

Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal



Vol. 3 / No. 2 (2025)





UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA, FACULTY OF LAW
Institute of Sports Law, Sports Policies and Sports Diplomacy &
Jean Monnet Chair in EU Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy

in partnership with



Sports Law, Policy & Diplomacy Journal

ISSN (Online) 2975-6235

UDC 3:796

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30925/slpdj>

Vol. 3

No. 2

Rijeka, 2025



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

SAUDI ARABIA'S STRATEGIC USE OF SPORT IN THE FORGING OF A NEW NATIONAL IDENTITY

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UDC 349:796(532)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30925/slpdj.3.2.4>

Received on August 13, 2025

Accepted on December 9, 2025

Review article



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Abstract

Instability in the Middle East has been on the rise in the first two decades of the century due to the power void created by the American invasion in Iraq, the geopolitical confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring. For the Sunni Kingdom, this has meant that the core of the Royal Family's legitimacy has been in permanent tension, menacing the continuity of the Saudi model and the homogeneity of the Saudi nation. At the same time, the securitarian bond with the West, key for sustaining the Al-Saud grip on power, has eroded as a result of the growing incapacity of Saudi Arabia to fulfill the role of regional stabilizer.

In response, the Saudi political elite, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has directed all their efforts on the Saudi Vision 2030, the most recent national development plan that aims to diversify the economic apparatus and shield the Al-Saud legitimacy.

This article aims to demonstrate, through a multidimensional lens, how the strategic use of sport under the Vision 2030 programme has been designated by the *de facto* ruler of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a catalyst for the modernizing and nationalist agenda, shaping the new national identity. While the new nationalistic drive of the Saudi Vision 2030 has been covered by several scholars, how sports have been articulated to be useful for this narrative and how they have influenced the fluid and everchanging nature of the Saudi nation remains a void in the literature that this article seeks to partially fill.

A constructivist approach, anchored in the theoretical works of Alexander Wendt, is suitable to observe how the strategic use of sport has been leveraged as a platform for the extrapolation of the content of the Saudi nation, presenting itself as a modern, moderate, proud and diverse country in order to alter the identitarian structure with a securitarian ally as the West. Furthermore, the investigation of the extrapolation of this new national identity, a more covered area, through a constructivist lens aims to theoretically enrich the debate over Saudi Arabia's strategic use of sport.

Keywords: *Strategic Use of Sport, Saudi Arabia, Nation, Identity, Saudi Vision 2030.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

By emphasizing competition between national actors, international sport seems to validate the image of a Westphalian system of states.¹ The clashes between national teams or individual athletes seem to justify George Orwell's claim that sport is war minus the shooting. Michel Foucault understood that politics are the continuation of war minus the shooting. As politics, sports are, in their purest state, a way of sublimation of violence.

Albeit this inherent condition of sport as a platform for the exhibit of a nation, it also hosts a contradiction. Globalization has embedded it with a sense of cosmopolitanism that challenges national, regional and local identities.² International sport can be better comprehended through the idea of "glocalization," which is related to a process of hybridization—in a dialectic way—between the "national" and the "international," between the distant and the local.³

Nowadays, we are witnesses to the emergence of nation-states that have found in sport a medium to rearticulate the content of the "national" and to leverage their status on the international stage. This is evident in the case of Saudi Arabia, a sparsely populated country where the population debates between a plethora of identities that, much of the time, overshadow the sense of national belonging. As the need for economic and social change becomes more urgent, the Al-Saud Crown has been forced to disrupt the social contract, the basis of their legitimacy.

The *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, has recognized the value of sport in advancing the country's economic, political, sociocultural, securitarian, and identity interests, to ensure strategic advantages and build and exert power.⁴ Sports are not a public nor a private resource, but a constituent part of networks where international actors' interests and narratives are debated, becoming increasingly relevant to nation-states.⁵

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In reference to the selected literature, a few concepts should be defined and explained prior to reading the article.

The conceptualization of the term "nation," crucial to understanding the following analysis, is built on the ideas of Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm's application of the concept to sport. Following the work of the former, a nation can be comprehended as an "imagined

1 Peter J. Beck, "The most effective means of communication in the modern world?: British sport and national prestige," in *Sport and International Relations: An Emerging Relations*, ed. by Roger Levermore and Adrian Budd (London: Routledge, 2004).

2 Andrei S. Markovits, and Lars Rensmann, *Gaming the World: How sports are reshaping global politics and culture* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 29.

3 Roger Levermore, and Adrian Budd, "Sport and international relations: Continued neglect?," in *Sport and International Relations*, ed. by Roger Levermore and Adrian Budd (London: Routledge, 2004). Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*.

4 Simon Chadwick, Michael M. Goldman, and Paul Widdop, "Introduction: Towards a Geopolitical Economy of Sport.," in *The Geopolitical Economy of Sport* ed. by Simon Chadwick; Michael M. Goldman and Paul Widdop (London: Routledge, 2023), 3.

5 Chadwick et al, *Introduction*.

and limited political community.”⁶ The members of a nation will never get to know most of their countryman, yet in their minds dwells the image of their communion towards common features and a deep and horizontal comradeship.⁷ The term “invented” must not be interpreted as a synonym for false or fabricated, but rather as making the nation an idea that is subject to an evolutionary process of reimagination.

The communal sense of fraternity must be forged into a somewhat homogenous identity that encompasses shared attributes and beliefs. When a state spearheads this process, it is possible to refer to it as “nation-building,” a concept that focuses on strategies designed to cultivate a cohesive, loyal and homogenous citizenry through the image of a nation.⁸ A common resort used by states is invented traditions. These are defined as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”⁹ Inventing traditions is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past highly related to the content of the “nation.”¹⁰

The imagined communities are also limited, since none of them portrays itself as coterminous with mankind as, for example, Christianity did in certain epochs.¹¹ Related to this fact, another feature emerges: the nation is imagined as sovereign. Anderson traces the rise of the concept to the age of Enlightenment and Revolution in Europe that undermined the divinely ordained societies and political systems. The individuals from the newly formed European nations started building new foundations, giving rise to the nation-state.¹²

The nation is not only an identity built through an intersubjective interaction between the individuals that form it, but in the globalized world, it is also subject to foreign influences that transform the comprehension of national identities. In order to examine and comprehend how the Saudi state and the Saudi national identity interact in the International System, and particularly with the West, a theoretical framework of international relations is necessary.

This article is founded on the extensive investigations of Alexander Wendt.¹³ In his work, this author affirms that identities and interests are endogenous to the interactions between the actors that take part in it and are traversed by a structure of shared knowledge—addressed by Wendt as the “culture” of a system—which is simultaneously produced and reproduced. This fact admits the possibility of change in the system’s structure emerged from the actions of the actors, despite how unusual it might seem, in Wendt words, culture is a self-fulfilling

6 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2006).

7 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

8 Montserrat Guibernau, “Globalization and the nation-state,” in *Understanding nationalism* ed. by Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 242-268.

9 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *La invención de la tradición* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2002), 1.

10 *Ibid*, 13

11 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

12 *Ibid*, 7.

13 Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics.” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992), [10.1017/S0020818300027764](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764). Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

prophecy,¹⁴ with inertial properties.

Each state bears multiple identities anchored in its self-perception as well as in the conjectures that other states collectively have upon them and the rest of the actors.¹⁵ The content of the “national interest,” while being derived from the very nature of the state,¹⁶ is affected by the interactions that give rise to intersubjective identities: roles and collective identities. In a counterpoint to neorealist theories, Wendt affirms that egoism is not a natural disposition of the state, but a belief about how to protect the national interest within a particular configuration of a culture¹⁷ such as the Hobbesian one. Other cultures may arise, such as the Lockean, the Kantian one and everything in between, as they are mere ideal types that reflect the primary role with which an actor is endowed by its counterparts: enemy, rival or friend.¹⁸

Structural change, based on the revision of the terms of one actor's identity, is possible under two conditions: a state must have reasons to self-perceive in novel terms arising from new social conditions that cannot be addressed based on past conceptions, and the expected costs of change cannot outweigh the rewards for the actors within the system. Wendt's conception of change is built upon the notion of an “intentional transformation of identitarian structures,”¹⁹ a process consisting of four phases through which a state breaks away from the consensus with its former identitarian compromises through critical examination, the adoption of new practices, and “altercasting—” when a practice attempts to induce the counterpart to take a new identity by treating it as if it already had that identity.²⁰

2.1. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SPORTS

Andrei S. Markovits and Lars Rensmann²¹ examined the convergence between international sport and the forces of globalization in their work, which has fundamentally transformed both. These authors take up Roland Robertson's concept of “glocalization,” which treats globalization not as a ubiquitous and homogenising force, but as one that merges with the “local” in a symbiotic process.²² In essence, the phenomenon of “glocalization” refers to the complex interactions between the global and the local, where each borrows elements from the other.²³

Stuart Murray²⁴ developed the concept of “sports diplomacy,” while other authors have

14 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 186–187.

15 Wendt, “Anarchy is what states make of it”, 398–399.

16 States possess objective interests that guarantee their perpetuation: physical survival, autonomy, economic well-being, and collective self-esteem. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 198.

17 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 240; 247.

18 Ibid, 257–258.

19 Lenny Favre, *La transformación intencional de las estructuras identitarias en la relación entre Arabia Saudita y Occidente: el uso estratégico del deporte (2016–2023)*, (Bachelor degree, Universidad de Rosario), 2025.

20 Wendt, “Anarchy is what states make of it”, 420–422.

21 Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*.

22 Ibid, 44.

23 Ibid, 44.

24 Stuart Murray, and Geoffrey Allen Pigman, “Mapping the relationship between international sport and diplomacy,” *Sport in society* 17 (2014). Stuart Murray, *Sports diplomacy: origins, theory and practice*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2018).

systematised and deepened the conceptual richness of this variant of public diplomacy.²⁵ It refers to the conscious and strategic use of sport, athletes, and sporting events by both state and non-state actors to engage with international audiences, exerting influence over its perceptions in order to configure a favourable image that supports the national interest.²⁶

Authors like Simon Chadwick and Paul Widdop have been not only important theoretical support, but also an inspiration for the present investigation. Both have built their work upon the concept of “the geopolitical economy of sport,” which refers to “the ways in which nations, states, and other entities engage in, with or through sport for geographic, political, and/or economic reasons in order to build and exert power, and secure strategic advantages through the control of resources within and via networks of which sport is a constituent part.”²⁷

3. THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the biggest in terms of territory and population in the Arabian Peninsula. As a result of fast demographic growth, approximately 70% of the population is now under 36 years old. This age group represents 61.7% of the Saudi national workforce. According to census data from 2022, the average age between Saudis is around 25.2 years.²⁸

Saudi Arabia could be described as a rentier state, a term related to the social function that the government fulfills. A rentier economy is characterized by the concentration of external rent in a tiny fraction of society—in this case, the Al-Saud family—whereas the rest of the population is subject to the distribution of such wealth.²⁹

Centralization of decision-making blurs the boundaries between the social objectives of the State and the particularist goals of the royal family. In this context, giving up economic sovereignty to foreign direct investment meant debilitating the absolute grip of the State over political power. The result has been a closed economy, subject to public spending and lacking a dynamic and autonomous private sector. “Government spending, almost exclusively underwritten by oil revenues, remains the engine of economic growth.”³⁰

Saudi Arabia is highly dependent on oil exploitation and export. Data from the Saudi General Authority for Statistics indicates that this sector accounts for 29.3 the 9% of gross domestic product and 75.2% of total exports for the period 2016–2024.³¹ This percentage only indicates the impact of crude and refined oil production, without considering the industrial sector,

25 Kambiz Abdi; Mahdi Talebpour; Jami Fullerton; Mohammad J. Ranjesh, and Hadi J. Nooghabi, “Converting sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcomes: Introducing a sports diplomacy model”, *International Area Studies Review* 21, no. 4 (2018). Verity Postlethwaite, Claire Jenkin and Emma Sherry, “Sports diplomacy: an integrative review,” *Sport Management Review* 26, no. 3 (2023): 361–382, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2022.2071054>.

26 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy*, 3, 91.

27 Simon Chadwick, *How 2022 Will Epitomise Sport’s Burgeoning Geopolitical Economy*, (Paris: IRIS, 2022), quoted in Chadwick; Goldman and Widdop, “Introduction,” 3.

28 Saudi General Authority for Statistics. <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/statistics?index=119021>.

29 Hazem Beblawi. “The Rentier State in the Arab World.”, *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (1987): 383-398. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315684864>.

30 Jane Kinnimont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia’s Social Contract: Austerity and Transformation* (London: Chatham House, 2017), 3.

31 Saudi General Authority for Statistics.

which depends on derivatives of hydrocarbons. If we also take into account that external rent represents around 90% of fiscal revenues³² of a State with great influence in economic growth, the impact of this resource becomes even bigger.

The evolution of the Saudi economy is directly tied to international oil prices. When they have stayed low for extended periods of time, the Kingdom was forced to impose cuts in subsidies and benefits for its citizens. These transferences have been of vital importance to preserve the support of the population. The reduction in the distribution of external rent could be seen as undermining the implicit social contract.³³

The Saudi economic infrastructure has not expanded nor adapted fast enough to generate more employment opportunities.^{34,35} In 2016, 12.3%³⁶ of people between the ages of 15–39 were jobless.³⁷ Numbers were even bigger if just women are considered as 34.5% of them were disemployed³⁸. The hydrocarbon sector has failed to keep pace, leading to a young generation dissatisfied with their job prospects. This problem has been aggravated by the growing disconnection between two generations, the rulers³⁹ and the youth.

3.1. THE SAUDI SOCIAL CONTRACT

States legitimise their authority, beyond coercion, through implicit consent to, or at least a basic acceptance of, its authority.⁴⁰ The concept of the “social contract” can be understood as a theoretical-political resource which encapsulates the institutional mechanisms to conciliate the tension between individual interest and social results, between the state and its subjects.⁴¹ The achieved balance is expressed through a particular distribution of rights and obligations between the government and the citizens that legitimizes the rule of the former.

In Saudi Arabia, this balance is constituted by a series of informal covenants between the Government and the royal family, the commercial elites, the clergy and the rest of the population that distribute rights and duties. Traditionally, the *ulema* have been responsible

32 Mohammad Nurunnabi, “Transformation from an Oil-based Economy to a Knowledge-based Economy in Saudi Arabia: the Direction of Saudi Vision 2030.” *J Knowl Econ* 8, (2017): 536-564, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-017-0479-8>

33 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 4.

34 The reasons are the absence of a detailed plan, almost complete dependency of the private sector on public transferences, lack of compromise with reforms and insufficient public support to non-oil sectors, Bassam A. Albassam, “Economic diversification in Saudi Arabia: Myth or reality?” *Resources Policy* 44, (2015): 112-117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2015.02.005>.

35 Albassam, “Economic diversification in Saudi Arabia: Myth or reality?”

36 The unemployment figures are usually higher than what public statistics suggest (Montagu 2015, 7).

37 Saudi General Authority for Statistics.

38 Ibid.

39 Since the original King Abdulaziz Al-Saud's death all the successive rulers were their sons. The succession proceeded in a lateral way, as it is commonly used in the Arabian Peninsula, Kepel, *Away from chaos*. Kings have traditionally ascended to the throne at an advanced age, as current King Salman became ruler at the age of 79. Consequently, this has originated a gerontocracy that is not congruent with the growing young population, stymied innovation and competition, and favoured corruption, Kepel, *Away from chaos*.

40 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 17.

41 Francisco A. Báez Urbina, “Diseño institucional y neoliberalismo. El modelo chileno como resultado del quiebre unilateral del contrato social.” *Papers* 2017 102, no. 3 (2017): 449-476. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.2299>.

for affairs concerning religion, society, education and the law, whereas the Al-Saud family has been in charge of political, economic and military leadership as well as international representation.⁴²

The legitimacy of the Kingdom and its royalty is supported by the pact established between the Al-Saud and Al-Wahhab families in 1744. Wherever the Al-Saud governed, the proselytism of Wahhabism⁴³ would be imposed and those who adopted these beliefs as their own, would support the monarchy.⁴⁴ The alliance, in addition with extensive use of force, was useful in expanding the territories under the central State; to homogenise the population fragmented by the divisive tribal socio-political system dwelling in them; and to undermine the nomadic nature of Bedouin tribes towards the third foundation of the Saudi state in 1932.⁴⁵

This pact remains one of the foundations of political legitimacy. The use of Islam for legitimation has worked through the institutionalization of religious authorities with wide functions and the State's diffusion of the Wahhabi narrative, which depicts it as the embodiment of the nation. The alliance with the *ulema* has ensured that the State's actions are sanctioned positively by the religious establishment. This support has proven vital when introducing innovations.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the clergy in Saudi Arabia has preached obedience to the State as a core value of Islamic society, infusing Saudi national identity with loyalty to the Al-Saud family as an element. Wahhabism has served as an overarching and supra-tribal identity that placated differences and legitimized the Al-Saud rule.⁴⁷ This narrative has constituted the basis of Saudi "customs," which serve as the social motor that gives any change the sanction of precedent, social continuity, and natural law.⁴⁸ The custom dominates in so-called traditional societies.⁴⁹

The position held by the clergy is not solely derived from their religious prestige, but also from their appointment as civil servants by the King.⁵⁰ This relationship, as a by-product of modernization of the State, has adopted a tendency of Islam becoming more statist in order for the *ulema* to preserve their power.⁵¹ The transition to a unified and modern nation-state demanded adjustments that diminished the *ulema's* role in society. Nonetheless, periods of intense instability, such as the 1979 seizure of Mecca, required the reinforcement of religious

42 Natana J. Delong-Bas, "Islam and Power in Saudi Arabia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics* ed. by John L. Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 411-422.

43 Wahhabism is a puritan doctrine of Islam based on the *Hanbali* legal tradition, considered to be the most conservative of all Islam's schools of thought. Its architect was Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab who, frustrated by what he perceived as a moral decline in society, proclaimed a return to orthodox Islamic principles. Febe Armanios, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya* (CRS Report for Congress, 2003).

44 David Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History*. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012).

45 Frederick W. Weston, III, "Political legitimacy and national identity in Saudi Arabia: competing allegiances," *The Fletcher Forum* 11, no. 1 (1987), The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 85, 88.

46 Weston, "Political legitimacy and national identity in Saudi Arabia," 89.

47 Alhussein, *Saudi First*, 3. Joseph Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern studies* 34, no. 3 (1998): 37.

48 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *La invención de la tradición*.

49 Ibid.

50 Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 42.

51 Ibid, 41.

power.⁵² The achievement of a balance has been subject to thorough revisions through time in order to preserve Islam as a source of legitimacy for the Al-Saud family.

The gradual diminishment of the clergy's ability to supervise the implementation of *shari'a* led to the emergence of zealous Muslims, whose identity had been moulded by those same *ulema's* religious discourse. They have occasionally questioned the religious authority of the State and even turned into bastions of Islamic fundamentalism opposing modernization campaigns.⁵³ The Royal family's efforts to cultivate Wahhabism as a state religion and as an essential national attribute had a by-product: the rise of fundamentalist groups both within and outside the Saudi establishment.

In this context, relying solely on religion as the basis of the State was insufficient to assure legitimacy. With the windfalls from oil, the Saudi government has pursued national integration through the creation of a community of economic and social interests that sublimate inbred local loyalties and prejudice into a national sentiment.⁵⁴ The relationship between citizens and the State has been shaped by the Saudi ruling establishment's ability to disburse oil revenues. The Government is a net provider of economic benefits⁵⁵ offering public employment opportunities, taxes exemptions, and subsidised services like water, energy, etc.⁵⁶

3.2. THE SAUDI NATION

Montagu affirms that "in creating a country, King Abdulaziz could not forge a nation."⁵⁷ However, the creation of a unified nation-state was a conscious effort of the first Saudi king that was prolonged by his sons.⁵⁸ Identity is a plural and multidimensional process subject to change.⁵⁹ Collective identities of Muslim Arabs in the Middle East usually incorporate Islamic, Arab, regional and national elements.⁶⁰

Saudi society is organized around a complex system of overlapping loyalties that include religious, tribal, ethnic and national allegiances, among others.⁶¹ In the opinion of the younger population, the most important elements when describing their identities are religion and family, both ranking higher than the nation.⁶² Social diversity transforms the national identity into something problematic.⁶³

In order to sublimate this social fragmentation into a national identity, a discourse that articulates the diverse components of the latter into one particular and differentiable entity

52 Weston, "Political legitimacy and national identity in Saudi Arabia," 90.

53 Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 39.

54 *Ibid*, 94-95.

55 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 3, 17.

56 Eman Alhoussein, *Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia* (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019), 4.

57 Montagu, *Civil Society in Saudi Arabia*, 14.

58 Weston, "Political legitimacy and national identity in Saudi Arabia."

59 Joseph A. Maguire, "Globalization, sport and national identities." *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 14, no. 7-8 (2011): 978, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2011.603553>.

60 Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 34.

61 Montagu, *Civil Society in Saudi Arabia*, 3-4.

62 ASDAA BCW, *Arab Youth Survey: Living a New Reality* (ASDAA BCW, 2023).

63 Eduardo P. Archetti, *Masculinities: Football, Polo and the Tango in Argentina* (London & New York: Routledge, 2020), 104. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085980>.

is needed. Saudi Arabia's national identity is infused with Islamic symbols and greatly traversed by Arab legacy, subordinating it to greater fellowships.⁶⁴ The ubiquity of Islam and Arab heritage pushes the nation, particularly within the Muslim *umma*, beyond the State's boundaries,⁶⁵ turning the distinction of peculiarities into a difficult task. The Saudi state preceded a national identity that was moulded to suit the Al-Saud's political needs.⁶⁶

The distinct component that turns the Saudi imagined community into limited is an idealized past built on two myths:

"The first myth is that the Kingdom is a cohesive national entity fused by a common loyalty to Islam as shaped by the Wahhabi tradition, and that the Al-Saud family are qualified-and uniquely so- to defend Islam and to ensure the moral well-being of the Muslim community. The second is that the Saudi Arabian state is an extension of the tribal family."⁶⁷

Both elements were identified as early as the 1920s in order to give rise to a cohesive national identity. The first has already been discussed, exemplified by the allegiance between the Al-Saud and the Al-Wahhab families. Cultivating a national identity anchored in religion and, thus, loyalty to the House of Saud was essential to counter opposition groups outside and inside the Islamic establishment.⁶⁸

The second one endows the State with the patriarchal obligations of the tribal shaykh of mediating disputes, defending its people, and dispensing largesse⁶⁹ to dismantle previous tribal loyalties. The most important function, the economic one, can be observed in the rentist nature of the State. Citizenship equals admission to the tribe and, thus, an entitlement to the distribution of external rent, creating another incentive for inhabitants of Saudi Arabia to buy into the myth of Saudi national identity.

The Saudi nation had to be built through the invention of traditions. Practices founded on religion, such as segregation between sexes or male guardianship, and a supra-tribal identity, through economic incentives like public employment and tax exemptions, have become ritualized via public efforts in order to inculcate a national sentiment. The instrumentalization of factors that generate identification throughout society has been intended to create a horizontal link for an idealized homogenous entity, *ergo*, the Saudi nation. This reality has been incarnated by the state—and by antonomasia, the Al-Saud family—turning it into the sacralization of the nation and a legitimate sovereign.

Elements that symbolize the Saudi nation, such as the national flag, anthem, postage stamps and holidays, while signs of the separateness of the State, are rooted in Islamic imagery. Even if useful to promote the collectiveness of the nation, they were primarily designed to emphasize the country's association with Islam rather than its narrow national character.⁷⁰ The promotion of religion as part of Saudi national values is a response to the perceived

64 Weston, "Political legitimacy and national identity in Saudi Arabia," 97–98.

65 Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 35.

66 Weston, "Political legitimacy and national identity in Saudi Arabia," 98.

67 Eleanor A. Doumato, "Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (1992): 36.

68 Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 46.

69 Doumato, "Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 39.

70 Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 48.

threat of Western influences that might menace the State's authority and legitimacy. This resistance to the incorporation of exogenous cultural elements creates a sense of holistic immobilism that has been challenging to uphold at times.

The emergence of national ideologies was contested by the religious establishment and blocked by the State since it could have threatened their existence.⁷¹ The concept of nationalism is regarded as a secular term and, thus, antithetical to adherence to Islam.⁷² Secularism and nationalism could have also introduced the idea of political representation.⁷³ In addition, these types of discourses in the Middle East are more commonly articulated in terms of Arab nationalism, an idea that transcends national boundaries.⁷⁴

Traditional roles for women have become a symbol of Wahhabi heritage and are exploited by the State to emphasize the Islamic character of its national identity.⁷⁵ Any intention to alter this unique state of affairs represented a challenge to the stability and legitimacy of the monarchy, as it could spark outrage within both the religious establishment and the citizenry.

Wahhabism imposes strict exegesis on women's role in society, creating an "ideal Islamic woman,"⁷⁶ that has deeply intertwined with Saudi culture, despite having little foundation on the sacred texts of Islam.⁷⁷ This ideology has been reinforced by the State's continuous re-inscription of it into society through policy decisions and government statements.⁷⁸ Controlling women's mobility and confining them to the household domain has meant that the nation's existence as an homogenous Islamic community has been moulded essentially by men.⁷⁹ Even later efforts to broaden women's role in society have not led to integration with men, but rather to small segregated spaces meant for women alone where they have minimal agency.⁸⁰

Segregation between sexes, in itself a way of making Islam noticeable, has turned into the most visible flagship of Islamic morality and has merged with the concept of gender in Saudi Arabia. The "ideal Islamic woman" ideology has been inculcated through the feminine education system. With control of the educational sphere, the *ulemas* have had a rigid control over knowledge. The collective identity promulgated reflects the idea of a Saudi entity, but has always been predominantly Islamic.⁸¹

71 Calduch Cervera, *Las relaciones internacionales culturales entre el Islam y Occidente*, 113.

72 Weston, "Political legitimacy and national identity in Saudi Arabia," 96.

73 Alhussein, *Saudi First*.

74 Weston, "Political legitimacy and national identity in Saudi Arabia," 96.

75 Doumato, "Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," 32.

76 *Ibid*, 33.

77 Yahya Al Alhareth, Yasra Al Alhareth, and Ibtisam Al Dighir, "Review of Women and Society in Saudi Arabia." *American Journal of Educational Research* 3, no. 2 (2015): 121-125, [10.12691/education-3-2-3](https://doi.org/10.12691/education-3-2-3). Armanios, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya*.

78 Doumato, "Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia", 33-34; Alanoud Aloufi, "Gender and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," (PhD, San Francisco State University), 2017.

79 This does not mean that Saudi women are submissive and passive. On the contrary, they have been protagonists of several protests to enhance their situation and broaden their rights, such as women's driving demonstrations of 6 November, 1990. Doumato, "Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia".

80 Aloufi, "Gender and National Identity in Saudi Arabia".

81 Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia", 48.

3.3. THE HEART OF THE ARAB AND THE MUSLIM WORLDS

Islam is the most important factor affecting the stipulation of priorities of foreign policy.⁸² The King bears the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, referring to Mecca and Medina, which has granted him significant regional gravitation. The Saudi Arabian Arab and Islamic cultural heritage is an important source of soft power.⁸³ In accordance, Saudi Arabia has presented itself as a hegemonic power in the Middle East and Northern Africa. The communion between the religious and political power legitimates Saudi Arabian foreign policy within the regional and Muslim spheres.

The Kingdom identifies itself as the natural leader of the Middle East, the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds and the sentinel of their heritage. It has assumed the role of regional guide and mediator.⁸⁴ Regional hegemony has been the most suitable way to assure that external events do not threaten internal political power.⁸⁵ As a way to preserve internal cohesion, prevent external interference or ideological influence and expand its hegemony, Saudi Arabia has adopted a parishioner identity—particularly after the Iranian Revolution and the Grand Mosque seizure in 1979.

The extrapolation of religious and sectarian rhetoric has been useful to counter alternative models of leadership in the region, namely in the present century the Islamic Republic of Iran. The two countries have perceived each other as sectarian (Sunnis versus Shiites), ethnic (Arabs versus Persians), ideological (United States allies versus enemies), and geopolitical rivals,⁸⁶ as they strive to position themselves as the representatives of the Middle East and Islam in the International System.

To maintain its religious authority in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia could not stray away from internal conservative measures.⁸⁷ Thus, this customary nature of the Saudi national identity is deeply intertwined with its perceived international image. The growing preoccupation of Western countries to enforce globally the human rights agenda has further strained the already withered relation with the stagnant Saudi monarchy.⁸⁸

82 Itxaso Dominguez De Olázabal and David Hernández Martínez, "La política exterior de Arabia Saudí: equilibrio entre factores domésticos y externos", *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 56 (2021): 39, <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.56.01>.

83 Giulio Gallarotti and Isam Y. Al-Filali, "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power." *International Studies* 49, no. 3-4 (2012): 233-261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881714532707>.

84 Abdulilah R. Alkathheeri and Muhammad Khan, "A Perspective on Saudi Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy." *Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR)* 4, no. 2 (2019): 20-26. [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2019\(IV-II\).03](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2019(IV-II).03).

85 Hernández Martínez, *La política exterior de Arabia Saudí en Oriente Medio tras la primavera árabe*, 204

86 Karim Sadjadpour and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Irán en Oriente Medio: aprovechando el caos." *Policy Brief*, no. 126 (2015).

87 The promotion of certain values and the attractiveness of a foreign policy outside of the country depend on the perception of consistency between discourse and actions as well as continuity between internal and external behaviour, Nye, *Soft Power*.

88 Raed A. Alhargan, "The impact of the UN human rights system and human rights INGOs on the Saudi Government with special reference to the spiral model." *The International Journal of Human Rights* 16, no. 4 (2012): 598-623, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2011.626772>.

4. THE BOND WITH THE WEST

Identity is not immutable nor does it exist in a void. It corresponds to a socio-historic category determined in relation to others. The identification of an actor as a threat or an ally is socially and historically constructed.⁸⁹ Narratives that describe “the East” as a passive object for study and conquest by “the West” are not uncommon.

Saudi Arabia's identity in the International System is erected over certain knowledge structures forged through multiple interactions and complex intercultural articulation between the Arab and Islamic spheres and those foreign to them. Following a political-ideological criterion, the Kingdom has been situated under the homogenising category of “Orient.” This concept submerges the identitarian differences of Asian realities in a monolithic fantasy that moulds the imaginary and creates knowledge.⁹⁰ Prejudices are not innate, but learnt beliefs acquired through socialization.

The West/East dichotomy and the identification of countries in the Middle East have been moulded by certain narratives. Roles exist in relation to others because they do not respond to individual characteristics of actors, but are positions within a structure based on intersubjective construction of meaning.⁹¹ The concept of the “West” is built upon the cooperative conduct of North Atlantic states following the Second World War that gave rise to an amity that goes beyond a mere alliance because they identify each other's securitarian needs as their own.⁹² This results in the development of a collective security system between homogenous⁹³ states who share a common fate and expectations of permanence, as crystallised by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.⁹⁴

The interactions between this sphere and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have been guided by the ambition of preserving stability for the global energy and arms commerce to function smoothly. On the basis of their exchanges, both actors gave rise to economic and military interests. Saudi Arabia had turned, after the cornerstone of the bond was set by the accord between Abdulaziz bin Saud and Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945, into an important ally. The tie-in was erected over a geostrategic interest of the United States in consolidating a state that could play the role of a regional hegemon responsible for preserving peace,⁹⁵ an identity that was assumed and reproduced by the Kingdom. This attitude was testimony of a shared perception of a common fate anchored in a communion of geopolitical interests: eliminating possible threats to peace in the Middle East, protecting commerce fluxes, and repelling the advance of socialist influence in the Arab sphere.⁹⁶

89 Wendt, “Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics”, 396–397.

90 Teo Hsu-Ming, “Orientalism: An Overview”. *Australian Humanities Review* 54, (2013):2.

91 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 226.

92 Ibid, 297.

93 This means that the organization of their political and economic systems—type identities intrinsic to actors but traversed by the cultural dimension, in Wendt terms—share common features. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 224.

94 Ibid, 301–302.

95 Conge and Gwenn Okruhlik, “The Power of Narrative,” 367.

96 Favre, *La transformación intencional de las estructuras identitarias en la relación entre Arabia Saudita y Occidente*, 36.

Saudi Arabia's position in the region, in security terms, was conservative. Once the Cold War period ended, the common fate perception mutated towards countering destabilizing actors such as Iraq, Iran, and transnational terrorism. The persistence of these master variables⁹⁷ originated the permissive condition for the generation of a collective identity: self-restraint. A cooperative security system emerged from what was once a purely transactional bond. However, Saudi Arabia's relations with the West have always shown lack of homogeneity, hindering the deepening of interdependence. The alliance has been an only instrumental strategy destined to enhance individual benefits, without the emergence of a collective identity. In the eyes of the Al-Saud family, this relationship was of vital importance to preserve national security.⁹⁸ However, since the beginning of the 21st century, the economic and geopolitical interests that supported the bond have been fading. The United States and Europe have attained more energy independence from Saudi Arabia through the boost of internal capacities and trade with new partners⁹⁹ amidst a steep drop in oil prices that has endangered Saudi finances.¹⁰⁰

The decline in the contribution of external rent to national development has impacted strongly over the Kingdom. The Government faced budget deficits that needed to be mitigated with fiscal reserves, reductions in public salaries and subsidies and the imposition of new taxes.¹⁰¹ Although the austerity measures were lifted in 2017 when oil prices began to rise, this cyclical pattern exposed the State to the population's discontent. Saudi Arabia not only had to deal with the financial cost of this process but also with the political one, deriving from the threat to internal stability and the viability of the social contract.¹⁰²

The security dimension of the relationship has not improved. Since the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center towers, the fight against transnational terrorism has turned central to Saudi-West relations due to Western pressure on Saudi leadership.¹⁰³ The onslaught on American soil created the necessary conditions for the imposition of two guidelines destined to ideologically mould the region: Iraq's invasion in 2003 and a resurgence of the exceptionalistic nationalism based on democratic values that shall be emulated by the Middle Eastern nations.¹⁰⁴ The American unilateral offensive in Iraqi territory without previous consultation with then King Abdullah, as a punishment for the participation of Saudi nationals in 9/11 attack and suspicions of ties between the Saudi government and extremist cells,¹⁰⁵

97 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

98 Armida van Rij and Benedict Wilkinson, *Security cooperation with Saudi Arabia: Is it worth it for the UK?*, (London: The Policy Institute at King's, 2018), 9.

99 Kylie Baxter and Kumuda Simpson, "The United States and Saudi Arabia through the Arab Uprisings." *Global Change, Peace & Security* 27, no. 2 (2015): 139-151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2015.1019845>. EUROSTAT, *Oil and petroleum product - a statistical review* (Eurostat, 2025). Daniel J. Soeder, "The successful development of gas and oil resources from shales in North America." *Journal of Petroleum Science and Engineering* 163, (2018): 399-420, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.petrol.2017.12.084>.

100 Dave Mead and Porscha Stiger, "The 2014 plunge in import petroleum prices: What happened? Beyond The Numbers", *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* 4, no. 9 (2015), <https://hdl.handle.net/1813/77796>.

101 Grand and Wolff, *Assessing Saudi Vision 2030*.

102 Alhussein, *Saudi First*.

103 van Rij and Wilkinson, *Security cooperation with Saudi Arabia: Is it worth it for the UK?*, 6.

104 Anabella Busso, "La política exterior americana a partir de la administración de George W. Bush: su impacto mundial y regional." *Centro de Estudios Internacionales - Programa Jóvenes Investigadores* (2003). Dina Esfandiary, *The Anxiety Effect: How 9/11 and its Aftermath Changed Gulf Arab States' Relations with the U.S.* (International Crisis Group, 2021).

105 Gilles Kepel, *Away from chaos: the Middle East and the challenge to the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 246.

dismissed Saudi regional authority and triggered a power vacuum in which Iranian influence grew stronger.¹⁰⁶

Saudi Arabia's international image was severely affected by these developments. Since the end of the previous millennium, interactions with the West have been marked by Western criticism of human rights abuses, lack of fundamental liberties, and absence of democratic rights.¹⁰⁷ Until this moment they had been managed in economic terms fundamentally.¹⁰⁸ However, with the emergence of the "human security" paradigm, in which human rights lie at the core,¹⁰⁹ the bond between the parties could no longer be justified in the same terms as before.

This new securitarian approach goes beyond the previously perceived dichotomy between national interest and human rights in order to guarantee human dignity. Shortcomings in a state's domestic human rights policy could be viewed as an indicator of international aggression by other actors.¹¹⁰ As a result, Saudi Arabia has often been depicted in the West as a conservative and repressive actor.¹¹¹ The media have focused their attention on events of crisis, terrorism and fanaticism, contributing to a biased perspective that reflects the persistence of the myth of a clash between civilizations and Islamophobic prejudices.¹¹² The coverage that Saudi Arabia receives is focused on human rights abuses and its conservative stance, promoting the automatic association of Islam with religious extremism.¹¹³

Due to its traditional role as a peacekeeper in the Middle East and its stance on human, political, and women's rights, the West has projected onto the Kingdom a role of "conservative" state. Such identity was assumed and reproduced by the monarchy because the legitimacy of its rulers is fundamentally attached to regional dynamics, as well as significant soft power emanating from its religious proselytism.

As the Arab Spring uprisings would once again showcase, disruptive regional elements that challenge religious and political legitimacy are seen as a threat to domestic equilibrium.¹¹⁴

106 David Hernández Martínez, *La política exterior de Arabia Saudí en Oriente Medio tras la primavera árabe. Objetivos y estrategias regionales (2011–2016)* (Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2018), 84–85. Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia and the United States: Common Interests and Continuing Sources of Tension*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2016.

107 Alhargan, "The impact of the UN human rights system and human rights INGOs on the Saudi Government with special reference to the spiral model."

108 Abdulaziz M. Alwasil, "Saudi Arabia's engagement in, and interaction with the UN human rights system: an analytical review." *The International Journal of Human Rights* 14, no. 7 (2010): 1072-1091. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642980903007516>.

109 Wolfgang Benedek, "Human security and human rights interaction," *International Social Science Journal* 59, no. 1 (2008): 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.2008.00630.x>.

110 William W. Burke-White, "Human rights and National Security: The Strategic Correlation," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 17, (2004): 249-280.

111 Rayan Alyusufi, "The Transformation of Saudi Arabia's Public Diplomacy." *USC Center on Public Diplomacy*, 14 December, 2023, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/transformation-saudi-arabia%E2%80%99s-public-diplomacy>.

112 Canales and Rivera, "En torno a Samuel Huntington." Zahia S. Salhi, "The Arab World and the Occident: Toward the Construction of an Occidental Discourse." *Journal of College of Sharia & Islamic Studies* 39, no. 2 (2021): 205-222, <https://doi.org/10.29117/jcsis.2021.0306>.

113 Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia and the United States*.

114 De Olázabal and Hernández Martínez, "La política exterior de Arabia Saudí."

The protests in 2011 deepened the divide with Western countries. Saudi leadership was frightened of losing control.¹¹⁵

Saudi Arabia intended to preserve the status *quo* in the regional scope. In Bahrain, the Saudi forces intervened to protect the al-Khalifa regime within the Gulf Cooperation Council framework. The downfall of this Government could not only end up in the rise of a hostile leadership under Iranian influence,¹¹⁶ but also encourage Shiite protests in Saudi territory.¹¹⁷ Washington was not keen on creating new hotbeds of conflict while trying to exit Afghanistan and Iraq, so its role in the Arab Spring was not active. The American absence of determination in dealing with Mubarak's downfall in Egypt in 2011 and the Syrian civil war disappointed Saudi leaders as it signified a growth of Shiite power.¹¹⁸

Uncertainty gave way to an arms race in the Middle East and challenges to Saudi hegemony. States like Qatar tried to distance themselves from the dispute, avoiding sticking to Riyadh or Teheran agendas instead imposing their own. Doha has attempted to establish itself as the hegemon in the Sunni bloc and the interlocutor of Western countries in mediation matters, distancing itself from the parishioner Saudi foreign policy.¹¹⁹ The growing tension winded up in a diplomatic crisis manifested in a blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Allegedly, the reason was Qatari financing of terrorist cells, but it was also related to the rapprochement of Qatar with Turkey and Iran, as well as divergences on the political situations in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen.¹²⁰

Simultaneously, the Obama administration opened a dialogue channel with Iran because it was now seen as a key actor in restoring stability in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹²¹ Western *detente* with an enemy plunged the Kingdom into an identity crisis that was compensated for through aggression and self-affirmation.¹²² The exclusion of Saudi Arabia's opinion in the negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was seen by the Saudi royal family as supporting Shiite interests and disregarding its role as an interlocutor.¹²³

The imposition of Saudi hegemony was not possible in a context characterized by the rupture of the Sunni bloc¹²⁴ and the emergence of wayward actors afraid to become vassals. The incapacity of the Al-Saud family to preserve peace in the neighborhood undermined their relationships with Western countries, which are crucial to Saudi foreign and security policies.

115 Montagu, *Civil Society in Saudi Arabia*, 22.

116 The al-Khalifa family professes Sunni Islam in a country with a Shiite majority.

117 Hernández Martínez, *La política exterior de Arabia Saudí en Oriente Medio tras la primavera árabe*, 227.

118 Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia and the United States*, 4. David Hernández Martínez, "The United States and Saudi Arabia alliance in the 21st century. The presidency of George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump." *Revista del Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos* 15, (2020): 15, (2020): 209-230.

119 Kepel, *Away from chaos*.

120 Hernández Martínez, *La política exterior de Arabia Saudí en Oriente Medio tras la primavera árabe*. Kepel, *Away from chaos*.

121 Baxter and Simpson, "The United States and Saudi Arabia through the Arab Uprisings."

122 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 237.

123 Hernández Martínez, "The United States and Saudi Arabia alliance in the 21st century."

124 The GCC was also fully fractured. Kuwait maintained contacts with Qatar and offered to serve as mediator and Oman lifted the embargo at its ports and airports, Kepel, *Away from chaos*.

4.1. THE RISE OF MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN

In 2015, with the ascension of King Salman to the throne, the armed forces turned into a deterrent element in service of regional policy objectives. Mohammed bin Salman, who was in charge of the Ministry of Defence, decided to lead an intervention in Yemen with the Emirati's support, Egypt's absence, and the Western countries' hesitation. During a time of geopolitical confrontation with Iran, war in Yemen and skepticism about the reliability of Western states as security partners, the Saudi leadership found a solution to guarantee the royal family legitimacy through a nationalistic narrative based on a Saudi, Arabic and Islamic identity.¹²⁵

The Houthis, a political and military group whose majority members profess the Zaydi variant of Shia Islam, were rapidly gaining territory with the intention of overthrowing the central Government. Operation Decisive Storm was not based on a political coincidence or legalism, but on a fear of Shiite influence extending into Saudi Arabia's perceived zone of influence.¹²⁶ The use of this "danger discourse" has been twofold. In the first place, to boost internal unity against an external enemy. In the second place, to fulfill the Al-Saud perception that the discursive construction of Iranian interference in regional conflicts is necessary to validate its role as an essential interlocutor and a security partner of the West.¹²⁷ However, the United States restricted their military action to the fighting of extremist jihadism and did not engage in the conflict with the Houthis. The operation continued but the desired outcome was never achieved. On the contrary, the sectarian narrative only strengthened the bond between the Houthis and Iran.

Moreover, the coalition led by the Kingdom has shown little regard for the human rights of Yemeni civilians, creating an unprecedented humanitarian crisis denounced by international media, Western citizens, the European Parliament, the American Congress and the United Nations.¹²⁸ The crisis worsened in 2018 with the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi dissident journalist, at the Saudi Arabia's embassy in Turkey. The UN's Human Rights Council held the Kingdom responsible, with several individuals accused of participating in the murder plot, including Mohammed bin Salman who had been the heir to the throne since 2017.

Western defense and security cooperation has been affected. The European Parliament proposed a halt in arms transfers to the Kingdom, which was abided by Germany, Finland and Denmark. In addition, the United States, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom all imposed sanctions on Saudi citizens and severely reduced cooperation with the Al-Saud family.¹²⁹ The country's media representation in the West has deteriorated as a result of the

125 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 6, 24.

126 Van Rij and Wilkinson, *Security cooperation with Saudi Arabia: Is it worth it for the UK?*

127 Paloma González Del Miño and David Hernández Martínez, "The Salman Doctrines in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy: objectives and the use of military forces." *Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations* 8, no. 16 (2019): 106-128. <https://doi.org/10.22456/2238-6912.95424>.

128 Alhoussein, *Saudi First*. Van Rij and Wilkinson, *Security cooperation with Saudi Arabia: Is it worth it for the UK?*. Maria-Louise Clausen, "Delegation or intervention: Yemen as a theatre for the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia," in *Saudi Arabia and Iran* ed. by Simon Mabon and Edward Wastnidge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022). Van Rij and Wilkinson, *Security cooperation with Saudi Arabia: Is it worth it for the UK?* Juneau, *Saudi Arabia's costly war in Yemen*.

129 BBC, "Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death", (24 February 2021), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>.

UN determining the country's direct responsibility in the assassination of Khashoggi¹³⁰ and denouncing Yemen's humanitarian crisis.¹³¹ Many companies and entrepreneurs decided not to attend "Davos in the Desert," an economic and financial conference organized by the Crown Prince to advance the Vision 2030 agenda.¹³²

The content of the Saudi "conservative" role mutated in absence of its securitarian basis. When the narrative gets devoid of egoist interests that justify a relationship with a heterogeneous actor, it becomes more susceptible to normative discourse.¹³³ If Saudi Arabia does not serve Western interests, it loses relevance in their securitarian apparatus. By 2018, the relationship not only brought limited benefits but also carried high reputational costs. Citizens of Western countries criticized the provision of arms to a Saudi Kingdom¹³⁴ that never met its expectations for social, religious and political reform. In this context, the logical basis for the bond no longer seemed obvious or, at least, easily justifiable.¹³⁵

5. SAUDI VISION 2030

Mohammed bin Salman has been the representative of a generational change in the State and the main artificer of the most recent Saudi national development plan: Saudi Vision 2030. This blueprint has become a symbol of the Prince's domestic ambitions and his efforts to address young people's concerns.¹³⁶ He understood that failing to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy, enact profound societal changes, and modify the country's international platform would lead to the end of the Saudi model.¹³⁷ The Crown Prince has expressed his dissatisfaction with the course Saudi Arabia has taken since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and is unwilling to risk the country's future combating extremist ideologies that have questioned the State's authority and diminished the Kingdom's stance on the international stage.¹³⁸

130 UN News, "Khashoggi murder 'an international crime,' says UN-appointed rights investigator: Special in-depth UN News Interview," (20 June, 2019), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1040951>.

131 Baxter and Simpson, "The United States and Saudi Arabia through the Arab Uprisings," 146. Van Rij and Wilkinson, *Security cooperation with Saudi Arabia: Is it worth it for the UK?*, 6. Chase Winter, "Saudis squash criticism of Yemen war," *DW*, (10 June 2016), <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-effort-to-squash-criticism-of-yemen-war-violations-may-backfire/a-19322083>. Lisa Schlein, "UN Committee Blasts Saudi Arabia on Yemen Child Deaths," *VOA*, (11 October, 2018), <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-committee-blasts-saudi-arabia-on-yemen-child-deaths/4609668.html>. UN News, "UN chief condemns attacks on civilian facilities in Saudi Arabia and Yemen," (27 March 2022), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114832>.

132 Zahraa Alkhalisi, "Saudi investment conference opens in the shadow of Khashoggi's death," *CNN Business*, (23 October 2018), <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/23/business/saudi-arabia-investment-conference/index.html>.

133 Patrick Conge and Gwenn Okruhlik, "The Power of Narrative: Saudi Arabia, the United States and the Search for Security," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 3 (2009): 359-374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530190903338904>.

134 Van Rij and Wilkinson, *Security cooperation with Saudi Arabia: Is it worth it for the UK?*

135 Simon Tisdall, "Saudi Arabia and the West: how a cosy relationship turned toxic." *The Guardian*, 27 January, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/27/saudi-arabia-and-the-west-how-cosy-relationship-turned-toxic>.

136 Alhusein, *Saudi First*, 6.

137 Kepel, *Away from chaos*, 252.

138 Martin Chulov, "I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says crown prince," *The Guardian*, 24 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia and the United States*.

Announced in 2016, Saudi Vision 2030 could be more accurately described as a roadmap than a detailed strategy since it states objectives and public compromises, but it is not clear how these shall be met. The main mission remains the same as enunciated in previous plans: to diversify the national economy, reduce dependence on public spending, and create new job opportunities. Nonetheless, it also aims to achieve a more dynamic and independent private sector, eliminate fiscal deficits, focus on efficiency in public structures and open the social sphere, among other goals.¹³⁹

Saudi Vision 2030 is not a homogenization with Western models of nation-states, nor is it a holistic modernization effort. It can be more accurately described as a hybridization process in which Saudi Arabia's identity internalizes exogenous factors perceived as compatible with the existing power structure in order to preserve political stability and royal legitimacy.

A common misconception is viewing traditionalist and modernist forces as opposing each other, whereas they often function in a symbiotic way. Strengthening traditional social structures has typically been a necessary prelude for the introduction of economic modernization measures, just as social reforms have had on multiple occasions the intention of validating political power.¹⁴⁰ The lens should always address how these forces complement each other to assure the viability of the Saudi regime.¹⁴¹

5.1. NATIONALISM

In order to reform the legitimacy of the Al-Saud family and change Saudi Arabia's international image, the government, through the Saudi Vision 2030 efforts, has embraced a nationalist rhetoric anchored in the philosophy of moderate Islam and a proud Saudi nation.

The nation-building process has been consolidated as a key instrument to modify the social contract, reduce the influence of the clergy, and facilitate a new generation of Saudis to ascend to power.¹⁴² By reshaping power structures, the incorporation of notions alien to Islamic discourse such as "inclusion" or "gender equality," also aims to reinforce political power and shield the monarchy's legitimacy. The decline of 'custom'—the conservative narrative—inevitably changes the 'tradition' it is habitually intertwined with.¹⁴³

The increase in state-sponsored nationalist discourse, such as the celebration of a National Day,¹⁴⁴ appeals to a largely fictitious national past as a response to a novel situation by referencing old ones.¹⁴⁵ In 2022, "Founders Day" was established as a new national holiday commemorating the beginning of the first Saudi state, set 17 years prior to the pact between the Al-Saud and Al-Wahhab families. The Crown Prince's imposition of this policy illustrates a distancing from Wahhabi legitimization of his authority.¹⁴⁶ This is evidence of a hallmark of

139 Pierre Rostan and Alexandra Rostan, "Where is Saudi Arabia's economy heading?," *International Journal of Emerging Markets* 16, no. 8 (2020): 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOEM-08-2018-0447>.

140 Tim Niblock, *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*. (London & New York, Routledge, 2015).

141 Ibid.

142 Alhusein, *Saudi First*, 2.

143 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *La invención de la tradición*, 3.

144 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 23.

145 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *La invención de la tradición*.

146 Zofia Sawicka and Aldona Piwko, "Contemporary Saudi identity: From religious identity to national identity,"

nationalist rhetoric: the broadening of the secular elements that compose the Saudi nation. The concept of "invented tradition" is useful in understanding the complex nature of national identity formation, weaving together objective and subjective factors.¹⁴⁷

The invention of traditions is expected when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed, or when they are no longer sufficiently adaptable and flexible.¹⁴⁸ The hermetic and parochial nature of Saudi Arabia's identity had become antiquated in facing the challenges posed by both the international and national context posed to the country.

Conservative customs are not capable of securing royal legitimacy in the modern context. However, Islamic dogmas still being the basis of governmental actions means the foundation of the Saudi nation aims not to replace custom or the preexisting system of loyalties, but to try to co-opt them around a collective identity through an appeal to an idealized past.

Customs cannot afford to be unchanging but they do not always have to be entirely new. "Novelty is no less novel for being able to dress up as antiquity."¹⁴⁹ Conversely, change and creativity are not possible without tradition.¹⁵⁰ The philosophy of "moderated Islam," reflected in Vision 2030, does not radically transform the custom, but rather adapts it to a novel situation. "Combining modernizing and traditional policies, the Kingdom validates itself on its religious authority and yet has promoted some Western values in its society."¹⁵¹

Islamic legitimacy is preserved while creating space for a deep transformation of the social contract and the advancement of social and cultural reforms through a narrative that emphasizes the nation. The term "moderation" or "moderate Islam" has become a sort of empty signifier.¹⁵² Its malleability allows it to represent both a series of social reforms claimed from inside the Kingdom, and the Western requests to combat against extremism and protect human rights, without straying away from religious legitimacy.

5.2. THE PATH TO A NEW SAUDI SOCIAL CONTRACT

The Kingdom has profoundly transformed the basis of the social contract in three fundamental ways: power concentration has replaced the consensus-guided process of decision-making; the state has assumed functions traditionally exerted by the religious establishment; and citizens have become contributors to the public good, no longer being mere beneficiaries.

The ascent of Mohammed bin Salman within the Government is evidence of a fast power concentration process. Traditionally, public policies have been conditioned by strong bloodline connections that regulated the decision-making procedures. The Al-Saud lineage is

European Journal of Science and Theology 19, no. 6 (2023): 24.

147 Bairner, "National sports and national landscapes: In defence of primordialism," 225.

148 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *La invención de la tradición*, 4-5.

149 *Ibid.*, 5.

150 Archetti, *Masculinities: Football, Polo and the Tango in Argentina*, 103.

151 Montagu, *Civil Society in Saudi Arabia*, 5.

152 Coined by Ernesto Laclau, it refers to an element capable of agglutinating and endowing with coherence heterogeneous demands, independently of their content.

constituted by dozens of relatives from diverse branches who compete for power, influence, and positions within the state. The Crown Prince has centralized economic policymaking within a small circle of trusted ministers and advisors to boost confidence in the credibility of the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030.¹⁵³

Prominent figures coming from the Al-Saud family, media, intellectual circles, business elites, and the Government were arrested at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh in 2017. This was presented as a blow to corruption¹⁵⁴—a growing concern among the Arab youth¹⁵⁵— it also conveyed a message to these constituencies about the new direction of decision-making in the Kingdom. Once guided by consensus, decision-making was now oriented by centralization of power in a small circle around Mohammed bin Salman, the *de facto* ruler¹⁵⁶ of Saudi Arabia, leaving no room for baronies.¹⁵⁷

These arrests drastically reduced the amount of criticism from religious figures, as they became aware that the State would not hesitate to target them.¹⁵⁸ The Vision enunciates its intention of reform in educational and social spheres, sectors which were traditionally regulated by the religious establishment. In 2016, King Salman expanded the Council of senior ulema to include two moderate clerics to support the social liberalization associated with Vision 2030.¹⁵⁹ These events highlighted the Crown Prince's intention to temper the transactional relationship between the dynasty and the *ulemas* by reducing their decision-making power.

Although the clampdown on the religious establishment was the prelude to the introduction of reforms, such as allowing women to drive,¹⁶⁰ it didn't translate into more space for associational life. The approach is clear and unquestionable: top-down. The Saudi State has absorbed the responsibility for the social sphere, imposing its own volition and prohibiting any form of social activism.¹⁶¹ The boundaries for associational national life have been carefully delimited in a top-down fashion in an effort to channel citizenship ideas and expectations without directly involving them in policy-making.

Citizens are no longer just recipients of benefits, but must also turn into active contributors to the public good.¹⁶² This sector of society absorbed the impact of public sector pay cuts, reductions in subsidies, and the introduction of new taxes, at the same time, while facing difficulties in finding a job. In 2017, almost twice as many Saudis worked in the public sector compared to the private sector, which was largely staffed by expatriates willing to accept lower wages and longer working hours.¹⁶³ To fill the voids the absence of the state has

153 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 10–11.

154 Stephan Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince: Economic Reforms and Power Consolidation in Saudi Arabia*, (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2019).

155 ASDAA BCW, *Living A New Reality*.

156 This event was preceded by the institution of a *de facto* hereditary monarchy, Kepel, *Away from chaos*.

157 Mireia Fonseca Claparols, *Mohammed bin Salman and His Foreign Policy: Shifting Tendencies in his Quest for Legitimacy* (Barcelona: Blanquerna Ramon Llull University, 2023). Kepel, *Away from chaos*.

158 Alhussein, *Saudi First*, 10.

159 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 20.

160 Alhussein, *Saudi First*.

161 Alhussein, *Saudi First*.

162 Alhussein, *Saudi First*, 6.

163 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 15.

created, the Public Investment Fund (PIF) is expected to fulfill a bigger role in the economy. Its functions include serving as a stabilization fund to shield public finances from external shocks, improving the competitiveness of the Saudi economy, and attracting foreign investments.¹⁶⁴ The interventionist capacity of the State has been concentrated on the sovereign wealth fund. The Fund directly responds to the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, led by Mohammed bin Salman, and operates as an investment company, so the use of the funds remains at his discretion. He can channel the Fund's capital to projects he personally favours without being subject to adequate governmental supervision.¹⁶⁵ Thus, the political and economic power remains highly concentrated, attaching the personal capital of Prince Salman to the economic transformation of Saudi Arabia.¹⁶⁶

5.3. A NOVEL INTERSUBJECTIVE IDENTITY

In order to preserve its attractiveness in the West, Saudi Arabia needed to restructure its international image at a time when its foreign policy had generated negative publicity in the West.¹⁶⁷ This is linked not only to the interest in luring Western tourists and investments, which are crucial for achieving national development targets, but also for safeguarding its traditional securitarian relationship with the United States and European countries.

However, the interest in preserving this cooperative system is subject to reassessment of the terms on which these interactions have historically developed. If the objectives of each part have converged, it has been due to the Saudi's willingness to adapt to Washington's foreign policy.¹⁶⁸ When there is an imbalance in material capacities, interactions tend to evolve in a way that favors the most powerful actor's desires.¹⁶⁹ The approach adopted by the Kingdom has prioritized the increase of its own military capacities, diversification of bonds, and soft power resources.

Saudi Arabia is highly dependent on weaponry imports from the West, a situation that has previously posed a threat to national interests. In consequence, one of the many targets of the Vision is to develop an indigenous arms industry that permits auto-sufficiency in terms of defense and security, as well as contributing to economic diversification.¹⁷⁰

Saudi Vision 2030 recognizes the hegemonic pretension over the Arab and Muslim spheres, but also its excellent geostrategic position as a Euro-Afro-Asian nexus of commerce, cultures, and people. An extrapolation of the nationalistic narrative under the slogan "Saudi First" replaced the idealistic conservative discourse with a more pragmatic and patient one in order to reduce regional tensions.¹⁷¹

164 Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince*, 10.

165 Stanis Elsborg and Karim Zidan, *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*, (Play the Game, 2024). Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince*, 16.

166 Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince*, 6.

167 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 40.

168 Gallarotti and Isam Y. Al-Filali "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power," 244.

169 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 331.

170 Van Rij and Wilkinson, *Security cooperation with Saudi Arabia: Is it worth it for the UK?*

171 Ana Jacobs, "Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy." *International Crisis Group*, 14 September, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/saudi-arabia/understanding-saudi-arabias>; Santiago Ott, *La naciente industria militar saudí: entre la autonomía y la*

A Western securitarian enemy, such as Russia, has reinforced its link with the Kingdom through OPEP+, a key institution for the cartelization of international oil prices in which both countries have acted jointly.¹⁷² Saudi Arabia has also established new commercial relationships with China, particularly concerning military armament and hydrocarbons.¹⁷³ In 2023, Saudi Arabia re-established formal relations with Iran, with China acting as a broker, to create a geopolitical climate favorable to the imposition of the Saudi economic agenda.

With the dismissal of the sectarian narrative, a channel for Saudi Arabia to remove itself from the conflict in Yemen has emerged. Former Secretary of State Anthony Blinken asked the Saudi leadership to assist in the retaliation against the Houthis, who had supported Hamas in the war against Israel and created a crisis in the Red Sea. However, Mohammed bin Salman declined in order to prioritise peace talks and cultivate political influence in Yemen.¹⁷⁴ Riyadh will keep on cooperating with Washington and its allies on certain initiatives, such as mediation efforts in Sudan, but will not bend its will to their agenda.¹⁷⁵

5.3.1. A SOFT POWER-BASED INTERNATIONAL PLATFORM

The Saudi nation's values, lifestyle, and culture in general, being completely traversed by Arab and Islamic heritage, have been of little interest to orchestrate diplomatic strategies beyond the Middle East. Cultural diplomacy is oriented towards the enhancement of the international image, the dissemination of values, and cultural cooperation, among others.¹⁷⁶ This is a relatively new phenomenon to Saudi Arabia due to the lack of a unified nationalistic narrative supporting the regime before Vision 2030.¹⁷⁷ Prior to 2016, the Kingdom showed a limited interest in communicating with foreign audiences, only elicited in the face of securitarian menaces in the region.¹⁷⁸ Culture is useful only where it is appealing and if it comes from an actor with moral authority in the eyes of its counterparts. The lack of secular elements that appeal to Western audiences explains the Kingdom's relative inexperience.

Historically, the Kingdom's influence beyond the Arab and Muslim spheres rested upon its moral authority derived from its role as the guarantor of regional peace and its collaboration within multilateral networks of cooperation.¹⁷⁹ In an International System that has been profoundly altered, traditional sources of soft power have waned in their capacity to deliver favourable outcomes. To address current challenges, the Kingdom has been compelled to reassess the importance of its diplomatic strategies.

dependencia, Consejo Argentino para las Relaciones Internacionales, (September 2025).

172 Sergey Vakulenko, *Russia's Great Energy Game in the Middle East*, Carnegie Europe, 12 November, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/russias-great-energy-game-in-the-middle-east?lang=en>.

173 Hernández Martínez, *La política exterior de Arabia Saudí en Oriente Medio tras la primavera árabe*.

174 Veena Ali-Khan, "Why Saudi Arabia Is Staying on the Sidelines in the Red Sea Conflict.," *Foreign Policy*, January 16, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/16/saudi-arabia-red-sea-conflict-houthis-us-strike/>.

175 House, *Saudi First*, 12.

176 Konopka and Strykhotyski, "Cultural Diplomacy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the context of the Vision 2030 Strategy Implementation."

177 Gallarotti and Isam Y. Al-Filali "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power," 243.

178 Alyusufi, "The Transformation of Saudi Arabia's Public Diplomacy."

179 Gallarotti and Isam Y. Al-Filali "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power," 240, 250.

The space for agreements in terms of norms and principles, a key element of soft power,¹⁸⁰ has been reduced. While Western countries have tried to export their values, as part of their international platforms, Saudi Arabia's relatively dim incorporation of the human right's agenda into the domestic arena has subjected it to its particularism,¹⁸¹ diminishing its moral authority in the West.

The expansion of soft power is dependent on diplomacy as a vehicle for culture and everything it encompasses: principles, values, lifestyle, policies, and institutions.¹⁸² New public diplomacy goes beyond traditional diplomacy by considering public opinion and global media narratives that affect how information is depicted and how public policies are developed.¹⁸³ Its impact is not directed only to international audiences but also extends to local ones, making it valuable in nation-building processes.

As part of the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi officials have resorted to new foreign policy approaches. In 2019, the Public Diplomacy Agency was established within the Ministry of Foreign Relations.¹⁸⁴ In hopes of reaching both Arab and Western audiences, Saudi Arabia has put an emphasis on entertainment and, especially, in the sports sector in its public diplomacy strategies.

6. THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

Sports diplomacy is a vehicle for the communication of identities, values, and narratives and, thus, a tool to conquer people's minds and hearts. Political exploitation of sports and global sporting events is not novel, but its manifestations have grown in recent times. Emergent states have taken a growing interest in them as a way to promote a national ideology, showcase internal reforms globally, alter their international image, further legitimise their governments, and leverage their position in the International System.¹⁸⁵ The strategic use of sport expresses the culture, values, attractiveness and prestige of a nation.¹⁸⁶

According to the IOC, international sport and its events are a force capable of building bridges for intercultural dialogue and promoting human rights, equality, and world peace, aligning

180 Gallarotti and Isam Y. Al-Filali "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power."

181 Favre, *La transformación intencional de las estructuras identitarias en la relación entre Arabia Saudita y Occidente*, 28.

182 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The means to success in world politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). Alkatheeri and Khan, "A Perspective on Saudi Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy."

183 Nicholas J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy Before Gullion: The Evolution of a Phrase," in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* ed. by Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull (London & New York: Routledge, 2020), 13.

184 Ibid.

185 Ranno Koorep, *Geopolitics of Sports Mega-events: Why is International Sport Moving to Emerging Countries?* (PhD, University of Tartu, 2018). Kammila Swart and Rauf N. Mammadov, "Bidding and Hosting Decisions," in *The Business of the FIFA World Cup* ed. by Simon Chadwick; Paul Widdop; Christos Anagnostopoulos and Daniel Parrell (London & New York: Routledge, 2022).

186 Simon Chadwick; Paul Widdop and Nicholas Burton, "Soft Power Sports Sponsorship - A Social Network Analysis of a New Sponsorship Form." *Journal of Political Marketing* 21, no. 2 (2020): 196-217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2020.1723781>. Andrew L Johns, "Competing in the Global Arena: Sport and Foreign Relations since 1945," in *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945*, ed. by Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

with the principles of cultural diplomacy.¹⁸⁷ In a global context that pushes states to pay more attention to public diplomacy strategies, sport has risen in relevance as a foreign policy instrument capable of promoting a national narrative and boosting soft power.

Sport has been utilized by the Arab world as a platform for expressing political identity and strengthening the edification of nation-states.¹⁸⁸ The Saudi State has traditionally found in sports an important tool for fostering a sense of community.¹⁸⁹ Nowadays, it has turned into an instrument to boost the modernizing agenda¹⁹⁰ and the foundation of a new identity based on a balance between exogenous factors and Arab, Muslim, and Saudi authenticity.¹⁹¹

In this sense, the strategic use of sport emerges as a tool for the Saudi regime to modify its identity in the West from a conservative stronghold into a modern and diverse country, but also as a key element in the nation-building process, equally necessary in order to export a culture. The ultimate aim of these objectives is none other than assuring the perpetuation of the Saudi model and the safeguard of the Al-Saud political legitimacy.

6.1. QUALITY OF LIFE PROGRAM: A GLOBAL SPORTING DESTINATION

The Saudi Vision 2030 aims to broaden the entertainment dimensions and the scope of leisure opportunities available to citizens, which were very limited prior to 2018.¹⁹² The objective of turning Saudi Arabia into a global entertainment powerhouse suggests that the new leadership recognizes a desire among the youth for greater social freedoms and a wider range of recreational and cultural offerings.¹⁹³ The State aims to partially live up to these expectations to compensate for the reduction in citizens' benefits.

The Internet has enabled the spreading of exogenous influences—related to alternative political, cultural, and religious systems—within the local population, eroding the contention that Wahhabism intended to provide.¹⁹⁴ The younger generations have been exposed to Dubai's or Doha's lifestyles, which offer fewer restrictions and a richer cultural offer. To prevent religious radicalization, the unregulated circulation of alien ideas, and a possible exodus of young people, Saudi Arabia has been pushed to compete with its neighbours.¹⁹⁵

In 2018, the Quality of Life Program was launched with the intention of ensuring inhabitants' participation and inclusion in cultural, sporting, touristic, and entertainment activities. Its

187 Konopka and Taras Strykhotyski, "Cultural Diplomacy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the context of the Vision 2030 Strategy Implementation," 144.

188 Mahfoud Amara and Sarah M. Al-Naimi, "Geopolitics of sport in the MENA region" in *The Geopolitical Economy of Sport* ed. by Simon Chadwick; Michael M. Goldman and Paul Widdop (London & New York: Routledge, 2023).

189 Fawaz Alhakami, "Strategy and Strategising. An Examination of sports clubs privatisation strategy in Saudi Arabia" (PhD, Brunel University, 2014).

190 James Dorsey, "Saudi Arabia Steps Up Effort to Replace UAE and Qatar as Go-To Regional Hub." The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 6 July, 2021, <https://besacenter.org/saudi-arabia-regional-hub/>.

191 Amara as it was cited in Thomas Ross Griffin, "National identity, social legacy and Qatar 2022: the cultural ramifications of FIFA's first Arab World Cup." *Soccer and Society* 20, no. 7-8 (2019): 1002, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2019.1680499>

192 Montagu, *Civil Society in Saudi Arabia*.

193 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*, 29.

194 Hernández Martínez, *La política exterior de Arabia Saudí en Oriente Medio tras la primavera árabe*.

195 Vitas R. Carosella, "Football as Soft Power: The Political Use of Football in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." *Abdoul Filali-Ansary Occasional Paper Series*, book 8 (November 2022).

pillars include infrastructure development, providing opportunities, broadening lifestyle options and organizing cultural and sporting events.

In order to diversify its economy and abandon the rentier paradigm, the Saudi Vision 2030 intends to orchestrate the construction of a Saudi sports industry that represents approximately 1.5% of the GDP. With the launch of the national development plan, the disbursement of US\$650 million was announced for sports clubs to upgrade their facilities and boost the interest in sporting events.¹⁹⁶

In 2016, the Ministry Council approved Mohammed bin Salman's recommendation to advance with the "Sports Club Investment and Privatization Project"¹⁹⁷ to create investment opportunities, boost professionalism, assure financial sustainability, and enhance teams' competitiveness. Only in 2023 was the continuation of a process that began in 2002¹⁹⁸ possible with the announcement of the transfer of a 75% share of the four most important national clubs: Al Hilal, Al Nassr, Al Ittihad and Al Ahli to the PIF.

The Quality of Life Program sets two objectives exclusively related to the sporting dimension: increasing public participation in physical activities and achieving regional and international excellence. In achieving these targets, as the document states, Saudi Arabia aims to become a global sports destination and fully integrate into the international sport ecosystem.

These efforts have been carried out through a series of eight main practices: sporting events organization, sports resources acquisitions, sports sponsoring, national clubs privatizations, reforms on women's role in sports and society, memorandums of understanding and partnership agreements, competent cultural ambassadors,¹⁹⁹ and high performance strategies.²⁰⁰

Saudi intentions to become a global sports player have not gone unnoticed by Western audiences. Saudi Arabia has been the target of criticism from the media accusing the Kingdom of engaging in sports washing, a practice used by political regimes to divert attention towards its sports associations in order to conceal human, political, and labour rights abuses.²⁰¹ If Mohammed bin Salman is indeed using sport as a medium to elicit benevolence within Western audiences, his naive efforts will probably fall on deaf ears. An international actor's image cannot be modified through a mere marketing campaign if it lacks substance and symbolic actions that demonstrate a change in behaviour.²⁰² For the Kingdom, sport is also a

196 Grand and Wolff, *Assessing Saudi Vision 2030: A 2020 Review*.

197 Only football clubs were considered as the rest of sports clubs are completely dependent on public funds and generate derisory interest from media and investors, Alhakami, "Strategy and Strategising", 199–200, 209.

198 The Saudi Crown first adopted a strategy towards sports clubs privatization in 2002, but its development was slow due to ambiguity in the objectives of the plan and political, economic, or legal barriers, Alhakami, "Strategy and Strategising."

199 Abdi; Talebpour; Fullerton; Ranjkesh and Nooghabi, *Converting sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcomes*, 4.

200 Loc cit.

201 Colm Kearns; Gary Sinclair; Jack Black *et al*, "'Best run club in the world': Manchester City fans and the legitimization of sportswashing?." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 59, no. 4 (2023): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902231210784>.

202 Simon Anholt, "Beyond the Nation Brand: The Role of Image and Identity in International Relations," in *Brands and Brandings Geographies*, ed. by Andy Pike. (Newcastle: Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies – CURDS, 2011).

communicative resource to globally publicise its internal reforms.

7. THE SPORTING BODY AS THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY OF MILLIONS

According to Saudi Vision 2030, the national identity should be something that citizens can take pride in. The discourse promoted by the central power constructs an identity by producing meanings about what the nation is.²⁰³ Due to the elusiveness of the components of the Saudi national identity, the voids must be filled with invented traditions.

Patriotism is not completely ingrained in the Arabian Peninsula as the national identity is not the primary source of personal identification among Arab youth.²⁰⁴ Thus, it must be inculcated through a series of practices that evoke an idealized past. "Sport, being inherently competitive and based on a hierarchical valuing of worth, binds people to the dominant traditions associated with the nation."²⁰⁵

Historically, sport has been an important tool to forge a national identity through the generation of scenarios where a "nation" is materialized into something tangible.²⁰⁶ "The sporting body bears triumphant national mythologies in a double way: extending the body to encompass the nation and compressing it to obscure the social divisions that threaten national unity."²⁰⁷ Sport can function as an "anchor of meaning" during a time when cultures are experiencing the effects of globalization and Western influence,²⁰⁸ which will most certainly pose a threat to local identities.²⁰⁹

Eric Hobsbawm applies Benedict Anderson's concept of an "imagined community" to conceptualise sport as an effective instrument in the construction of a feeling of national belonging.²¹⁰²¹¹ "The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people."²¹²

The approach adopted by the Saudi leadership has focused on glorifying Saudi geography, local architecture, and pre-Islamic heritage. The relationship between national sports and the landscapes they are commonly associated with helps us understand the reproduction of certain readings of the nation.²¹³ Invented traditions tie together two landscapes: the real

203 Maguire, *Globalization, sport and national identities*, 979.

204 ASDA' A BCW, *Living A New Reality*.

205 Maguire, *Globalization, sport and national identities*, 991.

206 Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter, "Introduction," in *Sport and National Identity in the Post-War World* ed. by Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter (London & New York: Routledge, 2004).

207 Miller *et al* as it was cited in Bairner, "National sports and national landscapes: In defence of primordialism," 226–227.

208 Maguire, *Globalization, sport and national identities*, 990.

209 Kinninmont, *Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract*.

210 Smith and Dilwyn Porter, "Introduction."

211 The global expansion of sports was possible thanks to British citizens who exported several disciplines which turned out to be an important expression of national identities in the decolonization and independence processes of territories all around the world, Smith and Dilwyn Porter, "Introduction." Closer in time, the role of sport was recognized by the European Union as a key in the development of an European identity, Jean-Loup Chappelet and Brenda Kübler-Mabbott, *The International Olympic Committee and the Olympic System* (London: Routledge Global Institutions, 2008).

212 Smith and Dilwyn Porter, "Introduction," 5.

213 Bairner, "National sports and national landscapes: In defence of primordialism."

one, lying beneath our feet, and the perceived one, made up of remembered accounts and hypotheses about the real one.²¹⁴

Traditional Saudi sports like dromedary races or falconry are closely related to the country's topography. In modern times, these disciplines pale in relevance *vis a vis* association football, which is regarded as the national sport due to being the most popular one. However, popularity is not the sole criterion the State has based its decision to support football's growth at the national level.²¹⁵ It is also linked to how the Saudi nation is presented for the purposes of nation building, marketing domestic products, and promoting tourism.²¹⁶

Tourism marketing communicates appealing images of the country, trying to influence perceptions through cognitive and affective elements. For example, Jeddah, aside from hosting football spectacles and the only Formula 1 nocturnal race, is a prominent commercial centre visited by millions of Muslim pilgrims due to its proximity to Mecca. The existence of projects like Diriyah and Al Ula, which enhance cultural heritage and national landscapes, endow the public efforts to forge an attractive nation with rich visual content. The former project consists in the conversion of the zone where the Al-Saud family originated into a touristic asset, while the latter is a World Heritage Site featuring ancient pagan monuments from the pre-Islamic era. The search for symbols of a Saudi nation that, while emphasizing its Islamic character, can also build distinct characteristics that appeal to new audiences has been favoured by the hosting of several sporting events.

The Saudi Tour, a cycling competition, unifies the sporting experience with a cultural one thanks to the landscapes of Al Ula. The SUV Xtreme E is an electric vehicle race that was held in NEOM, one of the giga-projects spearheaded by the PIF that aims to be fully sustainable. Diriyah has staged, among others, the Diriyah Cup, an international tennis competition, and the Diriyah ePrix, a race part of the Formula e Championship. Lastly, the Rally Dakar, a race that traverses inhospitable territories all around the Saudi geography, highlights the ambition to showcase the Kingdom's touristic and archaeological sites.

"These competitions fill the landscape with a 'sense of place,' a fundamental part of territorial identity and of geographical understanding."²¹⁷ Crucial in this process has been the media-sport production complex which projects images to large global audiences, allowing sport events to serve as vehicles for the expression of ideologies.²¹⁸ Sport media are at the center of the inherent contradiction that international sport hosts since it offers consumers the possibility of crossing spaces and boundaries and establishes points of geographical identification for the audience.²¹⁹

214 Ibid, 225.

215 James Mcauley, "PIF takes control of Al Hilal, Al Nassr, Al Ittihad and Al Ahli in Saudi Pro League." *The National*, 5 June, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/sport/football/2023/06/05/pif-takes-control-of-al-hilal-al-nassr-al-ittihad-and-al-ahli-in-saudi-pro-league/>.

216 Ibid.

217 Duffy as it was cited in Bairner, "National sports and national landscapes: In defence of primordialism," 232.

218 Maguire, *Globalization, sport and national identities*, 987.

219 John Bale, "Sport and national identity: a geographical view." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 3, no. 1 (1986): 18-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02649378608713587>.

7.1. ELITE NATIONAL SPORT PERFORMANCES

Sports diplomacy resources can be turned into results in various ways. One effective strategy is achieving high performance.²²⁰ "Winners will mostly remain in the minds and hearts of the people as they play at the highest level of competition and the media pays more attention to these groups telling their stories among people."²²¹ Triumphs are a medium to conquer hearts and minds.

The Quality of Life Program describes sport as a fundamental part of the lives and culture of millions of Saudi citizens. Athletes are symbols that, through association, evoke and mold what it means to be part of a nation. Elite sports can function as an element that articulates national pride²²² and promotes a shared national ideology to prepare citizens to serve for the greater national good.²²³ Football in Saudi Arabia evokes a national imagery that amalgamates the dislocated identities and obscures social diversity, as it is something that most Saudi nationals feel represented by.²²⁴

Following the Quality of Life Program, by the year 2030, at least fifty athletes should be representing Saudi Arabia at the Olympic level. The development of sports academies, like Mahd Sports Academy -inaugurated by the Minister of Sport, Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal- or Future Falcons, has already encouraged the development of students in their respective disciplines and enabled Saudi representation in international competitions. Public sports promotion has permitted several athletes, under the Elite Athletes' Development Programme, to achieve international success in disciplines like athletics, horse riding, snooker or muay thai, among others, which are exhibited in the annual report of the Quality of Life Program. International triumphs can elicit national identification within citizens²²⁵ and positively affect the Saudi identity within global audiences.

Instruction of local coaches is also a part of the sporting development process that has enabled joint work with American citizens based on shared values such as gender equity and inclusion thanks to teaching cooperation and cultural exchanges.²²⁶

7.2. COMPETENT CULTURAL AMBASSADORS²²⁷

Sport, instrumentalized by nation-states, can serve as a melting pot between ingrained national custom and "universal" values, positively sanctioning innovations. Athletes can act as useful diplomatic mediums embodying cosmopolitan values while also representing

220 Abdi; Talebpour; Fullerton; Ranjkesh and Nooghabi, *Converting sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcomes*.

221 Ibid, 4.

222 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, 66.

223 Adrian Budd, "Sport and capitalism." In *Sport and International Relations* edited by Roger Levermore and Adrian Budd (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 41.

224 Montagu, *Civil Society in Saudi Arabia*, 5, 15.

225 The Saudi football national team's victory over Argentina in Qatar 2022 World Cup was widely celebrated and recognized by Mohammed bin Salman, who was present on the stadium and decided to declare the day following the match a national holiday.

226 Dan Buchman, "ConGen Jeddah leverages community sports in Saudi Arabia," *State Magazine*, July 2023. <https://statemag.state.gov/2023/07/0723itn02/>.

227 Abdi; Talebpour; Fullerton; Ranjkesh and Nooghabi, *Converting sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcomes*.

a national identity.²²⁸ In the information age, individuals disseminate a nation's culture and values, becoming receptive and proactive agents in shaping an international agenda. This "glocal" nature of sport is key to understanding its value as a catalyst for a new Saudi identity that mixes tradition with modernity. Elite athletes, sports migrants and consumers have the capacity to reinterpret cultural products and experiences into something distinct.²²⁹

In order to achieve results, sports officials and athletes should convey the same messages as the diplomatic core of the country they represent.²³⁰ The program adopted in 2023 by Michael Emenalo, sporting director of the Saudi Pro League, aims to lure not only football stars, but also cultural ambassadors who elicit interest in the country among a new audience.²³¹ Players bring their own cultures and traditions, cultivating a feeling of sincerity and mutual understanding that has a positive impact on Saudi Arabia's international image. The nation is portrayed as one that values diversity and global connections.²³²

As part of the nationalist agenda, there has been an increase in public demonstrations of patriotism, especially on 23 September, the National Day of Saudi Arabia.²³³ Elite footballers have taken part in this phenomenon. Cristiano Ronaldo, who has been playing for Al-Nassr since 2023, was one of the protagonists of the festivity. Accompanied by his teammates, he danced the *ardah*, a national folkloric dance that is part of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List, in traditional Saudi attire. Neymar followed suit, representing the team he played for at that time, Al-Hilal. The performances were well received by Saudi audiences, who felt proud to showcase their national culture to the world.²³⁴

Both players have been subject to heavy media coverage. Their marketing campaigns for local companies were amplified by Arab media outlets that publish in English, such as Arab News, a portal perceived in the West as an outlet for the Saudi State, Al Arabiya, and APS—a public organism. Diplomatic efforts are more effective when they are communicated globally.²³⁵

Globalization, media power, international stars and economic, political and cultural interests have embedded sport in an irreversible cosmopolitan tendency²³⁶ that has been taken advantage of by the Saudi State. Through a universal language, the media related to the Government appeals to football lovers—especially those identified as "icon imitators" who admire particular athletes²³⁷— and turns players into globalized cultural models and symbols

228 Michael K. Park, "Long Shot: The Prospects and Limitations of Sports and Celebrity Athlete Diplomacy." *InMedia The French Journal of Media Studies* 6, (2017), <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.855>.

229 Maguire, *Globalization, sport and national identities*, 987.

230 Abdi; Talebpour; Fullerton; Ranjkesh and Nooghabi, *Converting sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcomes*, 4.

231 Oliver Franklin-Wallis, "Can Saudi Arabia Buy Soccer?" *GQ Sports*, 20 February, 2024, <https://www.gq.com/story/can-saudi-arabia-buy-soccer>.

232 Ali Hussain Alawi, "Sporting Diplomacy: The Role of International Players in Enhancing Saudi Arabia's Nation Branding and International Public Relations (PR) Strategies." *Journal of Media & Management* 6, no. 9 (2024), 3–4.

233 Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia's New Nationalism." *Project Syndicate*, 29 September, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/MbS-behind-saudi-nationalist-surge-by-bernard-haykel-2023-09>.

234 Arab News, "Ronaldo and teammates don Saudi traditional attire in Nassr Saudi National Day video." *Arab News*, 22 September, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2378436/saudi-football>.

235 Abdi; Talebpour; Fullerton; Ranjkesh and Nooghabi, *Converting sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcomes*.

236 Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 34.

237 André Bühler, "Engaging fans at FIFA World Cups," in *The Business of the FIFA World Cup* ed. by Simon Chadwick;

of a sports market that reaches the entire world.²³⁸ Access to the regulation of the flow of information constitutes a vital part of soft power²³⁹ that influences the translation of events in accordance with certain narratives.²⁴⁰

8. THE SUBSTANCE OF THE CHANGE: SUFFICIENT OR NOT?

The expansion of the social sphere, as outlined in Vision 2030 and the Quality of Life Program, is structured around a compromise with equality and inclusion.²⁴¹²⁴² It endows women with a fundamental role in national economic and social transformation. The Saudi government has accelerated efforts initiated during Abdullah's reign²⁴³ to incorporate women into Saudi society, to address economic necessity more than out of conviction to broaden women's rights. This introduces a counterpoint to traditional religious discourse, since the Ulemas Council has historically conceived gender equality as against the *sharia* and natural law.²⁴⁴

The construction of a more open, generous and inclusive Saudi society has been one of the habitual preoccupations of the young citizens and one of the main objects of international exigences.²⁴⁵ The introduction of social reforms can be explained by the necessity of shielding legitimacy and restricting the emergence of bids for greater freedoms, but it is also related to international identity requirements towards the construction of a moderate image in which women constitute and mould the Saudi nation.

While Saudi Arabia's goals of consolidating itself as a moderate and modern nation might seem inspiring, the feasibility of such a task remains uncertain. This strategy must be implemented through the effective execution of new political, social, cultural, educational, and economic innovations.²⁴⁶ This is what Anholt²⁴⁷ coined as the "substance" of a nation brand.

Both the Ministry of Sport and the Ministry of Education are endowed with the mission of achieving greater integration of women into the sports ecosystem, especially within the educational apparatus. Since 2017, physical education has been made compulsory in schools

Paul Widdop; Christos Anagnostopoulos and Daniel Parrell (London & New York: Routledge, 2022).

238 Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 16.

239 Saudi Arabia has escalated several positions in both the Brand Finances's soft power index and the Nation Brand Index during the 2020–2023 period.

240 Nancy Snow, "Rethinking Public Diplomacy in the 2020s," in *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy* edited by Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull (London & New York: Routledge, 2020).

241 In analyzing Saudi Vision 2030, it is possible to say that the word "inclusion" alludes to women and disabled people only, while minorities such as the LGBTQ+ community are still excluded from the national project.

242 The idea of "equality" in Saudi Arabia corresponds more with the Western understanding of the word "equity." It describes a distribution of rights between genders under an Islam-based moral notion. Mamdouh D. Alruwaili, *Females and sport in Saudi Arabia: An analysis of the relationship between sport, religion, education, gender and religion* (PhD, University of Stirling, 2020).

243 Several policies such as the abolishment of the prohibition of mixed labor spaces and the nomination of female members as part of the Council of Ministers and the Consultative Council were introduced during this period. Aloufi, "Gender and National Identity in Saudi Arabia."

244 Doumato, "Women and Work in Saudi Arabia," 579.

245 Alhargan, "The impact of the UN human rights system and human rights INGOs on the Saudi Government with special reference to the spiral model." Alwasil, "Saudi Arabia's engagement in, and interaction with the UN human rights system," Montagu, *Civil Society in Saudi Arabia*.

246 Anholt, "Beyond the Nation Brand."

247 Ibid, 8.

for girls, but it has faced several shortcomings in terms of infrastructure and personnel that have delayed its progress. According to official sources, there has been an increase in the amount of women engaging in physical activities, both as athletes and coaches, as well as in the quantity of women's gyms.²⁴⁸

2018 was a paradigmatic year as women were finally allowed to drive and prohibitions preventing them from participating in or attending sporting events were lifted.²⁴⁹ Following these milestones were the inauguration of several women competences or leagues of golf, football, basketball, and volleyball that allowed the rise of female role models such as Yusra Abduljadayel.

The Saudi Arabian Olympic Committee and other sporting institutions have started incorporating women into leadership positions.²⁵⁰ Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud, a member of the International Olympic Committee, was the one designated to embody the social reforms towards diversity and gender equality.²⁵¹ Now serving as the Saudi ambassador to the United States, she previously held positions as Deputy of Planning and Development and Vice President of Women's Affairs at the Sports Ministry. In these roles, she supported the reduction of barriers targeting women's sports and their access to stadiums.²⁵²

In North America, Princess Reema, with the support of lobbying companies, carried out several meetings with the objective of developing Saudi Arabia's sports industry. She was interviewed by the likes of Reuters, CNN, and The Washington Post, where she asserted her commitment to publicise reforms for the social status of women in Saudi Arabia.²⁵³

Notwithstanding these reforms, the role of Saudi women in society is still strictly limited by an underlying matter: the guardianship system, which is sustained by a reinforced authoritarian apparatus. This structure, although revised, still treats women as second-class citizens who require the permission of a male guardian to, for example, travel or manage their wealth independently. Manahel al-Otaibi and Salma al-Shehab, Saudi women who used social media to call for a reform of this system and to support women's rights, were sentenced to 11 and 34 years in prison, respectively.²⁵⁴

Even if the changes have dimly broadened women's educational, working, and sporting opportunities, they are insufficient to empower them and make them active participants in a Saudi nation that appeals to Western sensibilities. Their ability to make life choices is

248 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Saudi Arabia: A story of transformation*, n.d.

249 Amara and Sarah M. Al-Naimi, "Geopolitics of sport in the MENA region."

250 Al Alhareth *et al*, "Review of Women and Society in Saudi Arabia."

251 Karim Zidan, "Sportswashing: How Saudi Arabia lobbies the US' largest sport bodies." *The Guardian*, 2 September, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/sep/02/sportswashing-saudi-arabia-sports-mohammed-bin-salman>.

252 Mona Kamal Shahab; Marta Pérez-Villalba and Elise Kossaifi, "Women and sport in Saudi Arabia," in *Women and Sport in Asia* ed. by Rosa López De D'Amico; Maryam Koushkie Jahromi, and Maria Luisa M. Guinto (London & New York: Routledge, 2021), 182.

253 Karim Zidan, How Saudi Arabia buys influence in US Sports, *Play the Game*, 27 June, 2024, <https://www.playthegame.org/news/how-saudi-arabia-buys-influence-in-us-sports/>.

254 Tom Levitt, "Top female footballers urge FIFA to end deal with Saudi 'nightmare sponsor,'" *The Guardian*, 21 October, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/oct/21/top-female-footballers-urge-fifa-end-deal-saudi-nightmare-sponsor-aramco-oil-human-rights>.

still severely restricted. However, pushing for further social reforms might alienate internal audiences and lead to internal incongruencies that could threaten political legitimacy. The introduction of such changes must be gradual in the eyes of the Crown Prince, as they are not based on conviction but on socioeconomic needs. The speed at which the Saudi State advances with new social reforms will depend on economic conditions. The Saudi political elite has intended to achieve a balance that allows for reform according to both national and international standards.

The new Saudi lifestyle, featuring more visible women and a thriving sports and entertainment industry, has been exported through sports diplomacy in order to generate new sports power resources. All these actions are part of a sports diplomacy strategy with bidirectional communicative purposes: meeting internal demands and engaging with key international actors and audiences. As Saudi changes and intentions may go under the radar without media coverage, symbolic actions that communicate national policies, culture, and values are essential.

9. THE COMMUNICATIVE POWER OF SPORTS

Communication is an activity organized according to objectives, one of which is the maintenance of a good reputation. Sport is a symbolic action for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This refers to a particular species of substance with intrinsic communicative power; a component of the national story that is also the means to tell it.²⁵⁵ Collective ideals that emerged from experiences of change can only become manifest by being realized in symbols: emblems, places, dates, words, and people that can be seen and understood by all.²⁵⁶

Symbolic actions and soft power require consistency through time to build a believable image.²⁵⁷ A dissonance between narrative and practice can trigger a soft disempowerment²⁵⁸ process, a scenario where Saudi Arabia's ability to exert influence in the International System is diminished due to the persistence of critiques related to the absence of a change perceived as legitimate. They can't be devoid of substance since the simplistic act of selling images and spreading narratives has low probabilities of being effective.²⁵⁹

The modification of the national identity in the international dimension must, to a certain extent, adapt to the moral standards of the West to reduce the negative impact. To validate its proclamations that it has reformed women's rights and has carried out an important societal change, the Kingdom has used sporting cooperation memorandums, sports sponsorship, sports resource acquisitions, and sporting events as symbolic actions.

255 Anholt, "Beyond the Nation Brand," 8.

256 Archetti, *Masculinities: Football, Polo and the Tango in Argentina*, 121.

257 Anholt, "Beyond the Nation Brand," 8.

258 Paul M. Brannagan, and Richard Giulianotti, "The soft power-soft disempowerment nexus: The case of Qatar," *International Affairs* 94, no. 5 (2018): 1139-1157, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy125>.

259 Melissen, "The New Public Diplomacy," 7.

9.1. ASSOCIATIONS, AGREEMENTS, AND MEMORANDUMS OF UNDERSTANDING

The diplomatic core of Saudi Arabia has been replicated through traditional public diplomacy strategies, such as cultural exchanges and memorandums of understanding with football institutions. Although at first glance they may seem as merely symbolic, these agreements highlight the wide network of diplomatic contacts of the Kingdom, which can be transformed into a strategic instrument.²⁶⁰

Sporting cooperation opens new channels for interaction that might build confidence between actors in order to unlock negotiations in the geopolitical arena. The rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, thanks to the latter hosting the Islamic Solidarity Games in 2025, has been replicated through sports diplomacy to elicit cooperation strategies that strengthen Muslim unity and bilateral ties.²⁶¹

The Quality of Life Program postulates an initiative to create fan clubs for Saudi football teams in Arab countries. The goal is to raise the popularity of the league and to enhance the Kingdom's image in this sphere. Saudi Pro League clubs' privatization and marketing has turned into tools to acquire more visibility and promote the country's social and economic reforms.²⁶² This initiative targets a wider audience in order to increase benefits from fans, taking into account their role as co-creators of value. Sport's topography has been deeply transformed by transnational phenomena. Identities that remained confined to local spaces now have a global reach beyond immediate boundaries.²⁶³

A memorandum's policy has accompanied this process. Arab countries like Iraq, Mauritania, Oman, and Yemen have reached agreements with the Saudi Arabian Football Federation with the objective to enhance cooperation.²⁶⁴ However, their scope has not remained only circumscribed to this cultural area, but have also reached the Muslim sphere, with several agreements with countries such as Pakistan, Singapore, Maldives, and Brunei.²⁶⁵ A few months after formal relations with Iran had been re-established, a memorandum was signed with the Iranian Football Federation to cooperate on the development of Asian football and foster cultural exchange.

The agreements between the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, African national federations and the *Confédération Africaine de Football* are a testimony of Saudi Arabia's multi-vector foreign policy aiming for greater quotas of autonomy. As a result of this, the Kingdom hosted the finale of the CAF Super Cup in 2024. The particular interest in African countries was oriented towards securing enough positive votes prior to the final decision concerning the host of the 2034 World Cup.²⁶⁶

260 Elsborg and Zidan, *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*.

261 Javier Carro, "Iran-Saudi unite for sports diplomacy" *Inside the Games*, 24 April, 2025. <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1153051/iran-saudi-arabia-alliance-diplomacy>.

262 Steve Bainbridge, *The Privatisation of Saudi Arabia's Football Clubs: An Update*. *Al Tamimi & Company's Sports and Events Management*, 15 June, 2018, <https://www.tamimi.com/law-update-articles/the-privatisation-of-saudi-arabias-football-clubs-an-update/>.

263 Markovits and Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 25.

264 Elsborg and Zidan, *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*.

265 Ibid.

266 Stanis Elsborg, "The power players behind Saudi Arabia's sports strategy." *Play The Game*, 11 January, 2023,

9.2. SPORTING EVENTS

Between 2019 and 2023, it is estimated that the flywheel of Saudi public and sports diplomacy, the PIF, has spent approximately US\$6,300 million in sports investments at local and international levels, with US\$1.500 million dedicated to event organization.²⁶⁷ Over 100 major sporting events across 40 disciplines have disembarked in Saudi Arabia between 2019 and 2025. The Fund's subsidiary companies Saudi Entertainment Ventures Company and SURJ Sports Investment have focused on acquiring and developing intellectual property associated with sports, and facilitating the organization of sports events in the Kingdom.²⁶⁸ As evidence of this, it is possible to observe a growth in the quantity and magnitude of sports spectacles in the country leading to an industry that had increased its value to US\$7.2 billion by 2023. Saudi Arabia is now spearheading the sports industry boom in the Middle East, with an expected growth rate of 8.7% by 2026.²⁶⁹

Riyadh Season, a subsidiary of the PIF, has been crucial in organizing sporting events in the Kingdom. Each year, the capital city hosts entertaining and sporting events for 6 months. The 2025 edition featured the Six Kings Slam, an exhibition tennis tournament with top players, the WWE Royal Rumble, the Kings League (a modified version of football), Premier Padel, and the Fanatics Flag Football Classic.²⁷⁰ In January 2026, after the authorities of the Professional Darts Corporation declared that a competition in Saudi Arabia was not possible unless the ban on alcohol was lifted, Riyadh Season will host the World Series of Darts and the Snooker Championship.²⁷¹

Two patterns are easily identifiable in the organization of sporting events in Saudi Arabia. First of all, it is a multi-faceted process. While some sports like football and racing were endowed with special attention, the scope isn't limited to them and encompasses a wide range of disciplines. In second place, there is a shift in the acceptance of established norms of sporting institutions to cater Saudi impositions. A middle ground is being established on the basis of the dim liberalization of the Saudi social sphere. However, in public diplomacy's terms, the political elite is also requesting Westerners to give in in certain aspects. These efforts might reduce contradictions in how Saudi strategically uses sports.

One of the most prestigious international sporting competitions, the FIFA Club World Cup, was held in Saudi Arabia in 2023. The staging of this tournament reflects the strengthening bond between Mohammed bin Salman and FIFA's president, Gianni Infantino. The association

<https://www.playthegame.org/news/the-power-players-behind-saudi-arabias-sports-strategy/>.

267 Essam Albuhlul, *The Potential Role of Sports Tourism in Supporting Local Economies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Adelaide: Flinders University, 2022). Ruth Michaelson, "Revealed: Saudi Arabia's \$6bn spend on 'sportswashing,'" *The Guardian*, 26 July, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/26/revealed-saudi-arabia-6bn-spend-on-sportswashing>.

268 Ibrahim A. Elshaer, "Investment in the Sports Industry in Saudi Arabia and its Impact on the Quality of Life of Football Fans." *Journal of Law and Sustainable Development* 12, no. 11 (2023): 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.55908/sdgs.v11i12.2236>.

269 Deloitte, *Deloitte Football Money League 2024*, Deloitte, 25 January, 2024, <https://www.deloitte.com/uk/en/services/financial-advisory/analysis/deloitte-football-money-league.html>.

270 George Simms, "Saudi sporting land grab is going into overdrive," *The Observer*, 11 October, 2025, <https://observer.co.uk/news/sport/article/saudis-sporting-land-grab-is-going-into-overdrive>.

271 Ibid.

football's highest authority has been a mediator in the rapprochement between Qatar and the Kingdom, following the overcoming of the impasse that lasted from 2017 to 2021. In a showcase of the geopolitical economy of sport, Mohammed bin Salman, Infantino and the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, were seen together during the opening act of the 2022 World Cup, an event the Crown Prince had initially tempted to boycott.

In its compromise with human rights and the fight against discrimination, FIFA issues independent reports on these issues. In the light of the disgust sparked within numerous human rights organizations, FIFA has attempted, in order to protect its commercial interests,²⁷² to deter preoccupations concerning Saudi Arabia's record in the matter.²⁷³

Paving the way for the Kingdom's entry into the Mega-Sporting Events scenario was necessary for FIFA if it wanted to avoid the critiques it has faced since 2011, when Qatar was awarded the organization of the 2022 World Cup, in the face of Saudi Arabia's candidacy to host the 2034 tournament. In this pursuit, the Kingdom began heavily investing in football, hosting events in Jeddah and Riyadh each year since 2019 and introducing new formats like the Supercoppa Italiana and the Supercopa Española. Both cities offer venues that will be utilized in the 2027 AFC Asian Cup and the 2034 World Cup.

Saudi 2034 serves as an act of public diplomacy since it constitutes a platform that connects local and international audiences and presents national culture, traversed by sport, making it appealing in the West. Stadia are an emblem capable of synthesizing a culture.²⁷⁴ The ones proposed for the 2034 World Cup combine geography with Saudi, Arab, and Islamic heritage with the ambition to become a modern and sustainable economy and a moderate society. For example, the Prince Mohammed bin Salman Stadium will feature a cyberpunkish design with a clear view of the *Tuwaiq* cliff, whereas the Prince Faisal bin Fahd Sports City and Jeddah Central Development Stadia are projected as eco-sustainable venues inspired by Al Balad's district in Jeddah and edified according to the principles of Salmani architecture, traditional to the central region of the country.

International events are an important platform for the exhibition of exacerbated nationalisms that legitimise a national identity against the population of a territory and the international community.²⁷⁵ The protocols previous to matches or competences, such as displays of flags and the playing of national anthems, are totally embedded by solemnity. The organization of large-scale events exalts the culture and geography of the nations,²⁷⁶ while being charged with symbolism towards cooperation and peace, which are identified as universal values²⁷⁷ that

272 In 2024, the PIF had already manifested its interest in investing in DAZN, a sporting streaming website, that sealed an exclusive broadcast deal for the 2025 FIFA Clubs World Cup's new format in exchange for US\$1 billion, the same amount invested by SURJ, the Fund's subsidiary, in DAZN in 2025.

273 Matt Pearson, "FIFA's Club World Cup TV deal: Saudis pulling strings?" *DW*, 12 December, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/fifas-club-world-cup-tv-deal-are-the-saudis-pulling-strings/a-70996528>.

274 Mahfoud Amara and Youcef Bouandel, "Culture and the World Cup: The case of Qatar," in *The Business of the FIFA World Cup* ed. by Simon Chadwick; Paul Widdop; Christos Anagnostopoulos and Daniel Parrell (London & New York: Routledge, 2022).

275 Roger Levermore, "Sport's role in constructing the 'inter-state' worldview," in *Sport and International Relations* edited by Roger Levermore and Adrian Budd (London & New York: Routledge, 2004).

276 Albuhlul, *The Potential Role of Sports Tourism in Supporting Local Economies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*.

277 Park, "Long Shot. Smith and Dilwyn Porter, "Introduction."

can be transferred to the host country as a form of legitimacy.²⁷⁸ These spectacles have been justified on the basis of their potential to realise a shared global identity and interdependence, making real the sense of a global civil society.²⁷⁹

Best management comprises handling managerial issues and logistics of sporting events, such as security, leadership, planning, and gaining citizen approval, among others.²⁸⁰ Effective organization of sporting events is crucial for creating a positive image. The Qatar 2022 World Cup demonstrated that despite inconsistencies with Western morality, it is possible to successfully host an event and use sport as a platform to promote cooperation around shared values, assert international political power, and defy orientalist stereotypes.²⁸¹ However, a low correlation between narrative and substance can deteriorate a nation's international image. A national identity must satisfy three requisites: it must be genuine, internally anchored, and perceived as attractive in the markets it targets.²⁸²

Proponents of Saudi 2034 highlight it as a chance to attain the Vision sustainability targets and maximise the impact of social reforms. The candidacy aims to ensure that every aspect of hosting the World Cup adheres to Saudi Arabia's commitments to promote and protect human rights, labour rights,²⁸³ diversity, anti-discrimination, accessibility, safeguarding, and security, while also embracing Saudi culture and values. FIFA requires compliance with ISO 20121 sustainability standards and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.²⁸⁴

Similarly, the *Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile*,²⁸⁵ has claimed that, despite accusations against Saudi Arabia's strategic use of sport, labeled as sports washing, it remains deeply compromised with compliance with human rights standards.²⁸⁶ This institution has intensely cooperated with the Kingdom in order to host the Formula 1 (2021–2031), Formula 2 (2021–2025), and Formula e (2018–2025) Grand Prixes and the Rally Dakar (2019–2026), among other competitions, and to strengthen the strategic partnership with Aramco as a sponsor and supplier. The assertion of these Western sporting entities that Saudi Arabia complies with human rights compromises, whether real or merely for appearance, implies a communion and joint work with certain Western values, norms and principles.

278 Cornelissen, as it was cited in Ross Griffin, "National identity, social legacy and Qatar 2022," 2.

279 Alan Tomlinson and Christopher Young, *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup* (New York: State University of New York, 2003), 1.

280 Abdi; Talebpour; Fullerton; Ranjesh and Nooghabi, *Converting sports diplomacy to diplomatic outcomes*, 4.

281 Carosella, "Football as Soft Power." Ross Griffin, "National identity, social legacy and Qatar 2022."

282 Alan K. Henrikson, "Niche Diplomacy in the World Public Arena: the Global 'Corners' of Canada and Norway," in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* ed. by Jan Melissen (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 84.

283 Protests related to this matter have already arisen, Pete Pattison and Paul Macinnes, "Unions from 36 countries protest over treatment of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia." *The Guardian*, 4 June, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/jun/04/unions-32-countries-protest-over-treatment-migrant-workers-saudi-arabia>.

284 Sebastien Merten and Mathieu Winand, "Planning and organising FIFA World Cups," in *The Business of the FIFA World Cup* ed. by Simon Chadwick; Paul Widdop; Christos Anagnostopoulos and Daniel Parrell (London & New York: Routledge, 2022), 136.

285 FIA has established a 10-year agreement with the Saudi Arabian Motorsport Federation for Jeddah to host a Formula 1 Grand Prix in exchange for receiving around US\$65 million annually.

286 Matt Beer, "F1's Saudi deal will run for 'a decade, if not longer.'" *THE RACE*, 25 February, 2021. <https://www.the-race.com/formula-1/f1s-saudi-deal-will-run-a-decade-if-not-longer/>.

The 2024 WTA Finals, one of the most prestigious women's tennis competitions, held in Riyadh, served as a platform to communicate reforms concerning the social role of Saudi women.²⁸⁷ Promoting this narrative through diverse mediums like events, athletes, or media obviates the situation women and other minorities in Saudi Arabia face, including executions of Shiites and political dissidents,²⁸⁸ deplorable living conditions for migrant workers, and restrictions on freedom of speech. Another example is the Saudi Tourism Authority's US\$ 25 million agreement with Lionel Messi, one of the most prolific footballers in history, in exchange for refraining from making negative comments about Saudi Arabia's²⁸⁹ and promoting the country's attractions by vacationing there annually to break down and dismantle prejudices.²⁹⁰ However, organizing a massive event like the World Cup, which attracts fans from all over the world, will be a challenge due to cultural differences. Qatar faced numerous critiques for the poor working conditions of foreign workers employed in stadium construction²⁹¹ and for a lack of respect for human rights, especially coming from European football federations.²⁹² The Government of the Arab country was required to introduce reforms, like the *kafala*'s²⁹³ abolition, in order to comply with FIFA's human rights standards. To prevent similar criticisms that severely affected Qatar's national image, Saudi Arabia has already abolished *kafala* in 2025,²⁹⁴ but it remains to be seen if the new legislation will be respected or not, as in the neighbouring country. Throughout the course of the event, Qatari authorities had to be more lax in enforcing certain restrictions, especially related to minor offenses such as public nudity of the torso and intoxication.²⁹⁵

If Mohammed bin Salman pretends to use the 2034 World Cup as a means to obtain greater soft power gains, he will most certainly be subject to similar requirements and required to reduce contradictions with Western values. Saudi Arabia has already encountered much criticism

287 Elsborg and Zidan, *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*.

288 Which reached a new record in 2022 with 196 (Human Rights Watch 2023).

289 Elsborg, "The power players behind Saudi Arabia's sports strategy."

290 Dawit Habtemariam, "Saudi Tourism CEO: Lionel Messi Ad Campaign Targets Traveler 'Preconceptions.'" *Skift*, 11 March, 2024. <https://skift.com/2024/03/11/saudi-tourism-ceo-lionel-messi-ad-campaign-targets-traveler-prejudices/>. Michaelson, "Revealed: Saudi Arabia's \$6bn spend on 'sports washing.'" Karim Zidan and Tariq Panja, Lionel Messi, Saudi Arabia, and the Deal That Paid Off for Both Sides. *The New York Times*, 18 June, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/18/sports/soccer/lionel-messi-saudi-arabia.html>.

291 37 dead people as part of 6,500 dead working migrants between 2011 and 2021, Pete Pattison; Niamh McIntyre; Imran Mukhtar, *et al*, 2021. "Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since the World Cup was awarded." *The Guardian*, 23 February, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022>.

292 Norway, Germany—whose players also showed their discontent in their World Cup matches by covering their mouths as a protest to FIFA's decision to ban the use of the OneLove captain's armband, Ben Morse and Don Riddell, "Germany players cover mouths in protest against FIFA clampdown on free speech in 'OneLove' armband" row. *CNN Sports*, 23 November, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/23/football/germany-japan-mouth-protest-world-cup-2022-spt-intl/index.html>, the Netherlands; Denmark where shirts were used with symbolic meaning of complaint due to human rights violations in Qatar; and Belgium, Géraldine Zeimers and Bram Constandt, "An integrity system framework for the FIFA World Cups," in *The Business of the FIFA World Cup* ed. by Simon Chadwick; Paul Widdop; Christos Anagnostopoulos and Daniel Parrell (London & New York: Routledge, 2022).

293 A labour sponsorship system of extended use in Arab countries that nourishes from migrant workers exploitation.

294 Giulia Interesse, "Saudi Arabia Ends Kafala Sponsorship System: Implications for Business," *Middle East Briefing*, 24 October, 2025, <https://www.middleeastbriefing.com/news/saudi-arabia-ends-kafala-system-implications-for-business/>.

295 James Dorsey, *The 2022 World Cup: Qatar's Make-or-Break Moment* (2022).

for its moderate narrative emanating from its sports associations.²⁹⁶ Internal investigations in Saudi Arabia on human, environmental, and labour rights are often carried out by public agencies in a superficial way, obviating problems related to freedom of speech, women's and LGBTQ+ rights, torture of detainees, banning of syndicates, and forced relocations.²⁹⁷

9.3. SPORTS SPONSORSHIP

Sports sponsorship as a method to obtain soft power implies the association of a state or public institution with an athlete, team, or competition with the aim of promoting the attractiveness of a nation.²⁹⁸ It is useful to communicate messages about a country's values or policies and to influence the perceptions of its international image.²⁹⁹

Accounting for 61 Saudi entities, it is possible to detect a total of 910 sports sponsorship deals in 28 disciplines for the period 2023–2027. Of these deals, 346 are directly or indirectly through one of its subsidiaries, part of the PIF's strategic network, which has global presence.³⁰⁰ Their advertisements are visible in Formula 1, FIFA Club World Cup, FIFA Futsal World Cup, CONCACAF, and ATP competitions. Additionally, their advertisements can be found on AS Roma's, Atlético Madrid's, or Newcastle's shirts. This last club bears in their football shirts feature advertisements for Sela, an entertainment and hospitality company, and *noon.com*, an e-commerce platform.

Of the total deals, 104 are related to companies or institutions associated with tourism: Visit Saudi, Saudia, Royal Commission for Al Ula, Altanfeethi, and the Ministry of Tourism.³⁰¹ The Crown Prince aims to transform the country into a global tourist destination by exporting images of the Saudi national and cultural appeal through sports.

Aramco holds strategic positions in sports sponsorship, as one of the few stellar sponsors of the 2025 FIFA Club World Cup, along with the PIF. The competition's matches were plagued by Saudi companies' advertising. The state oil company sealed a covenant with FIFA, which was contested by an open letter signed by more than 100 women's footballers denouncing "brutal human rights violations."³⁰² The showcasing of Saudi sponsors was facilitated by these accords and by the \$1 billion bid from DAZN for exclusive global rights to the Club World

296 Lewis Hamilton, a British Formula 1 driver, expressed his discomfort with a race taking place somewhere where human rights are violated. Jordan Henderson, ex-captain of the English national team, was called a hypocrite after accepting to play for Saudi Pro League's Al-Ettifaq even after having carried out anti-homophobia campaigns and spoken out on human rights violations prior to the Qatar 2022 World Cup. He manifested his conviction to generate an impact in the Saudi human rights record but fled the country after six months, damaging his image and the ones from the league and the Kingdom. Jonathan Wilson, "Jordan Henderson has badly damaged his image - and that of the Saudi Pro League," *The Guardian*, 27 January, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2024/jan/17/jordan-henderson-has-badly-damaged-his-image-and-that-of-the-saudi-pro-league>.

297 Elsborg and Zidan, *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*.

298 Nicholas Burton and Michael L. Naraine, "Sport and Saudi Arabia: Mimetic Isomorphism, Soft Power and Disempowerment" in *The Geopolitical Economy of Sport* ed. by Simon Chadwick; Michael M. Goldman and Paul Widdop. (London & New York: Routledge, 2023).

299 Chadwick; Paul Widdop and Nicholas Burton, "Soft Power Sports Sponsorship."

300 Elsborg and Zidan, *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*.

301 Ibid.

302 Levitt, "Top female footballers urge FIFA to end deal with Saudi 'nightmare sponsor.'"

Cup. The bid was equal to the amount that SURJ Sports Investment, a subsidiary of PIF, had disbursed to buy a 10% stake in the broadcaster.³⁰³

The Saudi Pro League is streamed in 159 countries, while LIV Golf, a PIF-funded alternative to traditional golf tours, is broadcasted in 99 countries. Access to media is crucial in amplifying the reverberation of messages and achieving the sporting diplomacy agenda's objectives. Success in selling global rights is testimony to the effectiveness of the Saudi approach in boosting its soft power resources and communicating a narrative that presents the Kingdom as a modern and diverse nation.³⁰⁴

9.4. SPORTS PROPERTIES ACQUISITIONS

Newcastle United F.C.'s purchase by the PIF in 2021 for US\$381.9 million was not alien to these efforts. The transfer was filled with controversies, and only proceeded when the Premier League's board determined that enough guarantees of the Fund's independence existed.³⁰⁵ It had already been impeded in 2020, partly due to the pirating of BeIn Sports, Al Jazeera's sports network that held the broadcasting rights for the English league, on part of a clandestine signal based in Saudi Arabia called BeOut.³⁰⁶

The support of the United Kingdom's Minister of State for Investment was crucial in clearing the way for negotiations with the Premier League's board.³⁰⁷ Notwithstanding its denials, the British government aided the transfer of Newcastle through officials from the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office.³⁰⁸ The strategic implications of this agreement recognized Downing Street's interest in securing Saudi investments and highlighted the usability of the purchase as a platform to exhibit social reforms occurring in Saudi Arabia.³⁰⁹

A great deal of the dissatisfaction among Newcastle's fans regarding the Fund's acquisition, attributed to the internal and external behaviour of Saudi Arabia, succumbed to what Adams *et al*³¹⁰ denominated as "motivated ignorance." Even knowing about human and political rights violations carried out by Saudi authorities, the fans decide to ignore these facts as a way of protecting the cognitive limits of their identity. On 22 March, 2021, the day following the

303 Matt Hughes, "Dazn targets rights for Champions League in latest football move involving Saudi Arabia," *The Guardian*, 22 October, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/oct/22/dazn-champions-league-broadcasting-rights-football-saudi-arabia>.

304 Hussain Alawi, "Sporting Diplomacy."

305 Jonathan Wilson, "Jordan Henderson has badly damaged his image—and that of the Saudi Pro League." *The Guardian*, 27 January, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2024/jan/17/jordan-henderson-has-badly-damaged-his-image-and-that-of-the-saudi-pro-league>.

306 Carosella, "Football as Soft Power."

307 David Conn, "Revealed: government did encourage Premier League to approve Newcastle takeover." *The Guardian*, 24 May, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/may/24/government-did-encourage-premier-league-to-approve-saudi-newcastle-takeover>.

308 Conn, "Revealed: government did encourage Premier League to approve Newcastle takeover."

309 Adam Crafton, "Newcastle's Saudi takeover: New government emails about PIF, Premier League, Staveley and owners." *The Athletic*, 29 November, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5077168/2023/11/21/newcastle-saudi-takeover-emails/>.

310 Ian Adams; Andrew Jones and Joanne Mayoh, "Fan responses to ownership change in the English Premier League: Motivated ignorance, social creativity and social competition at Newcastle United F.C." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 59, no. 1(2023): 101-108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902231179067>.

execution of 81 persons, including Yemeni and Syrian nationals, in Saudi Arabia, Geordies who had celebrated the purchase by mimicking traditional Saudi clothes, waved the Kingdom's flag at Stamford Bridge during a match in support of the new owners.³¹¹

The controversial human rights record of the Saudi State still triggered alerts among the public. Hatice Cengiz, Jamal Khashoggi's fiancée, denounced the PIF's actions as a method to launder Saudi Arabia's image and restore faith in Mohammed bin Salman.³¹² The same accusation was wielded by the PGA Tour regarding LIV Golf.³¹³

Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy schemes are inextricably associated with public officials' plans. Its implementation is not only led by Mohammed bin Salman personally, but also by key figures such as Yasir Al-Rumayyan, who holds very influential positions³¹⁴ in economic and political terms within the PIF. A total of 1,402 jobs in 207 Saudi sporting entities are held by members of the political elite,³¹⁵ stressing the autonomy principles of the Olympic movement and related institutions.

Other sports have experienced a rise in activity thanks to public officials. Boxing and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), dominions traditionally circumscribed to the United States, were the spearheads of the czar of Saudi entertainment, Turki Al-Sheikh.³¹⁶ He is a counselor of the Royal Court, Ministry of Sport; president of the Olympic and Paralympic Committees, vice president of the Olympic Council of Asia, among other functions.³¹⁷ Al-Sheikh is the owner of the Spanish club UD Almeria and a key figure in the development of Riyadh Season, which has sponsored or hosted several high-profile fights, like Joshua vs. Usyk (2019 and 2022), Paul vs. Fury (2023), and Canelo vs. Crawford (2025). The former Ministry of Sport, Prince Abdullah bin Mossad bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, has also acquired several clubs³¹⁸ and played a crucial role in Saudi Arabia's emergence in the global sports ecosystem.

10. CONCLUSION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is in the midst of a complex process that involves a series of profound changes. With the perception of royal legitimacy under threat, Mohammed bin Salman as the *de facto* ruler of the country has commanded a new generation in charge to assure the perpetuation of the Saudi model through reforming of the socioeconomic ecosystem, nation forging, and transforming its international identity.

311 Carosella, "Football as Soft Power."

312 Hatice Cengiz, "The Saudi regime murdered my fiancé. It can't be allowed to buy Newcastle United." *The Guardian*, 18 May, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/18/saudi-regime-newcastle-united-jamal-khashoggi-mohammed-bin-salman>

313 Michaelson, "Revealed: Saudi Arabia's \$6bn spend on 'sports washing.'"

314 Apart from being Newcastle United's chairman, he is also the PIF's governor, the chairman of Riyadh Air, LIV Golf and Aramco; and a member of the Saudi Olympic Committee. These are just a few of the 22 positions—more than the Crown Prince (18)—that he occupies, Elsborg and Zidan, *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*.

315 Elsborg and Zidan, *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*.

316 *Ibid.*

317 Elshaer, "Investment in the Sports Industry in Saudi Arabia and its Impact on the Quality of Life of Football Fans."

318 Sheffield United in England, FC Chateauroux in France, KFCO Beerschot Wilrijk in Belgium, Kerala United in India, and Al-Hilal United in the United Arab Emirates, Burton and Michael L. Naraine, "Sport and Saudi Arabia."

Saudi Vision 2030 was born as a result of turbulent events that changed the systemic, regional, and national landscapes during the 21st century. It addresses numerous demands from the youth constituency and global audiences in a top-down fashion that is not meant to open the associational space. This national development plan is a reflection of the Crown Prince's ambition to maintain power by broadening the socioeconomic sphere and reshaping religious legitimacy. Simultaneously, these changes have enabled a reinforcement of authoritarianism and concentration of power.

The new nationalistic drive of Saudi Vision 2030 has been covered by several scholars, but the role of sports in this narrative and how they have influenced the fluid and everchanging nature of the Saudi nation remains a void in the literature that this article has intended to partially fill. Furthermore, this article seeks to explore how this new international identity, a more covered area, can be viewed through a constructivist lens to enrich the debate over Saudi Arabia's strategic use of sport. Identity in the International System is a category that will continue rising its relevance in a densely interconnected world, prompting states to develop new public diplomacy strategies to engage with global audiences. By grounding this field of study, and this particular topic, in international relations theory, scholars can move beyond simplistic explanations.

The strategic use of sport has been designated by the Saudi leadership as a catalyst for the modernizing agenda and the foundation of a novel national identity in front of both internal and external audiences. The goal is to endow the Saudi nation with a body that obscures social divisions—which the State has exploited through its patronage networks—that have for long blocked the consolidation of a unified identity. National athletes and teams have been used to configure a communitarian sphere without broadening the associational life. The Kingdom has sensibly increased its investments in sporting resources on a global scale in order to modify interaction patterns and intersubjective meanings that have reproduced its identity as a conservative and closed monarchy.

To achieve its national objectives, the Kingdom has attempted to build a soft power applicable to a broader sphere beyond the Arab and Muslim ones and transform the identitarian structure of its relationship with the West. Athletes, both national and international, have served as an anchor in the incorporation of exogenous elements. Sporting events have also been instrumentalized to extrapolate this new national identity that combines Saudi, Arab, Muslim, and pre-Islamic cultural heritage with "universal" values. Media coverage has amplified the publicity of internal social reforms concerning women's social roles, and the Saudi Government's narrative depicts Saudi Arabia as an open, moderate, diverse, proud, and modern nation, constituting these as symbolic actions.

However, the test of time and consistency erects as a limitation to the Saudi Arabian strategy. Legitimacy in the International System emanates from positive stimuli from other international actors, and it cannot be built on a narrative without substance. Soft power construction requires congruence between the values wielded and behaviour observed, as well as continuity between national and international landscapes.

The main problem with basing the modification of a State's international image on the strategic use of sport is that it not only attracts positive attention but also sheds light on negative

aspects. Negative stimuli, like sports washing denounces, contribute to soft disempowerment and impair the consolidation of moral authority. If Saudi Arabia can efficiently use sport as a medium to achieve its national objectives and leverage its international position remains a question whose answer will depend on its capacity to continue to absorb and reconcile internal and external exigencies, uphold shared values and principles, and preserve consistency and continuity over time.

This article intends to go beyond simple accusations of sportswashing. This does not mean not engaging with the evident contradictions between narrative and action, which have been addressed in order to show how they affect soft power resources. It is important to examine Saudi Arabia's strategic use of sport through a multidimensional lens that reveals all the motives behind it. The ultimate aim of this investigation is to enhance the discussions on the convergence of international relations and sports, which is increasingly relevant nowadays.

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