politics, and economics, and shows how the country's authoritarian capitalist system influences its sports diplomacy and global role. The article also considers the broader effects of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy on world politics, international cooperation, and the nation's global image. However, it does not evaluate the actual effectiveness or impact of Saudi Arabia's sports-based soft power, which is the focus of this study.

Similarly, G. Jarvie's book, "Sport, Soft Power and Cultural Relations,"²⁴ will also be useful for this research. The

book explores how sports can serve as a tool for fostering international connections, promoting cultural exchange, and enhancing a country's global image. Jarvie demonstrates how sports can bridge political and cultural gaps, helping countries build understanding and cooperation. He also highlights the role of sports in international cultural relations. However, Jarvie does not clearly define soft power or sports diplomacy, nor does he specifically address Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy, which this study aims to examine in detail.

Additionally, Jonathan Grix's study, "Of Mechanisms and Myths: Conceptualising States' 'Soft Power' Strategies through Sports Mega-Events,"²⁵ will be a useful source for this research. His work examines how governments leverage major sports events to project soft power. It explores the concepts and frameworks behind soft power strategies, showing how hosting sports mega-events can enhance a nation's international reputation, influence global perceptions, and strengthen diplomatic relationships. However, like Jarvie, Grix does not specifically analyze Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy, nor does he assess the impact or effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a soft power tool, gaps that this research seeks to address.

Finally, V.V. Romanov's article, "Historical Aspects of the Use of High Achievement Sports in the Implementation of the Soft Power Concept,"²⁶ also provides support for this study. Romanov investigates the historical role of elite sports as a means of demonstrating soft power, illustrating how countries

have used sports to improve their image, shape public opinion, and foster international relationships. He provides examples and case studies that show how the use of sports as a soft power instrument has evolved over time. Nevertheless, Romanov does not specifically examine Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy, which is another gap this research aims to fill.

Chapterization

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the idea of sports diplomacy and explains why it is becoming more important in international relations. It gives an overview of how Saudi Arabia has increasingly turned to sports as a way to promote its image and achieve its goals on the global stage. The chapter also lays the foundation for the study by stating the research questions, aims, and the method used in the research.

Chapter 2: Conceptualizing Soft Power and Sports Diplomacy

This chapter will focus on defining and explaining the key concepts of soft power and sports diplomacy. It will explore how soft power differs from traditional forms of influence, such as military or economic power, and highlight how countries use culture, values, and sports to enhance their global image. The

chapter will also explain the mechanisms through which sports can serve as a diplomatic tool, including international competitions, sports investments, and cultural exchange programs. By establishing a conceptual foundation, this chapter sets the stage for understanding how sports become a strategic instrument in international relations.

Chapter 3: Saudi Arabia's Sports Diplomacy

In this chapter, the focus will shift to the practical application of sports diplomacy by Saudi Arabia. It will examine specific initiatives undertaken by the kingdom, such as hosting international sporting events, investing in global sports clubs, and promoting domestic sports leagues. The chapter will discuss how these initiatives align with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which aims to diversify its economy and improve its international image. It will also consider the role of government institutions, private stakeholders, and media in implementing sports diplomacy, showing how the kingdom leverages sports to build influence and establish cultural connections worldwide.

Chapter 4: Impact and Effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's Sports Soft Power.

This chapter will evaluate the outcomes of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy efforts. It will analyze both the tangible and intangible effects, such as economic benefits, improved

international perceptions, strengthened bilateral relations, and shifts in regional influence. The chapter will also discuss challenges and criticisms, including public perception, ethical concerns, and geopolitical reactions. By assessing the effectiveness of these strategies, this chapter will provide insights into how sports can function as a soft power tool and the extent to which Saudi Arabia has succeeded in enhancing its global standing through sports.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Suggestions

This chapter brings together the main findings of the study, pointing out the most important lessons from Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy. It also provides practical suggestions for decision-makers and professionals on how sports diplomacy can be used more effectively to promote national goals, improve global reputation, and encourage economic growth. Finally, it highlights areas that future research can explore and stresses the growing role sports diplomacy could play in shaping international relations.

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CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUALIZING SOFT POWER AND SPORTS DIPLOMACY.

The concept of soft power is a more recent phenomenon in the international system today, distinct from the centuries-old focus on military might as the primary determinant of a state's power.¹ Unlike earlier periods, where power was solely based on the level of "might" (military arms and ammunitions) states possessed, the modern era has seen a growing recognition of the importance of non-military forms of power.² The focus on military progress as a criterion for determining the existence of a level of power gave birth to a lawless and chaotic international society, which also led to attempted definitions of what the international system was.³ Realists like Thomas Hobbes classified it as a jungle, where stronger states seek to amass and display their power at the expense of weaker states.⁴ This unpleasant state of affairs became even more frightening due to the lack of a central authority capable of keeping the world safe from bullying and ensuring that states adhere to the laws and order of the international community.⁵

The lack of a central authority was the main reason why states in the international system constantly sought to expand their power. Since the idea of "Might is Right" dominated global politics, the strongest states tried to gain as much power as possible and avoid losing any, while also making sure that no other state became stronger than them. States that were

somewhat strong tried to show their power against smaller states and work to gain more influence to keep up with the stronger ones, while the weakest states focused only on surviving in a world full of power-hungry nations.³ The competition for hard power (military strength) among states is not something new, instead, it has existed ever since states were formed. From the Mesopotamian era to the 21st century, nations have always sought to expand, control, and dominate weaker states, constantly showing off their power in the international system.⁴

The overemphasis on military strength caused nations around the world to rely too much on building up their armies. Because the strongest countries were seen as the most powerful, less attention was given to the importance of developing soft power. Instead, most nations focused only on increasing their military capabilities, which led to a series of wars and widespread destruction. And because military strength was considered the highest measure of a nation's power, countries often went to war whenever and however they wanted, for any reason, just to show their might and flex their muscles.⁵

However, this cycle of destruction could only go on for so long. The devastation of the First World War changed the balance in the international system. It marked the start of a new era and a renewed awareness of a form of power that had existed at various times in history but had been neglected.⁶

After the war of 1914–1918, also known as the First World War, nations had to rethink their strategies to prevent the complete destruction of humanity, all in a bid prove which

country was stronger. The famous quote by Albert Einstein, "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones,"⁷ became a reality in the minds of leaders at that time. The quote clearly shows Einstein's concerns about the devastating effects of advanced warfare on human civilization. He believed that a third world war would be so catastrophic that only primitive tools would be left for future conflicts.⁸ The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, using the first-ever nuclear fission weapons called "Little Boy" and "Fat Man,"⁹ made the world realize how severe the consequences could be if military power remained the only way for states to display their strength in the international system.

The devastating atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed approximately 166,000 and 246,000 civilians and soldiers,¹⁰ marked a major turning point in the international system. The catastrophic results of these attacks made nations look for other ways to show their power, and the idea of soft power became widely accepted as a safer and less destructive alternative. This has caused a significant shift in power, with new forms of power emerging in the modern international system. Power, in its various forms, refers to the ability to influence, control, or guide the behavior, actions, or decisions of others. This influence can be applied through authority, persuasion, pressure, or force.¹¹ This multifaceted nature of power allows states to employ different strategies to achieve their objectives.

Unlike earlier periods, where military might was the primary focus, the current era has witnessed a rise in new forms of power that have transformed international relations. The over-reliance on military strength has given rise to a more balanced approach, with soft power emerging as an important form of influence. With the help of advances in information technology and globalization, soft power allows countries to spread their influence and pursue their goals beyond traditional military methods.¹²

The concept of soft power refers to the ability of a country or organization to achieve its objectives and influence others through attraction, persuasion, and cooperation, as opposed to the use of force or coercion.¹³ This type of power works by shaping the choices and behaviors of other countries through the promotion of cultural values, arts, and entertainment that appeal to them, spreading political ideas or ideologies that gain support, establishing respected international organizations and rules, and developing good relationships through diplomacy. By doing this, nations can strengthen their global image, earn trust, shape international standards, and achieve their goals without resorting to force. Soft power is subtle but highly effective, relying on the appeal of a country's culture, values, and policies rather than its military strength.¹⁴

Numerous instances show countries investing heavily in soft power tools like music, football, movies, and other forms of cultural expression, which, although seemingly minor, are effective ways of showcasing a country's power. For example,

the United States has invested significant amounts of money in creating impressive movies that display their military equipment for the world to see and fear.¹⁵ These films are crafty yet powerful mediums that states use to showcase their level of power, as they often portray the country's military capabilities and technological advancements in a positive and appealing way. Similarly, countries like South Korea have used music and entertainment to promote their culture and values globally, thereby boosting their soft power and diplomatic influence.¹⁶

Another notable example of soft power in practice is Norway, which has successfully used its diplomatic reputation to mediate peace in several conflict zones. By leveraging its reputation as a neutral and peaceful nation, Norway has been able to build trust and facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties. Through the strategic use of soft power, countries can foster positive international relationships, promote their cultural values, and pursue their objectives in a non-coercive manner.¹⁷ Today, soft power is recognized as a critical element of foreign policy, allowing nations to subtly influence the decisions of other states. And as the international system continues to evolve, it is likely that soft power will play an increasingly important role in shaping the happenings in the International System.

Technology has further amplified the effectiveness of soft power in international relations. For example, the widespread use of social media has enabled countries to expand their influence and promote their culture to a global audience, as seen in South Korea, which has also successfully used these

platforms to showcase its cultural products, including K-pop and Korean dramas, that have gained popularity worldwide.¹⁸ This has not only enhanced South Korea's global reputation but also created new opportunities for cultural exchange and cooperation.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift towards a new kind of soft power within the field of sports diplomacy, with sports becoming an important way for nations to showcase their influence by using their wide global reach and popularity to highlight their national identity, values, and accomplishments. Countries use sports as a tool to display their abilities, hospitality, and organizational skills, which helps improve their international reputation and build connections with other nations. Because sports are popular worldwide, they provide an effective platform for countries to reach a large audience and promote their interests.¹⁹

By organizing international sporting events or taking part in global competitions, countries can display their strengths and achievements while presenting a positive image to the rest of the world. We have seen situations where countries argue and compete over the right to host major international sports events, showing how highly sought-after these opportunities are. Hosting global sports events like the Olympics not only brings huge financial benefits but also gives countries a chance to demonstrate their level of power, as no weak state would be trusted with the responsibility of hosting the world in such a large event.²⁰ Countries that successfully host these events gain a sense of pride and confidence in their capabilities.

Sports also serve as a common language and shared experience, enabling countries to foster cultural exchange and people-to-people diplomacy. By bringing together athletes, fans, and nations from diverse backgrounds, sports create opportunities to promote mutual understanding, build trust, and pursue foreign policy objectives in a peaceful and collaborative way.²¹ Beyond cultural exchange, sports can also be used to advocate for global ideals. A notable example was the Black Lives Matter movement, which highlights the value and dignity of Black lives. After the murder of George Floyd, a Black American in the United States, specifically in Minneapolis, football, especially, was used to showcase the importance of Black lives. Footballers each knelt down for a few seconds to honor George Floyd and acknowledge the significance of Black lives.²² Through these combined aspects, sports diplomacy allows countries to project their soft power, strengthen their international reputation, and achieve foreign policy goals while simultaneously promoting global understanding, peace, and development.

The concept of sports diplomacy is derived from the combination of two words, which are “sports and diplomacy”. Sports refer to physical activities or games that involve competition, skill, and strategy, which is often governed by rules and regulations. They can be played individually or in teams and include examples such as football, basketball, tennis, and swimming. Sports promote physical fitness, mental well-being, and social interaction among participants. They also help foster

a sense of community for both participants and spectators.²³ Diplomacy, on the other hand, is the practice of conducting negotiations and relationships between nations, organizations, or individuals through tactful and strategic communication. It involves the use of peaceful means to resolve conflicts, build alliances, and promote mutual understanding and cooperation.²⁴

Sports diplomacy refers to the practice of conducting peaceful relations between two or more countries, where sports form the central focus of these interactions. It involves using sports as a means to engage diplomatically, strengthen relationships, and foster understanding among nations, cultures, and communities.²⁵ This type of diplomacy provides several advantages, such as encouraging people-to-people connections, facilitating cultural exchange, and improving a country's international image. By utilizing sports, nations can build partnerships, address conflicts, and promote mutual understanding.

In spite of its numerous benefits, sports diplomacy also has some disadvantages. It can be susceptible to political tensions, nationalist biases, and cultural differences, which may weaken its intended outcomes. Sports events can also become politicized, resulting in boycotts, protests, or conflicts that harm diplomatic relations.²⁶ Additionally, sports diplomacy may have limited reach and impact, particularly among those not interested in sports. The temporary nature of sports events can also make it challenging to sustain long-term diplomatic effects. Furthermore, inequitable representation and dominance of certain sports or

nations can lead to unequal opportunities and create tensions. Despite these challenges, sports diplomacy remains a valuable tool for nations to promote their interests, build relationships, and foster global understanding.

In subsequent chapters, we will explore the Arabic region, where sports, a form of soft power, have been a major tool used to showcase strength. Specifically, we will observe Saudi Arabia, whose efforts and dedication to sports cannot be overlooked. We will also examine the means and methods through which Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a deep commitment to showcasing sports, notably football, as a means of displaying its power to the world. Additionally, we will assess the impacts and effectiveness of Saudi Arabia's sports soft power. In conclusion, this chapter provides an in-depth examination of soft power and sports diplomacy, highlighting the emergence and development of soft power, as well as the various forms it takes. It also explores the concept of sports diplomacy, its potential benefits, and limitations as a tool of international relations.

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CHAPTER THREE

SAUDI ARABIA'S SPORTS DIPLOMACY.

For many years, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries have faced negative views in the international community, especially from Western nations. These opinions were not formed recently but have been shaped by a mixture of historical conflicts, cultural differences, political struggles, and media portrayals that often presented the region in a highly negative way.¹ The roots of such views can be traced back to the colonial period, the Cold War politics, and later conflicts in the Middle East that affected how the world looked at the Arab world. Just as they had done in Africa, colonial powers like Britain and France drew artificial borders and introduced political systems that differed from the region's original structures. This created discord and instability, making relations with the West more complicated.²

One key reason for these negative impressions has been the religious and ideological gap between Islamic societies and Western secular traditions. This difference has often been exaggerated or misunderstood, leading to mistrust and reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The strong Islamic character of Arab countries was too often linked with extremism or authoritarianism, which overshadowed the region's diversity of culture, ideas, and progressive movements.³ Over the years, this

misrepresentation created suspicion and in many cases led to hostility between the West and the Arab world.

Several historical events further strengthened these negative perceptions. For example, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, marked a turning point in regional and global politics by replacing a pro-Western ruler with a religious government openly hostile to the West. This event worsened fears about Islamic values moving beyond Iran's borders and disrupting the Middle East.⁴ Also, the September 11 attacks in 2001, in which terrorists hijacked airplanes and struck the United States, killing nearly 3,000 people, shocked the world and brought the Middle East and Arab nations under intense criticism. Given that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens, the kingdom's reputation suffered significant damage despite its government's official attitude against terrorism.⁵

Other conflicts that have strengthened the negative view of the region by the West include Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which was accompanied by the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Both events unleashed repeated cycles of violence, destruction, and humanitarian suffering across the region. Over the years, the Syrian Civil War and the prolonged fighting in Yemen have also worsened the crisis, creating further complications as both regional and global powers became engaged in proxy wars.⁶ In many accounts, these wars are presented as evidence of instability, extremism, and authoritarian rule in the Middle East. However, these views often make the situation seem simpler than it really is, leaving

out the heavy human suffering and the variety of opinions and experiences in these societies.

The rise of extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS added to the destruction. Al-Qaeda, formed during the Soviet–Afghan war, carried out violent attacks such as the 1998 bombings of the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed more than 200 people and left thousands injured.⁷ Years later, ISIS emerged and in 2014 declared a caliphate across Iraq and Syria. The group became notorious for mass killings, slavery, and terror attacks around the world, including the 2015 Paris bombings that claimed about 130 lives and the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting.⁸ Although these groups represent only a very small fraction of Muslims, Western media such as Hollywood often portrayed them as the symbol of Islam, fueling Islamophobia, a fear and discrimination against Muslims that spread throughout many Western societies. This trend was worsened by the media constantly linking terrorism to Islam, failing to separate the actions of extremists from the wider, diverse Muslim and Arab populations. As a result, Islamophobia became a common problem, shown in prejudice, fear, and discrimination in the social and political life of many Western countries.⁹

Because of these different factors, diplomatic relations between Arab nations and the West, especially Saudi Arabia, have often been tense. The kingdom was frequently described as conservative and dangerous, ignoring its culture, economic strength, and contributions to world development. In recent

years, however, Arab states have made efforts to change this perception. By investing in cultural projects, economic reforms, and soft power tools, they aim to present a more positive and modern image to the world.

Saudi Arabia, being the largest and one of the most powerful Arab nations, has adopted a broad plan to rebuild its global reputation. Geographically, it is located in Western Asia and covers most of the Arabian Peninsula, sharing borders with Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. To its West lies the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf to its east, placing the country at the intersection of Africa, Asia, and Europe. This unique position has long made Saudi Arabia a key player in both regional and global matters.¹⁰ The kingdom covers about 2.15 million square kilometers and has a diverse landscape, from the vast Rub' al Khali (Empty Quarter) desert to the Asir mountain ranges, and fertile plains along the Red Sea coast. Riyadh, its capital, has grown from a small desert town into a large modern city, showing how quickly the country has developed.¹¹

The history of modern Saudi Arabia began in the early 1920s with Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, a strong and determined leader from the central region of Nejd. At that time, the Arabian Peninsula was made up of scattered tribes and small kingdoms with no central authority. Ibn Saud united these scattered tribes and kingdoms into one state, using both military campaigns and political alliances. His most important victory came in 1924 when he captured the holy city of Mecca from the Hashemite

rulers. A year later, in 1925, he took control of Medina and the entire Hejaz region. Taking full control over the two holiest cities of Islam gave Ibn Saud great religious influence and strengthened his authority among Arab and Muslim populations. Years later, Ibn Saud continued to bring more regions under his control. In 1932, after uniting the Nejd, Hejaz, Al-Hasa, and other territories, he declared the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, becoming its first king.¹² The new kingdom was based on a close relationship between the royal family and religious leaders who followed a strict form of Sunni Islam called Wahhabism. This partnership between the rulers and the religious leaders became the main structure that held the country together.

At its early stage, the country had very few resources and mostly depended on agriculture, trade, and religious tourism. However, everything changed in 1938, when oil was discovered in large amounts in the eastern province of Dhahran. This discovery came through a partnership with American oil companies and marked the beginning of a new era. Several years later, oil production increased rapidly, and Saudi Arabia began to earn massive income from its oil exports.¹³ The wealth from oil allowed the government to modernize the country, building roads, airports, hospitals, schools, and cities. Years later, Saudi Arabia turned from a poor desert kingdom into one of the richest countries in the world. In 1953, Saudi Arabia's first leader, Ibn Saud, died, and his successor, King Saud, took over. And in 1964, the crown passed to King Faisal. During his tenure, King

Faisal introduced important reforms in education and development while maintaining close ties with religious leaders.

One major turning point for Saudi Arabia came in 1979, a year that shook Saudi Arabia. Firstly, a group of religious extremists stormed the Grand Mosque in Mecca, taking hostages and calling for the removal of the royal family. The siege lasted for two weeks and ended only after a violent battle inside Islam's holiest site.¹⁴ This incident shocked the kingdom and the entire Muslim world. In response, the Saudi government became more strict and allowed religious leaders to have more control in order to avoid more trouble in the future. That same year, the Islamic Revolution in Iran overthrew the Shah, a Western-backed king, and replaced him with a religious government led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The new Iranian regime openly condemned Saudi Arabia and encouraged Islamic revolutions across the region. This created tension between the two countries and increased Saudi Arabia's fears of political and religious uprisings.¹⁵

In 1990, a new crisis began when Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded its neighbor, Kuwait. This invasion caused serious concern in Saudi Arabia because it feared that Iraq might try to invade it next. To protect itself, the Saudi government made a very important decision, it asked the United States and other Western countries to send their troops to Saudi Arabia. These foreign soldiers were there to help defend the kingdom and also to push Iraq out of Kuwait. This was a major moment in Saudi history because it was the first time that large numbers

of non-Muslim soldiers were allowed to stay in the country, which is home to the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina. While this decision helped keep Saudi Arabia safe, it also made many Muslims angry. Some felt that it was completely wrong to let foreign troops, especially non-Muslims, enter and stay in such a sacred land. One of the strongest critics of this move was Osama bin Laden, a Saudi citizen who later created the terrorist group Al-Qaeda. He believed that the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia was an insult to Islam and used it as one of his main reasons for turning against both the Saudi government and the West.¹⁶ As the 1990s went on, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and extremist Islamic groups became more tense. These groups accused the Saudi rulers of working too closely with Western countries and betraying Islamic values. The anger and tension kept increasing throughout the 1990s and eventually resulted in the September 11, 2001 attacks, an event that shocked the world and reshaped global perceptions of Saudi Arabia.

The attack was carried out mostly by hijackers from Saudi Arabia, which caused many to question whether the kingdom had any connection to or support for terrorism. Although the Saudi government has consistently denied any official role, these events led to intense diplomatic scrutiny and criticism, particularly in the United States and Western Europe. Another incident that further damaged Saudi Arabia's image was the 2018 assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a well-known critic of the Saudi government, who was violently killed inside

the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The international community widely condemned the killing, and the investigations pointed to high-ranking Saudi officials, sparking a diplomatic crisis and tarnishing the kingdom's human rights reputation.¹⁷

Since 2015, Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen has raised serious humanitarian concerns. The conflict has caused a large number of civilian deaths, destroyed important infrastructure, and led to widespread famine. Human rights organizations have accused the Saudi-led coalition of targeting civilian areas such as hospitals and schools. These actions have drawn allegations of war crimes, hurting Saudi Arabia's moral authority and international reputation. Even domestically, Saudi Arabia has faced criticism for its human rights record, including restricting freedom of speech and assembly, limiting political dissent, and treating women and minorities unequally. Although some reforms, like lifting the ban on women driving, have been introduced, the kingdom is still seen by many as an authoritarian state with limited political freedoms.¹⁸

Historically, Saudi Arabia's foreign relations and economic influence have been heavily dependent on oil. As one of the world's largest oil producers and a leading OPEC member, the kingdom wielded significant influence over global energy markets, adjusting oil prices by controlling production. This economic strength helped maintain ties with major Western powers, particularly the United States, which relied on Saudi oil in exchange for political and military support. Saudi Arabia also used its oil wealth to provide foreign aid and fund development

projects, boosting its international influence. In 1973, during the Yom Kippur War, Saudi Arabia led OPEC in cutting oil exports to countries supporting Israel, particularly the U.S. and other Western nations. This caused a global oil crisis and highlighted Saudi Arabia's rising role as a major player on the world stage. However, despite its growing wealth and influence, the kingdom continued to face significant challenges.¹⁹

However, the kingdom's overreliance on oil revenues posed significant risks, including being affected by changing oil prices and having a limited variety of industries. To address these challenges and improve its international image, Saudi Arabia launched Vision 2030, an ambitious plan which was aimed at transforming the economy by developing new sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and sports. A centre of this vision has been the introduction of sports diplomacy, a strategic effort initiated under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman starting in 2016. Seeing the worldwide influence of sports as a form of soft power, Saudi Arabia started putting substantial resources into sports facilities, hosting international events, and acquiring sports teams at home and overseas.²⁰ These efforts are designed to present the kingdom as a modern and open society while drawing in foreign investment and boosting tourism.

The purchase of Newcastle United Football Club in the English Premier League is a significant development, highlighting Saudi Arabia's strong interest in international football. The move drew widespread attention and sparked debate, with supporters seeing it as a strategic economic

investment, while critics questioned the kingdom's human rights record and accused it of using sports for "sportswashing", a practice aimed at improving a country's image through high-profile sports involvement. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia established the LIV Golf tour, offering massive prize money and signing top players to compete directly with the established PGA Tour.²¹ This move was not just about sports, instead, it was a strategic effort to boost the kingdom's influence and global reputation through sports as a form of soft power.

Saudi Arabia also hosts major sporting events, such as the Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, which showcases the kingdom's ability to organize large international competitions. Additionally, the partnership with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has brought popular wrestling shows to the country, attracting millions of viewers from all over the globe. Also, Football matches and tournaments are held regularly, and Saudi Arabia has shown interest in hosting future FIFA World Cups, showing its goal to become a major hub for international sports.²²

Besides sports, Saudi Arabia has focused on cultural and development projects to improve its image and influence. One example is NEOM, a futuristic city meant to attract technology and innovation from around the world. The country has also expanded entertainment options, such as cinemas, concerts, and music festivals. Saudi's social reforms, especially in the area of women's rights, show that change is happening gradually, though some challenges remain. Also, in the region, Saudi

Arabia works closely with groups like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to promote trade, cooperation, and diplomatic talks. The kingdom has also joined peace efforts in the Middle East, including efforts linked to the Abraham Accords.²³

Internationally, Western countries have had mixed reactions, including both cooperation and criticism. The United States, Europe, and Asia maintain strong economic ties with Saudi Arabia, particularly in energy and security sectors, while continuing to advocate for human rights improvements. Saudi Arabia's investments in renewable energy and green technologies also put it in a better position for a post-oil economic future, especially with the West. However, many people still question whether the reforms are real and worry about the ethical issues of Saudi Arabia's active sports and cultural programs.²⁴ Inside the country, opinions vary, some support fast modernization and more international involvement, while others want to carefully protect traditional values.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia has a long and complex history that shaped its relationship with the West, often affected by conflicts, cultural differences, and negative stereotypes. Modern Saudi Arabia was founded by Ibn Saud in the 1920s, who united tribes and established the kingdom, later transformed by oil wealth and modernization. The country faced major challenges,

including the 1979 Grand Mosque siege, tensions with Iran, the Gulf Wars, and global criticism after 9/11 and the Khashoggi killing. Domestically, human rights and political freedoms remain limited, though some reforms have been made. Economically, Saudi Arabia has relied heavily on oil but is now diversifying through Vision 2030, investing in tourism, entertainment, sports, and renewable energy. Sports diplomacy, cultural projects like NEOM, and social reforms aim to improve the kingdom's global image, while it continues to balance international relations, internal modernization, and traditional values.

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CHAPTER FOUR

IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SAUDI ARABIA'S SPORTS SOFT POWER.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has often been viewed negatively by the international community. Many perceive the kingdom as rigid in its beliefs, quick to implement strict decisions, and focused mainly on preserving its traditional structures instead of actively participating in global affairs. The strict Islamic laws and conservative political system in Saudi Arabia have often been opposed to the principles valued by Western nations. These divergences have put pressure on the kingdom's relations with the West, resulting in economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and persistent criticism. Consequently, Saudi Arabia has developed a reputation as a country reluctant to conform to international standards.¹

To improve its international image and face these challenges, Saudi Arabia has started taking a more careful and diplomatic approach. One important way it is doing this is through sports diplomacy. The government knows that sports are popular worldwide and can bring people from different countries and cultures together. And so by spending large amounts on sports, Saudi Arabia has made friends, formed partnerships, and changed how the world sees the country. It has hosted international sports events, invested in global sports teams, and invited top athletes from football, golf, boxing, and racing to compete in the kingdom. These efforts are helping

Saudi Arabia become a well-known place for international sports. This sports investment is also an important part of Saudi Arabia's bigger development plan known as Vision 2030.² The goal of this plan is to reduce the country's heavy dependence on oil and grow other parts of the economy like tourism, entertainment, and culture. Sports played and still plays a major role in this process. Hosting global sporting events brings in foreign visitors, creates jobs, and gives Saudi Arabia positive media attention. It also allows the country to show the world that it is changing, especially with new reforms such as encouraging women's participation in sports and public life, which helps to counter old and negative views about Saudi society.³

These recent developments in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has shown the world that Saudi Arabia has decided to turn a new leaf and has adopted soft power as a means of influencing happenings in the international system, rather than relying only on the use of force. In order to progress, soft power, as defined in the previous chapter, refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction rather than force or coercion. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the kingdom's soft power strategy has focused on using sports to promote a more positive and modern image of the country. The impact of Saudi Arabia's sport diplomacy is multifaceted, but we would be examining some key ones, and they include;

Youth Engagement and National Identity Building

One of the most significant effects of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy is its ability to engage young people and build national pride. With most of the population under 30, the government recognizes the importance of involving youth in the country's growth through sports and recreation. Saudi Arabia has been creating opportunities for young people to participate in meaningful activities by developing sports facilities like King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah and the Riyadh Sports Boulevard, supporting local programs such as the Saudi Women's Football League, and promoting homegrown athletes like footballer Salem Al-Dawsari and sprinter Mohamed Al-Qarni.⁴

These initiatives also bring people together and strengthen national pride, particularly when Saudi athletes compete on international stages, such as the national football team at the FIFA World Cup, or when internationally renowned stars like Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema play in domestic leagues. The presence of top global athletes inspires young Saudis, increasing their interest in sports, fitness, and personal discipline while motivating them to pursue high standards both on and off the field.⁵ This domestic influence complements Saudi Arabia's international sports initiatives, fostering a strong national identity and promoting ambition, excellence, and achievement among the youth.

Economic Diversification and Growth

Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy also plays an important role in the kingdom's economic development. As part of Vision 2030, the government has set clear goals to diversify the national economy. This means reducing the country's heavy reliance on oil revenues, building better infrastructure, and growing industries outside of oil. The sports sector has become a key part of this plan to change and strengthen the economy. One way the government is doing this is by developing local sports leagues and building new stadiums across the country. These projects create many new jobs for people, from athletes and coaches to stadium staff and event organizers. At the same time, Saudi Arabia is encouraging foreign investment in sports and entertainment, bringing in money and expertise from other countries to help grow these sectors. This approach has helped build a more sustainable economy that does not depend only on oil.

A good example of this is the Saudi Pro League, the country's top football league. The league has grown a lot in recent years and has attracted big sponsorship deals and media rights contracts that bring in large sums of money. The league has also gained attention from football fans all over the world because Saudi clubs have signed famous international football players. For instance, Cristiano Ronaldo, one of the world's most well-known footballers, joined a Saudi club in 2023. In 2024, Karim Benzema, another global football star, followed.⁶ Having players of this level in the league has helped put Saudi football on the global map. It shows the kingdom's clear effort

to raise the quality and popularity of its sports leagues, attracting more viewers and investors internationally.

Alongside this, sports tourism, people traveling to Saudi Arabia to watch or take part in sports events, has helped other parts of the economy grow as well. When big events happen, visitors need places to stay, eat, and shop. This has led to the opening of luxury hotels like the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh, designed to offer high-quality accommodation for tourists and visitors. Meanwhile, entertainment and shopping areas, such as Qiddiya, have been developed as large centers where people can enjoy various leisure activities beyond sports. Qiddiya is not just an entertainment hub; it is a project aimed at creating thousands of new jobs and business opportunities, helping diversify the economy even further. Transportation infrastructure has also seen important improvements. For example, King Fahd International Airport has been expanded and upgraded. This makes it easier for visitors to come to Saudi Arabia, and for goods and services to move around more efficiently within the country. Better transportation supports business activities and helps connect different regions, which is essential for a growing economy.⁷

All these developments work together to help Saudi Arabia create new sources of income beyond oil. They also provide many job opportunities, especially for young people, and attract foreign investors who bring in money and new skills. These factors are vital for Saudi Arabia's long-term economic growth and diversification, which are central goals of the Vision 2030

plan. In addition to these efforts, the government has focused on creating sports cities and entertainment hubs like Qiddiya, which is expected to create over 17,000 jobs when fully developed. This has made a big difference in youth employment, offering young Saudis new career paths in sports, entertainment, and related industries. Partnerships with international sports organizations have also played an important role by bringing in expertise, funding, and modern technology to support local development.

Saudi Arabia has also hosted global events that promote other important industries. For example, The Dakar Rally which is a famous and challenging off-road race that involves driving over tough desert terrain and long distances. Saudi Arabia began hosting this event in 2020, which is significant because the race attracts competitors and fans from all over the world. As a result, the country positions itself as a hub for motorsport and adventure tourism, encouraging visitors interested in extreme sports and outdoor experiences to come to the kingdom. This also helps promote the country's automotive industry by showcasing advanced vehicle technology and engineering used in such difficult races.⁸ Another important event is the Diriyah E-Prix, which is part of the global Formula E championship that features electric car racing. Saudi Arabia has hosted this race since 2018. Unlike traditional motorsport, Formula E focuses on electric-powered cars, which are more environmentally friendly. By hosting the Diriyah E-Prix, Saudi Arabia not only attracts motorsport enthusiasts but also demonstrates its commitment to

innovation in clean energy and sustainability. This event highlights the kingdom's interest in new technologies that reduce pollution and support environmental goals.⁹

Together, these events offer Saudi Arabia opportunities to display its strengths and ambitions beyond just sports. They help the country attract attention from industries like automotive manufacturing, technology, and environmental innovation, which are important for economic diversification and future growth. Overall, Saudi Arabia's use of sports diplomacy is achieving more than just international recognition. It is building the foundation for a stronger and more varied economy that can support future generations. By investing in sports and related sectors, the kingdom is working toward becoming a more modern, open, and economically resilient country.

Tourism

Furthermore, one of the most direct and measurable impacts of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy is the boost in international tourism. Originally, the kingdom was not known as a tourist destination, which is largely due to its strict societal norms, strict visa policies, and limited entertainment allowance. However, under Vision 2030, the government has made tourism a national priority, using sports as a major gateway to attract foreign visitors. Saudi Arabia has been hosting several major international sports events to attract global attention and boost tourism. One of these is the Formula One Saudi Arabian Grand

Prix, which first took place in 2021 in the city of Jeddah. Formula One is a popular worldwide racing sport, and having this race in Saudi Arabia put the country on the map for global sports fans. Another key event is the Saudi Cup, held in Riyadh. This is a horse racing competition that has been famous for being the richest in the world, with a total prize money of \$20 million. Because of the large prize, top horse racing athletes from around the world come to compete, attracting international media and visitors.

Saudi Arabia has also hosted big international boxing matches, such as the fight between Tyson Fury and Francis Ngannou in Riyadh in 2023. Tyson Fury is a well-known boxing champion, and Francis Ngannou is a famous MMA fighter, which attracted huge attention worldwide. Through this, Saudi Arabia signaled to the world that it is open to international visitors and interested in becoming a major destination for global sports and tourism. These events were designed not only to entertain but also to position Saudi Arabia as an open, welcoming, and vibrant country, and helped change how people see the country, showing it as vibrant and welcoming rather than just traditional or restrictive.¹⁰

Also, Saudi's visa requirements that were tiring and burdensome have recently been relaxed. This has been done by including the introduction of e-visas and tourist visas for citizens of over 50 countries, such as the United States, United Kingdom, and much of Europe, which has made it easier for visitors to attend these events and explore the country. Furthermore,

investments in infrastructure such as the luxury Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh, the expansion and modernization of King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, the development of the Qiddiya entertainment city near Riyadh, and the restoration of historical sites like Al-Ula, famous for its UNESCO World Heritage status, are meant to support a growing tourist economy. According to research, millions of tourists have visited the kingdom since these reforms began, especially due to the sporting events that Saudi Arabia hosts.¹¹ As a result, sports diplomacy has become an effective channel for rebranding Saudi Arabia as more than just a religious or oil-based economy. It is now being marketed as a destination for leisure, culture, and global sports experiences.

Enhancement of Global Image

The improvement in tourism has enhanced Saudi Arabia's image on the global stage, which has been a central motivation behind its sports diplomacy agenda. For decades, the kingdom has been associated with negative perceptions, including human rights issues, gender inequality, and a lack of political freedom. These concerns have often overshadowed the country's efforts to engage internationally. However, by investing heavily in sports, a universally appreciated and neutral ground in politics, Saudi Arabia has been able to project a different side of itself: one that embraces progress, inclusiveness, and global cooperation.¹² High-profile sports deals and events have allowed

Saudi Arabia to receive positive international media attention. For example, the hosting of the Diriyah ePrix, an international Formula E race near Riyadh, and the Saudi Pro League's recent signings of globally recognized football players such as Cristiano Ronaldo in 2023 have brought significant global exposure.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's partnership with international sports organizations such as FIFA, the Asian Football Confederation, and the International Olympic Committee helps show its willingness to participate actively and responsibly in global institutions.¹³ Also, these sporting efforts are often accompanied by social reforms, especially around women's participation in sports and public life. The government's encouragement of women's football teams, such as the establishment of the Saudi Women's Premier League in 2020, female athletes competing in the Olympics, and the allowance of mixed-gender attendance at stadiums, first permitted during the 2019 King's Cup final, has helped to counter the old narratives about female gender exclusion. Although critics argue that these reforms are limited and tightly controlled, they have still helped soften the country's image globally.¹⁴

Regional and Geopolitical Influence

Finally, Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy has had implications for its role in the regional and geopolitical sphere. Positioning itself as a leader in Middle Eastern sports initiatives

has made the kingdom assert soft power influence across the region. For example, Saudi Arabia has hosted major regional tournaments such as the Gulf Cup of Nations, which brings together football teams from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which in turn has fostered regional unity and cooperation. Additionally, the kingdom hosted the Islamic Solidarity Games in 2022, an event that gathers athletes from across the Islamic world, strengthening and developing relationships with other Muslim-majority nations. As Saudi Arabia tries to host major global events like the FIFA World Cup, the kingdom demonstrates its ambition to become a strong center for international sports in the Middle East. Even though the 2022 World Cup took place in Qatar, Saudi Arabia is still working to host future tournaments and other big events, such as the Asian Cup, to become a leader in regional sports.¹⁵

This use of soft power also helps Saudi Arabia manage its relationships with both Western countries and neighboring nations. For example, working with Western sports organizations like FIFA, the International Olympic Committee, and Formula One helps keep good ties with countries such as the United States and European nations. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy creates ways to work with nearby countries, like the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, through co-hosting tournaments and joint sports programs. As global alliances change and new powers like China and Russia grow, sports offer a safer and more flexible way for diplomacy. Saudi Arabia's hosting of events like Formula E racing and the Dakar

Rally, which attract people from all over the world, allows for dialogue beyond politics. This approach not only builds international partnerships but also reduces political tensions by providing shared interests and neutral spaces for cooperation.¹⁶ Despite these successes, Saudi Arabia's sports investments have also caused some negative effects. They include:

Public Perception and International Scrutiny

One of the most talked-about results of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy is the strong accusation of sportswashing. This means using sports to make the country look better to the world, while hiding ongoing problems like human rights violations.¹⁷ Saudi Arabia has spent a lot of money on sports, buying shares in famous football clubs, hosting big sports events, and starting local sports projects. These efforts have helped the country gain more attention globally, but they have also brought serious criticism. Human rights groups and critics say that all this is being done to make Saudi Arabia seem modern and open, without really fixing serious issues at home, like punishing people who speak out, limiting press freedom, and restricting women's rights.¹⁸

Some people, including business and government leaders, support Saudi Arabia's sports push. They say it helps the economy, creates jobs, and brings in tourists. But others do not trust it. They believe it's more about changing how the world sees Saudi Arabia than about making real changes inside the

country. Because of this, people around the world, especially in democratic countries, are divided. Some welcome the country's new role in sports, while others are uncomfortable or even angry. The fact that famous Western athletes and sports teams are working with Saudi Arabia has made the debate louder. Some believe it encourages cultural exchange, while others think it's wrong to support a government with serious human rights problems.¹⁹ In the end, while sports diplomacy has made Saudi Arabia more well-known globally, it has also brought greater criticism, public scrutiny, and risk to its reputation.

Stakeholder and Diplomatic Responses

The reactions of key stakeholders represent another layer of consequences. International sports federations, human rights organizations, athletes, and foreign governments have expressed varied and often different views about Saudi Arabia's growing influence in sports. For example, while some sports organizations welcome Saudi investment due to the financial backing and market potential it brings, others remain cautious, raising concerns about ethics, governance, and transparency.²⁰ Human rights groups, in particular, have been loudly vocal about the implications of awarding major sporting events to the kingdom, calling into question the legitimacy of such partnerships. In diplomatic terms, these mixed reactions have both opened and strained relationships. Some countries view Saudi Arabia's global sports presence as a strategic opportunity

for economic and political engagement, while others are more reserved, especially when public opinion in their own countries is critical of the kingdom's human rights record.²¹ Thus, stakeholder perceptions, ranging from endorsement to criticism, carry consequences for Saudi Arabia's international image and influence.

Social and Economic Consequences

Saudi Arabia's growing investment in sports diplomacy brings both social and economic challenges. On the social side, many young Saudis welcome the arrival of global sports events and famous athletes, seeing them as signs of progress. But more conservative parts of society may feel uncomfortable with these changes, especially when they seem to go against traditional values. There is also increasing public demand that these major investments should benefit everyday citizens, not just improve Saudi Arabia's image abroad.²² People want to see better local sports facilities, more job opportunities, and real chances for local talent to grow. If these benefits are only enjoyed by elites or foreign partners, public dissatisfaction could grow. Economically, while sports diplomacy supports Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goal of reducing reliance on oil, it comes with financial risks. The country has spent billions on hosting international events, building infrastructure, and buying stakes in global sports organizations.

These efforts are meant to attract tourists, create jobs, and bring in new income. But if these projects fail to deliver the expected returns, due to global market shifts or reputational damage, they could put pressure on the national budget. Most of this funding comes from the Public Investment Fund (PIF), raising concerns about opportunity cost. Critics argue that these funds might be better used for healthcare, education, or job creation. Also, the strong focus on international deals could mean less attention to local sports development, making it harder for ordinary citizens to access sports or for the country to build a strong sports culture from the ground up.²³

The Role of Social Media in Influencing Perceptions

Social media has played a major role in shaping how people see Saudi Arabia's involvement in global sports. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow news, opinions, and videos to spread very quickly across the world. When Saudi Arabia hosted big sports events or signed top athletes, clips of these moments were shared widely online, helping to promote the country's image as modern and exciting. For example, when Cristiano Ronaldo joined Al Nassr, millions of fans around the world saw videos of his welcome and his matches in Saudi Arabia, which helped boost the country's global visibility.²⁴ At the same time, social media has also become a place for strong criticism. Human rights groups, journalists, and regular users often use hashtags and viral posts to remind others of Saudi

Arabia's record on violations of freedom of speech, women's rights, and treatment of dissidents. These online discussions have turned these global events into controversial topics.

Some posts accuse the government of using sports to distract from serious issues, a practice known as "sportswashing." Because of social media, people who may never read official news reports are still able to form opinions based on what they see online. This means that the success or failure of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy is not only judged by leaders or experts, but also by millions of everyday people around the world.²⁵ In this way, social media has become a powerful tool that has supported and damaged the kingdom's efforts to improve its image through sports.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy has brought many positive changes to the country's image, economy, and global standing. By hosting major international events and investing heavily in sports infrastructure, the kingdom has attracted global attention, boosted tourism, and shown the world a more modern and ambitious side of itself. These efforts have helped move the country's identity beyond oil and religion, presenting it as a growing hub for entertainment and sports. However, the strategy is not without its downsides. There are concerns about the long-term cost of such investments, the risk of neglecting grassroots sports, and the possibility that sports are

being used to cover up deeper social issues. Reactions from global stakeholders have been mixed, some applaud the progress, while others remain critical due to human rights concerns. Social media has made these voices louder, spreading both praise and criticism across the world. Overall, while sports diplomacy has strengthened Saudi Arabia's soft power, its long-term success will depend on whether these efforts are backed by real reforms and inclusive development for both citizens and international audiences.

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CHAPTER FIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Diplomacy has replaced wars as a form of interstate relations and as a means of often replacing wars as the main method to achieve foreign achieving foreign policy objectives. Saudi Arabia is a good example because its diplomacy has been shaped by its history, religion, oil wealth, and position in the Middle East. After the kingdom was founded in 1932 by King Abdulaziz, its first steps in diplomacy was to gain recognition and protect its independence. The king built ties with Be in 1927 and the United States in 1931, hoping to modernize the country and keep its b safe. Later, Saudi Arabia joined the United Nations in 1945 and also became part of groups like the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. These moves gave it more influence in world and regional matters. During the Cold War, it stayed close to the United States, especially in issues of oil and security, which helped make it a major player in the region.

The discovery of oil in 1938 completely changed Saudi Arabia's position in the world. Oil gave the kingdom not only economic strength but also strong diplomatic power. With its large oil reserves, it became a founding member of OPEC and

gained a powerful voice in global energy matters. Its location in the center of the Middle East also made it important for regional peace and world security. In recent years, however, Saudi Arabia has gone beyond oil and religion by using sports as part of its diplomacy. Hosting international events, investing in sports, and working with well-known athletes have become ways of showing the country's openness and rising influence. These efforts are part of a bigger plan to diversify the economy, attract more visitors, and build soft power. By doing this, Saudi Arabia is working to change the old view of it as a closed and rigid country, presenting itself instead as modern and ambitious.

Instead of using military power to control regional and global matters, as many countries did in the past, Saudi Arabia has chosen to focus more on diplomacy. For a long time, countries measured their strength mainly by their armies and weapons, showing who was stronger through wars. Thinkers like Hobbes compared this to a jungle, where the strong could easily dominate the weak. Saudi Arabia's choice to rely on diplomacy and soft power shows that it understands influence today works better when it comes through cooperation, attraction, and cultural connection rather than force and fighting. History shows that depending only on military power has caused huge destruction. For example, repeated wars and the arms race led to two World Wars, and dropping nuclear bombs in Japan showed the extreme dangers of relying only on military strength. The massive damage in Hiroshima and Nagasaki made the world realize that safer and smarter ways of showing power were

needed. This helped make soft power important, the ability to influence others through culture, values, diplomacy, and working together instead of fear or violence.

Today, soft power is even more important because globalization and technology, especially social media, let countries share their culture and ideas very quickly with the world. One of the strongest ways to use soft power now is sports diplomacy. Sports are loved everywhere and can bring people together across different cultures. They give countries a chance to show who they are, build trust, and improve how others see them. Hosting big events like the Olympics or the World Cup does more than help the economy, it also shows that a country is capable, respected, and influential. But sports diplomacy has limits. It can be used for political reasons, may not last long, and may help some countries more than others. Still, it is very effective at promoting peace, unity, and cultural exchange. That is why Saudi Arabia is now using sports diplomacy together with its oil wealth, religion, and strategic location to increase its influence around the world.

One of the main ways Saudi Arabia has worked to increase its influence is through Vision 2030, a plan to reduce reliance on oil and present a more modern image to the world. The kingdom is investing in tourism, technology, and culture to show that it is open, forward-looking, and ready to engage internationally. Sports have become a key part of this strategy. By acquiring the English football club Newcastle United, launching the LIV Golf

tour, and hosting Formula 1 races, Saudi Arabia is using sports to attract visitors, investors, and global attention. These efforts aim to reshape the country's image and show that it is about more than just oil and religion. Through sports diplomacy, Saudi Arabia has hosted major events such as international boxing matches, Formula 1 races, and is even planning to host the World Cup. These events allow the nation to demonstrate that it can welcome the world and take part fully in global culture. Similar to how the United States promoted itself through Hollywood or South Korea through K-pop, Saudi Arabia is now using sports to share a new story about itself. Along with sports, social reforms, like expanding women's rights, and large projects such as NEOM also support the country's efforts to appear modern and global.

However, despite these initiatives, Saudi Arabia still faces challenges in changing its reputation. Critics point to ongoing human rights concerns, the war in Yemen, and the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi as evidence that reforms may focus more on appearances than on real change. These issues cause many people to question the country's investments in sports and culture, with some calling the approach "sportswashing", meaning using sports to improve image while ignoring deeper problems. Despite such criticism, sports diplomacy has played an important role in supporting Saudi Arabia's economy and society. For instance, Vision 2030 aims to reduce the country's dependence on oil, and sports are a key part of economic diversification. Hosting major sports events draws tourism,

helps businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and shopping centers, and creates jobs for young people. Investments in large projects like Qiddiya entertainment city, the restoration of historic sites like Al-Ula, and upgrades to airports and stadiums show how sports diplomacy works together with infrastructure development. Sports also help build national pride and engage the youth. Since most Saudis are under 30, the government promotes sports to inspire young people and give them new opportunities. This includes women's football leagues, modern sports facilities, and programs supporting local athletes. International tournaments and the presence of global sports stars have motivated many young Saudis to take part in sports and feel connected to a more ambitious, successful, and forward-looking nation.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy has helped the country increase its influence both globally and within the region, but it has also faced criticism. By hosting major sports events and working with international organizations like FIFA and the International Olympic Committee, the kingdom has created new partnerships with countries in the West and across the region. Sports provide a neutral and friendly platform for diplomacy, allowing Saudi Arabia to engage in global affairs in a way that is less confrontational than traditional politics. However, critics argue that these large investments in sports are a form of "sportswashing," meaning they are used to improve the country's image while hiding ongoing problems, such as human

rights violations, limitations on freedoms, and the war in Yemen. Human rights organizations, athletes, and international groups have mixed opinions: some see Saudi investment in sports as a sign of progress and opportunity, while others view it as a way to manage the country's reputation without addressing real issues at home. This situation has resulted in both positive attention and strong scrutiny. Overall, sports diplomacy has given Saudi Arabia more visibility on the world stage, strengthened its soft power, and supported economic reforms. Yet, the long-term success of this strategy will depend on whether the kingdom also makes genuine internal changes that reflect the modern, open, and progressive image it seeks to project internationally.

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