

**Palacky University Olomouc**  
**Faculty of Arts**  
**Department of Politics and European Studies**

Bc. Hanna Olšanská

**Sports Diplomacy in the Middle East: The Case of Saudi Arabia**

Master's Thesis

**Thesis supervisor:** Gökhan Bacik, Ph.D.

Olomouc 2025

I hereby declare this thesis is a result of my own independent research based on the provided literature and other resources.

In Olomouc.....

Signature

I would like to thank my supervisor Gökhan Bacik, Ph.D. for providing me guidance throughout this thesis. A big thank you also goes to my family, for patiently supporting me during my university journey.

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 Theoretical framework .....</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1 Soft power .....	10
1.2 Soft power criticism .....	12
1.3 Public diplomacy .....	15
1.4 Propaganda vs public diplomacy .....	16
1.5 Nation branding .....	16
1.6 Sports diplomacy .....	18
1.7 Actors of sports diplomacy .....	22
1.8 Sports diplomacy as a tool of soft power .....	23
<b>2 Saudi Arabia's approach to sports diplomacy .....</b>	<b>25</b>
2.1 Vision 2030 .....	25
2.1.1 Economic diversification .....	26
2.1.2 Healthier and more active society .....	28
2.1.3 The aspect of young Saudi population .....	30
2.1.4 Progress of Vision 2030 .....	32
2.2 Football as a sports diplomacy tool .....	33
2.2.1 Acquisition of football mega-stars .....	34
2.2.2 Hosting football mega-events .....	39
2.2.3 Investing into foreign football clubs .....	42
<b>3 Sportswashing .....</b>	<b>44</b>
3.1 History of sportswashing .....	44
3.2 Sportswashing in Saudi Arabia .....	47
3.3 Saudi Arabia's stance towards sportswashing .....	50
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>List of sources .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Abstrakt .....</b>	<b>75</b>

## Introduction

In recent years, the topic of sports diplomacy of Saudi Arabia started gaining a significant momentum. In 2016, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman unveiled his *Vision 2030*, a strategic framework to transform the country. A visible connection across the individual sections of the Vision is evident - sport. Sport and sports diplomacy represents a crucial component which aim to transform the country both on domestic and international level. Similarly to other parts of the world, football is massively popular among the Saudi society. However, the outpour of finances into securing football superstars like Cristiano Ronaldo for the domestic league or buying a foreign football club has been, mainly by the media and some academics, framed as a practice of sportswashing.

The author of the thesis chose this topic because of its current relevancy. Part of the reason was also the fact that the academic debate on sports diplomacy of Saudi Arabia and sportswashing is still a very limited and unexplored topic as scholars have just recently started paying attention to how Saudi Arabia utilizes sports diplomacy. From a methodological standpoint, the thesis represents a case study, which aims to answer three research questions: 1) *What are the key drivers behind Saudi Arabia's approach to sports diplomacy?*, 2) *How does Saudi Arabia utilize football to enhance its soft power?*, 3) *What is sportswashing and to what extent can Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy be considered sportswashing?* by utilizing qualitative research techniques. The aim of the thesis is to analyse main drivers behind Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy and how Saudi Arabia uses football as a sports diplomacy tool. The thesis also seeks to contribute to the scholarly debate on sportswashing while analysing Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy strategy and whether it can be classified as sportswashing. The time frame of this thesis is limited by focusing on the development in Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy since 2016 onwards.

The thesis is divided into three chapters which are divided into subchapters. The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework of the thesis by introducing soft power theory, which is a key component in examining sports diplomacy. The author contextualizes soft power theory while also provides a critical overview of the concept by multiple authors. Crucial part of the chapter is also the introduction of *soft disempowerment*, phenomenon by coined by Richard Giulianotti and Michael Brannagan, referring to a process when soft power leads to unwanted consequences as states seeking to increase their soft power and improving their nation-brand might end up damaging their image rather than enhancing it. Fundamental part of the first

chapter is the contextualization of sports diplomacy. In the academic sphere, sports diplomacy is usually perceived to be a part of public diplomacy, that is why the author introduces concepts such as public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy as well as related concepts such as nation-branding to provide a full understanding of sports diplomacy. In the second part of the chapter, the author focuses primarily on sports diplomacy, its roots and role in academic sphere while also introducing main actors of sports diplomacy. Lastly, the first chapter is concluded by introducing tools through which sports diplomacy is used to enhance soft power.

The second chapter focuses on the case of sports diplomacy of Saudi Arabia. Firstly, the chapter introduces the driving factors behinds Saudi Arabia's heavy investments into sports. In this regard, analysis of *Vision 2030*, strategic framework on which the vast majority of Saudi policies are based is an absolute key. Sport is a link which aims to transform the oil-dependent economy and support its diversification, improve health and the quality of life of Saudi population. At the same time, investment in sport and sporting infrastructure are intended to satisfy the needs of predominantly young population and strengthen the regime's legitimacy.

The second part of the chapter focuses specifically on football. Although Saudi Arabia's sports portfolio includes broad spectrum of sports such as golf or boxing, the author opted to focus particularly on football because of its relevancy and popularity both in Saudi Arabia and worldwide. The author focuses on three mechanisms of sports diplomacy through which soft power can be achieved. Acquisition of famous footballers, investment into purchasing foreign renowned football clubs and hosting football mega-events. Cristiano Ronaldo serves as a key example of acquisition of foreign football superstar, by which Saudi Arabia seeks to enhance domestic football scene while also utilizing his marketing potential both on and off the pitch. A portion of the second chapter is also dedicated to Lionel Messi. The author is well aware that Messi, as opposed to Ronaldo is not a player of any of the Saudi football clubs. However, the example of Messi was chosen because the author seeks to demonstrate how Saudi Arabia utilizes the marketing potential of famous footballers in order to boost their domestic and international image. Both Ronaldo and Messi were chosen because they are undoubtedly one of the most popular and successful footballers of all time, who not only possess extraordinary skills but also have an enormous marketing potential. The investment into English football club Newcastle United FC as well as controversies tied to securing hosting FIFA World Cup 2034 are also analysed

The third chapter examines the phenomenon of sportswashing, term often used when referring to sports diplomacy of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Similarly to Qatar, Saudi Arabia has been accused of using sports diplomacy as a tool to enhance its nation-brand

and shift attention away from human rights violations. In this chapter, the author conceptualizes sportswashing, while also highlighting the fact that it's a rather controversial term both in its meaning and use. The following section is dedicated to examples of sportswashing in Saudi Arabia and the debate whether or not can Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy can be classified as sportswashing.

From the literature and sources perspective, the work relies on a large number of diverse sources – monographs, edited volumes or academic articles. The author also utilized a variety of online resources such as news media platforms or even social media platforms. Interviews and podcasts also proved to be a beneficial resource for contextualizing the topic. The author also tried to include diverse sources in order to provide an objective view of the issue.

The first chapter heavily relied on the works of Joseph Nye, who is considered to be the 'father' of the concept of soft power as we know it today. In this regard, the author drew from a cross-section of his works, especially his book *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* or academic articles such as *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power*. However, it is important to note that Nye's works alone were not sufficient to understand the concept of soft power, therefore the author of the thesis had to gather additional information from other academics in order to fully understand the concept. However, according to multiple authors, Nye's definition of soft power possesses certain shortcomings, therefore the author decided to include a section that is devoted to providing a critical overview of soft power. In this case, the key authors exploring the other side of soft power are Paul Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti. In their article *Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals* from 2014, they introduce the before mentioned concept of soft disempowerment. This concept is crucial when examining soft power, as sports diplomacy does not always lead to acquisition of soft power, but it can backfire and further tarnish country's image. Other authors, such as Fan (2008) and Rothman (2011), offer similar insights. Rothman in his article *Revising the soft power concept: what are the means and mechanisms of soft power?* attempts to provide a new and improved definition of soft power that responds to the criticism of Nye's concept.

A beneficial resource for understanding the field of sports diplomacy is Stuart Murray's *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, which seeks to provide an overarching framework of the field of sports diplomacy by exploring its roots, position within the academic sphere while also exploring the current practice of sports diplomacy. Research by Michal M. Kobierecki (2019) was also quite useful source for the thesis, primarily because Kobierecki emphasises the often-neglected domestic aspect of sports diplomacy. In the second chapter,

the author often utilized official documents of the Saudi government, especially Vision 2030, which represents a key source for analysing Saudi Arabia's approach to sports diplomacy. The author would also like to highlight a document *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport* by Play the Game, organization focusing on promoting democracy in sports. Although this report does not solely focus on football, it provides a comprehensive summary of all investment in sport done by Saudi Arabia.

Danyel Reiche and Paul Michael Brannagan's *The Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East* has also proved to be a beneficial resource, especially chapters by Simon Chadwick and Paul Widdop (2022), in which they provide a clear and comprehensive overview of how Saudi Arabia invests in sport and the reasons behind their actions. Victor Olivereau (2022) provides a similar insight in his chapter, focusing directly on certain steps in sports diplomacy such as investing in clubs, hosting events. He also provides a comparison of sports diplomacy of Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Similar comparative approach is found in several authors works, one example being Cinzia Bianco and Sebastian Sons' article *More than a Game* in which they specifically focus on the role of football in sports diplomacy in different GCC countries. While the sources regarding Saudi Arabia's hosting of 2034 World Cup are very limited, Danyel Reiche and Paul Brannagan's *Saudi Arabia and the 2034 FIFA World Cup: context, strategy, critique* is among the very first articles examining motivations behind Saudi Arabia's determination to secure hosting the biggest football event.

The last chapter was the most challenging in terms of sources. This is primarily due to the fact that the phenomenon of sportswashing is still a very unexplored concept in the academic sphere. It was firstly introduced in the media in 2015 and since then it became part of limited academic interest. Authors primarily focus on case studies, especially on the case of Qatar hosting the 2022 World Cup, academic research focusing solely on the sportswashing in Saudi Arabia is very limited. Currently, the Saudi Arabia region is thus still quite undeveloped, but the author expects increased interest in this topic as the World Cup in 2034 approaches.

Throughout the whole thesis and particularly in this chapter, Simon Chadwick's work proved to be very valuable source to the author. Chadwick focuses on sports diplomacy of Saudi Arabia as well as on sportswashing. His research is also reflected in the book *Geopolitical Economy of Sport* by Simon Chadwick and Paul Widdop, where they critically examine the concept of sportswashing. Michael Skey's article *Sportswashing: media headline or analytic concept?* provides an interesting insight into the concept of sportswashing, primarily because similarly to other authors such as Boykoff (2022), he points out that the concept of sportswashing is mostly only applied when referring to sports diplomacy of Non-Western



states. In this regard, the author would also like to mention Thomas Griffin's article *Football in the hands of the other: Qatar's World Cup in the British broadsheet press*. Despite the fact that this article is only marginally used by the author, Griffin explores an interesting concept that builds on the idea of how media shape the general narrative about Arab states and their investment in sporting activities. As the media significantly shape the narrative of sportswashing, the author also made use of news articles from sources such as BBC News or The Guardian.

# 1 Theoretical framework

This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework of the thesis which is based on soft power theory. While it introduces soft power, it also includes the debate on soft power criticism. Key part of the chapter is dedicated to sports diplomacy. Nevertheless, in order to fully grasp the concept of sports diplomacy, related concepts such as public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and nation-branding must be introduced. An important part of this chapter is also the introduction of soft power tools through which sports diplomacy is implemented.

## 1.1 Soft power

As opposed to the term *power* which has been defined as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want” (Nye, 2008, p. 94) the term *soft power* is rather a new addition to the understanding of power. Political scientist Joseph Nye coined the term *soft power* in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power* in 1990 (Brannagan, 2022, p. 164; Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Although Nye was the first one who gave the concept a name and popularized it, soft power is not a new phenomenon. Its roots can be traced back as far as ancient philosophy and throughout history, all nation-states to some degree, have been utilizing soft power to pursue their strategic goals (Nye, 2023, p. 36; Nygård & Gates, 2013, p. 237). Before Nye popularized the term, the notion of soft power can be found in the works of many international relations scholars such as Hans J. Morgenthau, Klaus Knorr and Ray Cline (Fan, 2008, pp. 148). As both Fan (2008) and Kohara (2005) mention, Morgenthau’s understanding of what national power comprises includes elements which could be classified as soft power, namely national character, national moral, quality of diplomacy and quality of government (Fan, 2008, pp. 148-9; Kohara, 2005, p. 40).

Nye pinpoints three main approaches typically used to persuade others into getting the desired outcome: 1. Coercion with threats (carrots), 2. Inducement with payments (sticks) 3. Attraction and co-option (Nye, 2004, pp. 2; Snow, 2020, pp. 4). As opposed to hard power which uses coercion in form of economic sanctions or military power to get desired outcomes, soft power refers to the ability to persuade others or shape their preferences in non-coercive manner to essentially make them want the same thing as you (Nye, 2004, p. 147; Nygård & Gates, 2013, p. 236; Murray, 2018, p. 96). As Nye has mentioned, “soft power co-opts people rather than coerces them” (Nye, 2008, p. 95). Since the strength of soft power lies in the persuasion rather than coercion, Nye understands soft power as a power of attraction as he draws a parallel between soft power and art of attraction and seduction, where one is able to

shape preferences or change the behaviour of others in order to get what they want without employing coercive means. He dismisses the critics who underestimate the power of soft power as those who do not understand the power seduction holds (Abdi et al., 2019, p. 147; Grix & Brannagan, 2016, p. 252; Nye, 2004, p. 8; Nye, 2008, p. 94-95).

To summarize, soft power is the power of attraction, where the key to obtaining your desired results is to entice, attract and convince others to act based on your values. Soft power is not to be confused with influence, as influence can be based on hard power (Nye, 2008, p. 95). Nye (2008) typically divided sources of country's soft power into 1) its culture, 2) its values, 3) its policies (foreign policies) (Nye, 2008, pp. 94-95). Nye has revisited his conceptualization of soft power in 2003 when he introduced the term *smart power*, which essentially tells states how to combine *hard* and *soft* power, as either is rarely completely replaceable by the other and there are limits to what both can achieve on their own. The fusion of hard and soft power resources is smart power sometimes in the literature also known as *cosmopolitan power* (Gallarotti & Al-Filali, 2012, p. 234; Grix & Brannagan, 2016, p. 253; Nye, 2009, p. 160).

One of important aspect of smart power is contextual intelligence, meaning actors, in order to achieve the best results, must know their strengths and weaknesses and must properly figure out the context in which to operate and based on the context adapt a fitting strategy that combines hard and soft power resources (Grix & Lee, 2013, p. 526). Having power resources alone is not enough to achieve desired results, what matters the most is the effective use of a well-chosen strategy (Nye, 2004, p. 3). As an example, Nye mentions the US strategy towards USSR during Cold War, where the US administration used both soft power – in the form of its capitalistic values and ideals as well as hard power – in the form of military strength capable of challenging the Soviets to help bring down the Soviet bloc (Nye, 2009, pp. 161-162).

As opposed to hard power which typically relies on the use of *carrots* and *sticks* to achieve desired outcome, soft power often makes use of more distinguished means such as diplomacy or information in order to achieve the target goal (Nye, 2004, p. 5; Rothman, 2011, p. 50). It is important to point out that not only democratic countries can generate soft power as there are many academic resources focusing on soft power of non-democratic states such as China or Qatar (Fan, 2008, p. 150; Reiche, 2014, p. 490). As the world became more globalized, soft power started gaining a bigger momentum. One of the key areas of soft power is culture which includes huge variety of areas such as arts and sports (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014, p. 706).

## 1.2 Soft power criticism

Although Nye has revisited his earliest attempts of conceptualizing soft power numerous times, to react to the criticism and the limitations in his definition, many scholars still find his definition inadequate. Grix and Brannagan (2016) have been amongst academics who have criticised Nye and his conceptualization of soft power and they have summarized the shortcomings into four main categories. According to them, Nye's conceptualization presents unclear definition of what soft power truly is and how soft power can be achieved. There have also been concerns that Nye's view of the soft power is too Western-oriented, as Nye has initially introduced the concept of soft power in order to give a new impetus to US foreign policy after the end of Cold War (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1141; Grix & Brannagan, 2016, p. 256; Nye, 2023, p. 36). Although it must be pointed out, that Nye (2017) has mentioned upon revisiting his conceptualization, that although he primarily focused on the soft power of the US, the concept of soft power extends beyond that area (Nye, 2017, pp. 2).

Similarly to Grix and Brannagan, the critique of Nye's vague definition is also shared by Ying Fan who in his article *Soft power: Power of attraction or confusion?* points out that Nye's definition of soft power is rather confusing and inadequate. Contributing to confusion are also the multiple definitions Nye has provided over the years. According to Fan this often leads to the term being misunderstood and applied too broadly (Fan, 2008, p. 149). As soft power is based on the idea of attractiveness and the associated ability to influence the behaviour of other actors toward a desired outcome, Fan ponders on the fact that attractiveness and affection stem from human emotions and preferences, which are often unpredictable and inconsistent. He goes on to argue whether it is even possible to influence other actors on an international scale purely through attractiveness. Soft power is also problematic and hard to navigate because although it may seem that the power lies with the party projecting it, in reality, it is the opposite way. According to Fan the true power lies in the reaction of the receiving party (Fan, 2008: 154). He also questions the soft power resources and, above all, their universality, meaning whether two countries with the same soft power resources are able to create the same soft power outcomes (Fan, 2008, p. 150; Rothman, 2011, p. 60).

Rothman (2011) has also one of the scholars who have attempted to redefine the conceptualization of soft power. Rather than categorizing power into hard and soft he suggests that power should be perceived as a spectrum, that distinguishes between the hardness and softness of individuals' actions. An example of the hardest form of power is the ability to end somebody's life with physical force as the primary mechanism. On the other side of the

spectrum, the softest form of power is the ability to influence others' behaviour through ideals or morals. Rothman proposes two mechanisms through which soft power is able to influence others. The first is *rhetoric and discourse control*, where actors shape and modify public discourse to their liking. In this process, media play a crucial role as they are used as a tool to diffuse the discourse to influence public perception (Rothman, 2011, pp. 59-60). The second mechanism is *attraction through norm diffusion*, which is based on the adoption of norms and ideas which actors perceive as successful and therefore consider them attractive. However, similar to previously mentioned scholars, Rothman also acknowledges that attraction can sometimes lead to negative consequences (Rothman, 2011, pp. 57).

On the other hand, Hall (2010) does not dismiss the concept of soft power as such, but he is opposed to Nye's conceptualization which uses soft power as an analytical tool. He suggests that it is more accurate to operate with multiple soft powers, each with its own distinct mechanisms. Hall proposes examples such as *institutional power*, *reputation power* and *representational power* through which the soft powers can be analysed (Hall, 2010, pp. 191-211).

When addressing soft power, the debate cannot be complete without mentioning the concept of *soft disempowerment*, firstly introduced by Paul Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti. Soft power does not only yield positive results, meaning that rather than achieving a positive outcome, projecting soft power can lead to an opposite effect. Soft disempowerment therefore refers to "occasions in which you may upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a loss of attractiveness or influence" (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014, pp.3- 12; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, pp. 1140-45). Because the outcomes of soft power are not always positive, it is important to account for the possibility of negative results. Soft power and soft disempowerment are interconnected, meaning that wherever soft power is present, there is always the potential for soft disempowerment (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014, p. 4; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015, p. 706; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1143).

To properly understand the concept of soft disempowerment, it is crucial to explain how Brannagan and Giulianotti interpret soft power. Their understanding of soft power is based on the division of process through which states obtain soft power in three stages. The first stage is defined by the actors maximizing their soft power resources in order to appear attractive to others, this process is called *positioning*. At the second stage, the recipients decide whether they deem the presented resources attractive. This is when the *credible attraction filter* plays a key role. As mentioned earlier, attraction is essential to soft power, for this reason, it is crucial that actors perceive the offered resources as attractive. At the same time, attraction alone is not

enough, as the state must be perceived both attractive and credible. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that attraction is intersubjective, meaning in order for the soft power to work, it is necessary for both the sender and the recipient to have a mutual understanding of what is considered attractive, as well as for the sender to have a clear understanding of who the target of their soft power projection is. If the recipient fails to understand its target audience, the soft power simply does not appeal to the receiver thus not producing the intended outcome.

Returning back to the division of obtaining soft power, the third stage is when soft disempowerment comes into consideration. It is the process which follows after competing actors, which can be both state and non-state, are actively trying to discredit the state projecting the soft power in order to undermine their credibility in the perception of recipients. (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, pp. 1140-1151). Brannagan and Giulianotti further pinpointed three mechanisms through which soft disempowerment process can develop. Firstly, states may face accusation of *violating international laws and rules*, these practices are often uncovered and brought up to the public by media. An example of this case is the accusations of bribery of FIFA officials by Qatar in order to secure the 2022 World Cup bid. The second mechanism thought which soft disempowerment can occur is when states face the accusation of not being able to *uphold international conventions or standards on global development*. The standards mainly touch upon areas such as human rights or environmental issues and are usually highlighted by international non-governmental organizations (NGO's) such as Amnesty International. Example being Qatar which during the 2022 World Cup faced backlash for the kafala system and the inhumane treatment of migrant employees working mainly in the construction sector. Third and the last mechanism comes to play when the state's actions are considered to have *direct and negative impact on other individual nations or communities of nations*. As an example, Brannagan and Giulianotti mention Qatar's funding of terrorist groups such as Muslim Brotherhood (Brannagan & Guilianotti, 2018, pp. 1150-1156).

Coming back to Nye's parallel of comparing soft power to the art of seduction, Joffe (2006) perceives seduction as a double-edged sword. Although in his article *America the Ubiquitous* where, similarly to Nye, he focuses on the soft power of the USA, his criticism targets the core concept of soft power. Joffe proceeds to argue that when seduction is successful and the party who is being influenced gives in, it may eventually develop resentment not only towards the seducer but towards itself for yielding. This is partly because when one is influenced too much it can lead to the loss of one's own power and overall identity. Soft power, often compared to "winning hearts and minds" in this case, "twists minds into

resentment and rage" which serves as a great example of how soft disempowerment can look like (Joffe, 2006, pp. 14-15).

### **1.3 Public diplomacy**

In order to gain a better understanding of sports diplomacy, it is necessary to firstly introduce the plethora of concepts that are interrelated with it such as public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and nation branding. Key aspect of public diplomacy is its extensiveness as it is often understood as an umbrella term for many other diplomatic disciplines such as cultural diplomacy and sports diplomacy (Grix & Brannagan, 2024, pp. 3). Public diplomacy, similarly, to the concept of soft power, is not a recently developed concept. Public diplomacy as we know it today was developed during Cold War by Edmund Gullion, who coined the term in 1965 (Cull, 2010, p. 11). When analysing the literature regarding public diplomacy, it is undeniable that there are countless definitions explaining the concept. Paul Sharp describes public diplomacy as “the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented” (Sharp, 2005, pp. 106). On the other hand, Melissen (2005) and Nye (2008) both understand public diplomacy as one of the key tools of soft power, through which soft power resources such as culture are being communicated to foreign audiences (Melissen, 2005, p. 4; Nye, 2008, p. 95).

When using sport as a tool of soft power, it is wrong to assume it that it is used only for foreign audiences. Freeman mentions that sport, an attractive asset, when used as a tool of “soft public diplomacy”, is not aimed solely at a foreign audience, as important aspect is also targeting the domestic audience (Freeman, 2012, p. 1263; Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2020, p. 71).

Grix and Brannagan (2024) understand public diplomacy as a process of “any government-led attempts at communicating directly with foreign publics with the aim of building mutual trust, fostering cooperation, and presenting one’s country as attractive” (Grix & Brannagan, 2024, p. 3). However, similarly to the international environment which has changed mainly due to globalisation and digitalisation, public diplomacy also had to stay on track and adjust to the modern times (Wang, 2006, pp. 41-44).

Traditionally, main actors of public diplomacy were governments and officially appointed diplomats as public diplomacy mostly used to refer to bilateral relations between states. Nowadays, the scope of who can be pursuing public diplomacy has changed and expanded significantly as it can be carried out by non-governmental organizations as well (Melissen, 2005, p. 4; Snow, 2020, p. 8; Veselý, 2018, p. 28).

Similarly to public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy lacks one coherent definition as well as every author highlights different aspects. Milton Cummings presents a definition where he describes cultural diplomacy as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding.” (Cummings, 2003, as cited in Goff, 2020, pp. 30-31). Cultural diplomacy represents a vital part of public diplomacy, it’s a tool of soft power able to persuade foreign audience through culture and values (Dubinsky, 2019, p. 156; Schneider, 2005, p. 147).

#### **1.4 Propaganda vs public diplomacy**

In the connection to public diplomacy, multiple authors (Peterková, 2006; Nye, 2019; Cull, 2010) touch upon the confusion between public diplomacy and propaganda. It is important to explain the difference between those terms because while they might share certain common characteristics, they are undoubtedly not synonymous.

Whilst they both represents channels through which state projects its influence onto foreign public, they mainly differ in the way the communication is carried out. According to R.S. Zaharna (2004), propaganda’s communication is mainly based on secrecy and deception. Propaganda purposely conceals certain information as it aims to manipulate the receiving audience, among the most known examples are Nazi and Communist propaganda (Peterková, 2006, p. 89; Zaharna, 2004, pp. 3-5). On the other hand, public diplomacy is as the title suggest - public and open. Important aspect is that the audience receiving the information can decide whether or not they want to accept the message being transmitted. As the main goal is to persuade the audience and to gain their trust, the more credible the government is, the bigger chance it has in succeeding (Melissen, 2005, p.15; Zaharna, 2004, pp. 3-5). If the country does not possess certain level of credibility and its policies are viewed as illegitimate, it is unable to translate its cultural resources into effective soft power (Nye, 2008, pp. 96-101).

To summarize the main distinction between the two, propaganda’s communication is one sided, whereas public diplomacy's communication functions both ways as it does not only convey a message but at the same time, it listens because it views the foreign public as an active participant of the process (Cull, 2010, p. 12).

#### **1.5 Nation branding**

The founder of the term nation brand is Simon Anholt, who came up with the term in 1996 (Anholt, 2011, p. 1). Similarly to public diplomacy or soft power, nation branding also



has a wide range of definitions that can often lead to an inaccurate understanding of the term. One of the reasons is that the term nation branding is used by a wide range of disciplines, especially it often appears in connection with marketing or public relations (Anholt, 2007, p. 4-5). A common trait shared by public diplomacy and nation-branding is that both disciplines have a higher chance in succeeding if the strategies they are based on are more long-term focused (Melissen, 2005, p. 21).

Although there is a notable overlap between nation branding and public diplomacy, Melissen (2005) perceives nation branding as a much more complicated field compared to public diplomacy, as he highlights two key conceptual differences. Firstly, unlike public diplomacy, which is significantly limited in both its scope and influence, nation branding is much bolder and dynamic in its approach. Secondly, while public diplomacy focuses on developing or sustaining existing international relationships, nation branding's central point of focus is the identity of a country and its promotion to foreign audiences (Melissen, 2005, pp. 20-21).

This idea of overlap of public diplomacy and nation branding is also shared by Anholt (2007), who coined the term *competitive identity* mainly because he was fully aware of and frustrated by the incorrect use of the term nation-branding. The term *competitive identity* in its definition directly combines the connection between public diplomacy and brand management, which consists of four components, which are 1) brand identity 2) brand image 3) brand purpose and 4) brand equity. The misinterpretation of the term nation-branding primarily stems from the confusion between the terms brand and branding. Brand refers to the “product or service or organization, considered in combination with its name, its identity and its reputation” whereas, branding is the “process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity, in order to build or manage the reputation” (Anholt, 2007, pp. 3-5).

Similarly to Anholt, Wally Olins is one of the key authors who specializes on nation branding, which he claims has roots in French Revolution. Nation branding as we know it today consists of three areas which are: 1) brand export, 2) foreign direct investment and 3) tourism. Even though the initial instinct is to think of the area of brand export as mainly manufactured goods, Olins also points out the importance of intangible products such as culture or sport (Design Indaba, 2020). Although the three areas of nation branding may seem as they do not have anything in common, according to Olins, they are all interrelated and should be treated as such in order to maximize their success (Olins, 2005, pp. 170-179). Especially in today's highly globalised world, nation-branding is a key aspect which allows countries to be able to compete

and defend their position in a extremely competitive environment (Anholt, 2007, p. 21; Melissen, 2005, p. 19; Peterková, 2006, p. 90).

Nation branding is also closely linked to the stereotypes that people associate with a certain country that consciously or unconsciously influence their attitude and behaviour towards the nation-state. Anholt demonstrated this on the example of Brazil and Rio de Janeiro which is stereotypically linked to fun and entertaining activities such as the carnival and football. This argument is also supported by Simon Chadwick, professor of sport and geopolitical economy, as he highlights that during his courses, when students are asked about their opinions and associations with Brazil, the vast majority of the answers are linked to football and overall have a positive connotation (Anholt, 2007, pp. 1; Anholt, 2011, pp. 1-4; The 966 Podcast, 2023).

Stereotypes serve as means to quickly and in a simplified manner classify a nation, since most people do not usually have the time to form a coherent view of a nation and regardless of whether these stereotypes are based on true or false information, they evoke either positive or negative emotions in the audience and in this way, shape their perception towards the country (Anholt, 2007, pp. 1; Anholt, 2011, pp. 1-4; Pestana, 2020, pp. 343; Taylor et al., 2020, pp. 373). To this day, some countries may still benefit from the positive international image they have secured in the international arena, while others find themselves on the opposite end of the spectrum. For this reason, and in this day and age, it is crucial for nations to engage in nation branding. In order to build a strong nation brand, the country must take into consideration its strengths and limitations and build upon that. Important aspect of nation-branding is its authenticity and the ability to focus on unique qualities that set the country apart from others in order to succeed in the market. It is in the interest of every country to actively manage its reputation, as failing to do so allows the international community to form its own perception which is often reduced to earlier stated stereotypes. Naturally, it is important for countries to understood and viewed as positively as possible, primarily because the ultimate goal of all countries is an economic prosperity, linked to attracting new investors and boosting sectors such as tourism (Anholt, 2006, pp. 2- 3; Anholt, 2007, pp. 1-2; Anholt, 2011, pp. 1-4; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015, p. 705; Design Indaba, 2020).

## **1.6 Sports diplomacy**

Similarly to music and arts, sports represent an inherent part of cultural diplomacy (Veselý, 2018, p. 30). It is important to point out that the main aim of the thesis is not to thoroughly explore the origins and the phenomenon of sport as such, but rather to draw attention to sport as a means of public diplomacy, more specifically sports diplomacy, through

which soft power can be projected both on domestic and international level (Nygård & Gates, 2013, p. 236).

Sport does not solely equal to a form of physical activity which contributes to both physical and mental health, it is a phenomenon which represents an essential part of culture, and it holds a vital role in conveying nation's values and ideals (Nye, 2004, pp. 47). It represents a well-established institution functioning on multiple levels ranging from local, national to international. It is important to highlight that sport is in vast majority of cases associated with positive characteristics such as teamwork, respect, fair play, it is fun but at the same time has a certain structure in the form of rules (Brand, 2023, pp. 160-161; Murray, 2018, p. 96; Teach Mideast, 2023).

As mentioned in the section regarding nation-branding, today's world is highly globalized and interconnected, given these positive characteristics sport is often utilized as a perfect tool through which a nation-state can enhance its nation-branding and reputation in the international sphere (Brand, 2023, p. 160; Kobierecki & Strozek, 2021, p. 49).

It is extremely unlikely to come across one consistent definition of sports diplomacy. According to variety of authors (Abdi et al., 2019; Kobierecki, 2019; Murray & Pigman, 2014; Vonnard & Marston, 2020) the area of sport and diplomacy has long been thoroughly unexamined by the scholars. Although Murray mentions rise of sport in the academic sphere in the 1960s, scholars mostly researched sport in the area of international relations rather than specifically focusing on the role of sport in diplomacy. Focus on the role of sport in diplomacy has started becoming more prominent only in the last 30 years (Murray, 2018, p. 59; Vonnard & Marston, 2020, p. 1).

According to Rofo (2018), sport is often being overlooked and misunderstood, and it is crucial to understand its function in diplomacy because for a long time, scholars have been neglecting this area of study (Rofo, 2018, pp. 1-4). Stuart Murray is one of the most prominent academics who focus their research on the role of sport in diplomacy, in his book *Sports diplomacy, Origins, Theory and Practice*, Murray attempts to contribute to the scholarly debate of sports diplomacy by providing a thorough overview of the role sport has served in diplomacy. He introduces the term *public sports diplomacy*, in order to separate sports diplomacy from broad term of public diplomacy. The term public sports diplomacy refers to the process when Ministry of Foreign Affairs utilizes sport to achieve diplomatic aims by informing and engaging with foreign audience in order to create a positive public image (Murray, 2018, p. 114).

Brand (2023) does not contribute to the scholarly debate about sports diplomacy by providing a definition per se but rather he categorized all of the important characteristics

of sports diplomacy into five categories in order to provide an extensive and detailed overview of what sports diplomacy entails. He highlights the acquisition and strengthening of soft power through various sport activities in order to exert soft power in various areas as one of the key components (Brand, 2023, p. 152).

The vast majority of authors in their research on sports diplomacy utilize the soft power theory as a theoretical framework. It is important to note, however, that most of the academic literature specialising in sports diplomacy and soft power overwhelmingly discusses case studies, among the most popular are Qatar as well as China or address the topic of sports mega-events such as the Olympic Games or World Cup (Chadwick et al. 2020; Dichter, 2014, p. 12).

Postlethwaite et al. (2022) also point out another limitation in the field of sports diplomacy and that is that most of the research comes from Western-based scholars which leads to imbalance in the field (Postlethwaite et al., 2022, p. 364). These examples illustrate that research in the field of sports diplomacy is still very limited. It is also for this reason that the author of this thesis has chosen a topic on sports diplomacy to contribute to the academic debate and to broaden the content. Many scholars Cha (2016), Brand (2023), Murray (2018) list Australia as an example of a country who understands the role of sports diplomacy, managing to use sport to their own benefit by hosting sporting events such as the Olympic Games, being amongst the six countries who secured hosting the Olympics multiple times as well as constantly delivering sustained athletic performances. Australia managed to capitalize on sport, which is strongly embedded in their culture and identity and convert it into a tool of soft power which translated into improving country's image and proving Australia to be an important international player. It is also worth mentioning that Australia is considered to be a pioneer in the area of adopting long-term strategies of sports diplomacy, as it is the first country which officially published sports diplomacy strategy by the government in 2015 (Brand, 2023, p. 156; Cha, 2016, pp. 144-145; Murray, 2018, pp. 99-119; Nalwala 2024).

Murray (2018) also highlights the universalism of sport, as according to him, it represents a form of universal communication – a language everyone understands that is shared amongst different cultures and countries across the world which is proved by the sheer amount of people which are drawn to sport and sport events, making it the perfect tool for obtaining soft power (Murray, 2018, pp. 38-53; Reiche, 2014, p. 499).

By taking into account Nye's division of soft power resources mentioned above, sport therefore represents the most effective combination of all components - culture, values and policy. Although, in many of his works Nye acknowledges sport as a soft power tool, he has never explored this particular area of soft power in depth in any of his research (Lekakis, 2019).

However, utilizing sport as a diplomacy tool is certainly not a new trend, as states have always used sport as a tool to exert their power or as a diplomacy means for reaching their desired outcomes (Brand, 2023, p. 156). As the history shows, sport is not only an enjoyable pastime activity and a form of entertainment. Although many deem sport to be apolitical, it has always been interlinked with politics (International Olympic Committee, 2024; Murray & Pigman, 2013, p. 1098; Vonnard & Marston, 2020, p. 1; Walker, 2024).

The most well-known example goes as back as Ancient Greece and the first Olympic Games, firstly introduced as an activity during a religious festival had a political undertone since during the Games, the Olympic Truce also known as Ekecheiria was put into motion, so athletes and the audience were able to participate and enjoy the events without the pressure of conflict. Although there were wars presents between different city-states, all of them respected the truce (Dubinsky, 2019, pp. 156-158; International Olympic Committee, 2025). Jumping ahead to 1896, when Greece hosted the first Modern Olympic Games, this mega-event served as a tool for the Greeks to demonstrate their independent state to foreign public (Dichter, 2023, p. 2). The Olympics later became a sporting event used all across the political spectrum for the attainment of their political objectives (Dubinsky, 2019, pp. 156; Murray & Pigman, 2013, p. 1098). Widely recognized examples are the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin also known as the “Nazi Games”, which the Nazi regime used as vehicle to spread propaganda and celebrate the German nation. Both the Nazis and the Soviets used sport and sporting events such as the Olympics to demonstrate their power and superiority to both the domestic and the foreign audiences (Amara, 2012, p. 20; Cha, 2016, pp. 141; Vonnard & Marston, 2020, pp. 3-4).

## 1.7 Actors of sports diplomacy

As sports diplomacy falls under the umbrella of public diplomacy, similarly as to actors who traditionally participated public diplomacy used to be exclusively the matter of the state and state agencies, sports diplomacy has also undergone a change in the regard of actors in sports diplomacy. Typically, actors participating in sports diplomacy can be divided into two categories: 1) state actors and 2) non-state actors. The first group as it is clear from the context entails actors such as state, government, foreign ministries as well as public authorities. This refers to all the cases when sport is consciously used by state actors to reach political objectives, such as hosting sport mega-events. The latter group includes variety of actors such as international sporting organisations, individual athletes or popular teams as well as private organisations (Brand, 2023, p. 154). This group can also be referred to as the use of *international-sport-as-diplomacy* and it mainly focuses on how sport can affect diplomacy as well as on the diplomatic efforts which are used in order to facilitate sporting competitions (Murray & Pigman, 2014, p. 1099).

According to Nygard and Gates (2013), for middle and great powers sports diplomacy often represents a key element of their foreign policy (Abdi et al., 2019, p. 148; Nygård & Gates, 2013, p. 148). However, sports diplomacy is not reduced to only being an area where only well-established and great powers can become a prominent player. Qatar serves as a great example. A microstate in the Middle East, without any prior connection to sport, has managed to build a reputation of a sport capital by hosting mega-events such as the 2022 World Cup as well as heavily investing in sports infrastructure along with purchasing multiple renowned European football clubs such as Bayern Munich and Paris Saint Germain (Bianco & Sons, 2023, p. 100; Brand, 2023, pp. 161-162; Dubinsky, 2019, p. 156).

One of the ways to utilize sports diplomacy is also the legitimisation of the state and its regime. Another common theme is the use of sport as a tool of re-branding or re-invention of a state. China serves as an example of combining re-branding and using soft power to proclaim its power in the international arena. During 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China's hosting of the Games proved to be success which helped to boost Chinese international image. China, previously portrayed as outdated and backward nation, proved to be a capable power with the ambition of asserting its dominance on a global scale.

There is also another layer to Chinese use of sports diplomacy, and it is the domestic factor. Not only did China manage to improve its international image, hosting the Games also

had a domestic implication as its goal was to legitimize the regime and to improve the relationship between the society and the Chinese government (Kobierecki, 2019, pp. 21-23).

## 1.8 Sports diplomacy as a tool of soft power

There are numerous ways through which soft power can be exercised in sports. Most of the scholars Abdi et al. (2019), Nygård & Gates (2013), Roffe (2018), Kobierecki (2019) recognize hosting mega-events to be one of the key mechanisms. The phenomenon of mega-events was firstly introduced and researched by Maurice Roche who classified it as "large scale cultural (including commercial and sporting) events which have a dramatic character, mass popular appeal and international significance. They are typically organised by variable combinations of national governmental and international non-governmental organisations and thus can be said to be important elements in 'official' versions of public culture." (Roche, 2002, p. 1).

In the area of sports, the most prominent and sought-after mega-events are the Olympic Games or the World Cup (Cha, 2016, p. 139). Hosting a mega-event is rather a prestige opportunity for a country to present itself to the foreign public with the ambition to improve its image. Although it is sometimes overlooked, it is important to also focus on domestic influence. Chadwick et al. (2022) also emphasize that in some cases, the impact on the domestic audience plays a significant role. In this regard, Russia serves as an important example, as it used the 2014 Sochi Olympics to demonstrate a new, modern Russia not only to the foreign audience, but primarily to its domestic audience (Chadwick et al., 2022, p. 211; Grix & Brannagan, 2024, p. 5; Kobierecki, 2019, p. 21).

As it was previously mentioned, the attention that comes with hosting of mega-events does not always have to give rise to nation in the best light possible as it can easily lead to soft disempowerment, which brings the opposite of the desired effect as it damages rather than improves country's image (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014, p. 706).

Abdi et al. (2019) provide a well-structured division of sports diplomacy resources into three groups. The first group is *sports events*, which consist of previously mentioned mega-events as well as smaller events related to domestic leagues. The second group, *sports human capitals*, focuses on all the actors of sports diplomacy. This group includes variety of actors, generally all people who interact with sports in one way or another. From people who do sports such as players, coaches but also fans and most importantly this group also includes sports academics. The last group mentioned is *sports producers and sports products*, which includes

media focused on sports as well as sports merchandise. Another key and effective resource of soft power in sports are the players. The players are perceived as ambassadors of the country they operate in. The more well-known the players are the better exposure they provide for the country and the league they participate in. This is particularly common approach in the area of football as there has been a heavy rise in acquiring famous football stars to play in the domestic leagues by Gulf countries such as Qatar, UAE or Saudi Arabia (Abdi et al., 2019, pp. 2-8). Apart from hosting mega-events, investing into foreign clubs as well as acquisition of foreign superstar footballers are one of the key tools for enhancing soft power. This pattern is primarily visible in the Gulf countries, which started heavily investing into football (Abuamer & Nassar, 2025; Barzani, 2022; Dorsey, 2024; Karataş, 2022).



## 2 Saudi Arabia's approach to sports diplomacy

This chapter focuses on the main domestic factors behind Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy. The country's approach is predominantly influenced by a strategic framework Vision 2030, which outlines all the key areas the government aims to improve. These primarily include economic diversification, improving public health and providing a fulfilling life for the young population. In the second part of the chapter, the author focuses on the individual aspects through which sports diplomacy manifests itself externally, particularly through activities tied to football. These include the purchase of foreign football stars, securing the rights to host major football events and investments in foreign football clubs.

### 2.1 Vision 2030

The concept of Visions is a common theme shared amongst GCC countries. The Visions represent a framework that outlines long-term strategic goals, and the individual steps needed in order to achieve them. An underlying link shared between these Visions is the need to reverse the economy's dependence on oil. Brannagan and Reiche describe this behaviour of the GCC countries as a way to avoid a phenomenon known as the "resource curse" (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025, p. 3). Averting dependence on oil is set to be achieved through economic diversification by focusing on strengthening and improving different sectors of economy such as tourism while also supporting privatization leading to creation of more diverse and competitive job market (Bianco & Sons, 2021, p. 86; Brannagan, 2022, p. 166; KPMG, 2022, p. 3).

Not only does Saudi Arabia seek to socioeconomically reform the country but it also aims to rebrand itself and secure its position in the international arena (Matarese et al., 2024, p. 4). An aspect that can be seen through the different Visions of the GCC countries is the visible support and endorsement for sport, which serves as a tool for achieving domestic and foreign political goals (Bianco & Sons, 2023, p. 297).

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS)<sup>1</sup>, who is perceived to be a very dynamic leader, is considered to be the main driving force behinds the country's ambitious approach to sports diplomacy. In 2016 he unveiled the strategic framework called Vision 2030 to socioeconomically transform Saudi Arabia and sports plays a huge part in achieving these aspirational goals (Ottaway, 2021, p. 95). Saudi Arabia's interest in sports diplomacy must therefore be understood in the broader context of the need to transform the

---

<sup>1</sup> MBS became the Crown Prince in 2017 (Ottaway, 2021, p. 33).

country on multiple levels while projecting soft power both internationally and domestically. Saudi Vision 2030 is consisting of three main pillars: *a vibrant society, a thriving economy and ambitious nation* (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, pp. 13).

### **2.1.1 Economic diversification**

As it was previously mentioned, the main objective of the economic aspect of the Vision 2030 is to diversify the economy beyond its oil dependence. Saudi Arabia has started utilizing oil commercially since 1938 after it was first discovered, with a significant expansion of the oil industry occurring during the 1970s and 1980s. The 1973 oil crisis helped Saudi Arabia to further cemented its position as a key international player of the oil industry while it also brought significant economic leverage to its domestic development (Borck, 2023, pp. 7-8; Faudot, 2019, pp. 3-4). The flourishing oil industry brought along not only a transformation of the state's economy, but also a demographic change, as the population started growing significantly, a trend that has prevailed well in to the 21st century (Hitti & Abbed, 1974; Ochsenwald et al., 2025; Statista 2024a).

Although Saudi Arabia possesses natural resources other than oil, the economy is highly dependent on oil revenues. This fact is also demonstrated by looking into its resources as it currently holds one of the largest oil reserves in the world, sixth biggest gas reserves in the world while also being the biggest oil producer in the world (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025, p. 2; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 6; Statista, 2023; Twin, 2024). It should be pointed out that it was the crash of oil prices in 2014-2015 which further supported the impulse of expanding into new sectors of economy. (Ottaway, 2021, pp. 95-97). Not only do the crashes in oil prices bring attention to the fact that economic model dependent on oil revenues is more prone to fluctuations, therefore making it more unstable but data from 2008 suggests that Saudi Arabia will only be able to produce oil for another 70 years (Elneel & AlMulhim, 2022, p. 3405; Reiche, 2010, p. 2298). The inability to produce oil poses an existential threat to Saudi Arabia. Its economic reliance on the oil and gas industry is also reflected in the country's GDP, which in 2023, accounted for 50 % of the GDP (Statista 2024b).

Nonetheless, MBS himself is fully aware of the necessity to expand the country's economy and branch out into different areas away from oil and gas, considering the current economic model on which Saudi Arabia operates is unsustainable in the long term. Part of the unsustainability can also be attributed to population growth rate which by 2050 is projected to

increase by 43 %.<sup>2</sup> This fact puts further pressure on to the Saudi government as it might struggle to maintain the funding needed to support the current standard of living the Saudi society is accustomed to. In an interview from 2021, MBS has mentioned that if no intervention was done, the current model would struggle to sustain itself for more than 20 years into the future (Al Arabiya English, 2021; Diwan, 2019, p. 26; Elneel & AlMulhim, 2022; Reiche, 2010, p. 2298). Part of the issue also lies in the fact that Saudi Arabia is a rentier state, meaning, its revenue is mainly derived from the export of natural resources in this case referring predominantly to oil, rather than depending on the taxation of the citizens (Faudot, 2019, pp. 3-4; Chadwick, 2022, p. 692; Qasem, 2015, pp. 4-5).

A key aspect of the plan to diversify the economic model is a strong support for strengthening the private sector, as a significant portion of companies and sectors such as education or healthcare are currently state-owned (Ottaway, 2022, p. 95). The emphasis on privatisation can be seen in the example of well-established oil company Aramco. The partial privatisation of Aramco, previously fully owned by the state was seen as one of the turning points in the economic shift of the state (Chadwick & Widdop, 2022, p. 234; Matarese et al., 2024). However, even though Aramco became available for investment in 2019 through tradable bonds, currently, the majority of the company is still under the control of Saudi government. The government controls Aramco through a sovereign wealth fund called the Public Investment Fund (PIF), which is an important player in the Saudi's sports strategy (Matarese et al. 2024, p. 4; Weijermars & Moeller, 2020).

The decision to open Saudi Arabia's companies for privatization is primarily tied to attracting both domestic and foreign investors, whose assets are intended for providing a new stimulus to the Saudi economy. Simultaneously, supporting private sector growth is also heavily linked to the job market. As in non-oil economies, it's mostly the private sector responsible for generating new job opportunities which are much needed as the public sector is not sufficient to provide enough jobs positions especially for the younger generation (Hertog 2019, pp. 30-32; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, pp. 22; International Monetary Fund, 2016, pp. 12). As the Saudi job market is heavily dependent on the migrant workforce, Bianco and Sons (2021) also point out that one of the aims is the "Saudization" of the workforce, meaning the government seeks to provide more opportunities for Saudi nationals rather than attracting

---

<sup>2</sup> Both Saudi-born and migrants are included in this prediction (General Authority for Statistics, 2024a; WHO Data, 2025).

migrant workers (Bianco & Sons, 2021, pp. 82-87).

Palpable attention is also devoted to the promotion of tourism, which is one of a crucial areas Saudi government seeks to boost. Similarly to other GCC states, tourism in Saudi Arabia has always been primarily associated with religion, mainly because it is home to several important Islamic sites, including two holiest cities of Mecca and Medina, attracting millions of pilgrims from all over the world each year (Bianco & Sons, 2021, p. 93; Brannagan & Reiche, 2025, p. 3; Oxford Business Group, 2020). The importance of sport can also be seen at Saudi Arabia's new focus on the promotion of sports tourism. The Minister of Tourism, Ahmed Al-Khateeb, one of prominent figures shaping sports diplomacy in Saudi Arabia, stated that sports tourism is a key component of economic development in the country (Khateeb, 2025). However, it is important to note that, even though tourism is typically associated with the influx of foreign tourists, the importance of domestic tourism should not be overlooked, as the Saudi government aims to entice not only international tourists, but it seeks to attract domestic public as well (KPMG, 2022, p. 20).

Investment into expanding a certain industry, in this case the sports industry is not only limited to increasing the influx of tourists, but the expansion also naturally generates new jobs for the domestic population (Reda & Viviez, 2021). The influx of investment into sports industry is a clear indicative that Saudi Arabia is actively trying to shift away from resource-based economy into knowledge one (Satish et al., 2024, p. 36).

### **2.1.2 Healthier and more active society**

One of the aspects of Vision 2030 which has a direct link to sports is manifested in the section which addresses the creation of a vibrant society. Apart from bringing economic benefits to the country, sports also have an impact on promoting an active and healthy way of living (Mosly, 2022, p. 12). Similarly to other Gulf states such as Qatar or the UAE, Saudi Arabia's population has long struggled with the problem of unhealthy lifestyle. Sport is therefore not just a means to achieve external aspirations, but in this case a link to ensure that Saudi society leads a healthier lifestyle. Saudi society has major shortcomings in the area of healthy living and therefore a firm health intervention is needed to bring about change. This approach is reflected in the emphasis the Saudi government places on making sports a regular part of Saudi citizens day to day routines. According to data provided by National Health Information Survey from 2019, more than 38 % of Saudi society is overweight, while more than 20 % are obese (Ministry of Health Saudi Arabia, 2024; Olivereau, 2022, p. 306).

These statistics are not only alarming when it comes to adult population, but a similar phenomenon can also be observed in children's lifestyle, with 33% of children between the ages of 2 and 14 being overweight and more than 14% being obese (General Authority for Statistic 2024b). Long-term lack of physical activity is known to have a serious impact on health and increases the risk of diseases such as obesity, diabetes and worsening heart conditions, which are typical examples of diseases of affluence (Albujulaya et al., 2024, p. 610; Taylor & Francis, 2025).

For these reasons, the Saudi government places great emphasis on incorporating sports into the daily lives of its citizens - both passively and actively. Saudi society is not a particularly active one, which can be seen at their daily habits, supported by the fact that Saudi Arabia is the world's leader when it comes to daily TV consumption (Wang, 2024). Lack of physical activity is also reflected in other statistics, which show that currently only 13 % of the Saudi population works out at least out once a week, however the goal outlined in the Vision 2030 is to increase the number to at least 40 % (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 25).

Unhealthy lifestyle consisting of unhealthy eating habits – such as the overconsumption of fast food, not enough exercise, free time spent on social media and watching television has a direct impact on society's lifespan and quality of life (Alluhidan et al., 2024, pp. 15-16; Alsulami et al., 2023, pp. 2-8; Brannagan & Reiche, 2025, p. 6; Hvidt, 2019, pp. 4-5). It is also worth noting, that apart from improving physical condition, sport is also known to provide benefits such as boosting mental health and well-being of individuals, which both physical and mental health significantly contribute to an overall healthier society (Better Health Channel, 2025). When Saudis decide to workout, walking is the most popular form of exercise, while football takes the second place (Alqahtani et al., 2021, p. 233).

In order to contribute to the development of sport in the society and motivate the Saudi public into incorporating sports into their daily routines, the Saudi government started heavily investing into sports infrastructure. In this case, the aspect aiming to instil healthy habits is linked to economic development. By building and investing into sports infrastructure and facilities the state seeks to develop modern sports facilities for public use as well as for professional sports (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 22). An example of this policy is the ambitious plan to build a futuristic mega-project, NEOM. The city of NEOM is supposed to serve as an international sports destination, designed to host a wide range of sports events such as the 2034 FIFA World Cup or 2029 Asian Winter Games (Elsborg et al., 2024, p. 29; Elsborg, 2024).

There is also an economic benefit to having a healthier society, Albujoyaya et al. (2024) point out that there is a connection between a healthier and more active society and the economic prosperity of the state. A healthier society does not burden the economy as much, because it does not put additional pressure on the healthcare system and at the same time, a healthier society is more productive which brings significant benefits to the workforce (Albujoyaya et al., 2024, pp. 609-610).

### **2.1.3 The aspect of young Saudi population**

Young population is also one of the driving factors which accounts to Saudi Arabia's initiative for heavily investing into sports and sports diplomacy. As various statistics show, Saudi population is leaning more towards the younger side – meaning 63 % of the society is younger than 30 years old, which means that the vast majority of the population falls into Generation Z (Gen Z). It is also important to mention the fact that Saudi Arabia also has the second biggest penetration of social media with 96,2 % as of April 2024 (Jo Dixon, 2024). Chadwick (2023) sees the link of Saudi Arabia's heavy investment into sports not only as a way to project soft power, enhance the nation brand and diversify the economy but also as a curated attempt to provide entertainment for the young public. Although it may seem that securing the organization of grand events such as the World Cup, attracting foreign football superstars or investing in various sports infrastructure is aimed to enhance the soft power on the international stage, there is a strong domestic subtext (The 966 Podcast, 2023).

The government is fully aware that young people make up the majority of the Saudi society as it reflects in various programs aiming to transform the social life of Saudi citizens (Smith Diwan, 2016). One of the key programs dedicated to improving the well-being of residents is Quality of Life Program launched in 2018. It primarily aims to expand the entertainment area and sports are in the centre of the plan. By heavily investing into sports, in any form possible and providing the youth with variety of entertainment, the government aims to satisfy their needs (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025, pp. 5-6). Olivereau (2022) also sees focus on young generation as an important driving factor behind Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy while also highlighting that the focus of Saudi government on younger generation sets Saudi Arabia apart from other GCC countries' strategies (Olivereau, 2022, p. 306).

As it was mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Saudi Arabia is a rentier state which on one hand brings certain benefits for the society such as the absence of direct taxation. On the other hand, while the society is free of taxation, the state is not constrained by social demands

and is therefore free to act as it pleases. State cannot be held accountable for its actions, because citizens lack any tangible resources to enforce them. This makes the social contract between the society and state deeply asymmetric (Reiche, 2010, p. 2298).

However, there seems to be visible shift in the existing social contract across GCC countries. As the states diversify their economies away from oil and gas and focus on expanding private sectors with the intention of boosting job markets, the traditional model is being reshaped (Bianco & Sons, 2023, p. 96). One of the reasons why Saudi government aims to please the young generation can be also rooted in its fear of possible unrest emerging among Gen Z population, which has been showing long-term dissatisfaction with the current situation (Brannagan & Reiche, 2025, p. 5; Chulov, 2017). Chadwick (2023) even goes as far to mention the reasons behinds government's heavy spending towards sports is the concern of potential ignition of another Arab Spring (The 966 Podcast, 2023).

Young people generally want to enjoy themselves and have fun while also be able to secure jobs in order to support themselves. Essentially, the government's steps can be seen as a strategic approach aiming to provide the young generation with various opportunities to actively spend their leisure time while also ensure job perspectives in order to prevent any anti-systemic ideas from arising.

The government has also been implementing gradual social reforms. A slight loosening up of the social norms can be observed particularly when it comes to the entertainment industry with examples such as concerts no longer being prohibited and cinemas opening again in 2018 after more than 30 years of being banned (The Economist 2021; Reuters 2017). The shift can also be seen in the area of women's rights and gender equality, which are often a target of international criticism, particularly from human rights organisations. In general, Saudi Arabia struggles with poor human rights record as reflected by the Freedom House statistics (Freedom House, 2025).

Before the reforms started being implemented, women were not allowed to drive, travel without a male guardian nor attend a football match (Chadwick & Widdop, 2022, pp. 234; Fauzul & Basuni, 2023, p. 587). The inequality of genders is also very visible in the area of sport, a key sector the government seeks to reform as seen by the goals stated in Vision 2030. Generally women were not encouraged to participate in sports as for example there was no physical education in school curriculum for girls, women were not even allowed to participate in exercising in public as there were no sports facilities meant for women (Albujulaya et al. 2024, pp. 613-614; Chadwick & Widdop 2022, p. 235; Ottaway, 2021, p. 45).

Nowadays, women are being encouraged to pursue sports as seen by the rise of investment into sports organisations and facilities to provide areas designed for women (Albujulaya et al., 2024, p. 616).

However, although the introduced reforms are condemned by human rights organisations as inadequate, conservative voices within the Saudi society, particularly coming from religious leaders, are against the relaxation of social policies (Amnesty International 2025; Chadwick, 2023; Fauzul & Basuni, 2023, p. 588). Introducing and implementing reforms aimed at the enhancing and enriching cultural life as well as relaxing societal norms seeks to satisfy the young population nevertheless these steps also seem to be rooted in a deeper goal, legitimization of the current Saudi Arabian regime (Ettinger, 2025, p. 540; Walt, 2021).

#### **2.1.4 Progress of Vision 2030**

The Vision was introduced in 2016 and as of today, it has been nearly 10 years since the first reforms started being put into motion. Although there is still some time left before 2030, it is possible to assess to what extent Vision 2030 has been successful so far. This part will only shortly focus on the areas of Vision mentioned in the above sections. Each year, the Saudi government publishes an annual report, in which it reflects successes or shortcomings of the Vision 2030 so far. In 2026, the Vision is set to enter the final stage called full delivery mode (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025, p. 6). The data presented were retrieved from the annual report of the Vision 2030 progress from 2024.

From the perspective of the Saudi government, the Vision is regarded as a success, already hitting certain targets even before the deadline. In the area of economy, the goal is mainly to diversify away from oil and boost private sector in order to provide more job opportunities. As of 2024, there was a 4, 3 % growth of the non-oil sector and the private sector's contribution to the GDP is 47 % (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025, pp. 14, 42). The unemployment rate among Saudi citizens has been dropping since 2021, but in 2024 it reached historic low of 7 %, meaning the target goal was already accomplished (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025, pp. 15, 52).

In regard to a having a healthier, more active society there have also been some positive change. Both youth and adults are more active in their day to day lives. More than half of the Saudi population spends more than two hours engaging in any form of physical activity every week. The rise in physical activity is ascribed to various aspect primarily to the expansion of sports infrastructure, support for grassroot sport but also to hosting various sporting events



which aim to motivate and entertain the public. Living a healthier lifestyle also reflects in life expectancy is rising, currently hitting threshold of 78,8 years (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025, pp. 31-35).

The Vision also seeks to improve women's rights in Saudi Arabia. One of the reasons why the unemployment dropped to the historic low is also because in general, women participation in the job market has on the rise. The focus on women is also visible in the area of sport. Under the Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia established Women's Football League (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025, p. 184).

However, as other independent researchers suggest, the Vision 2030 has been dealing with some issues. Although there has been notable success in certain areas, according to Jonathan Fenton-Harvey (2024) areas such as tourism or attracting foreign investment are still falling behind. The Vision has also been dealing with budgeting issues, especially when it comes to building costly ambitious projects such as NEOM. The Saudi government will most likely have revisit budget and reevaluate their strategies (Fenton-Harvey, 2025). Similar notion was expressed by Andrew Leber (2025) who mentions that although the development of the tourism sector has been quite successful, the Saudi government seems to be overstating the current results (Leber, 2025, p. 2).

Because of the Vision 2030, various social reforms, especially targeting gender equality have been introduced such as allowing women to drive or attend sports matches, there is still a lot of room for improvement as women still face oppression in different areas of life (Polok & Akeel, 2024). Although there have been some reforms in regard to the guardianship, which for example allow women to travel freely, the guardianship is still in place in multiple key areas such as child custody (Carr-Ellis, 2025).

## **2.2 Football as a sports diplomacy tool**

As a famous footballer Billy Shankly once said: "Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that." (Hunter 2013). Football, often referred to as the beautiful game, is a global phenomenon, with extensive number of fans across the whole world. A sport that is so deeply popular it sometimes is compared to a religion or cult, transcends borders and unites different cultures around the whole world.

According to Dichter, football particularly is perceived to be the most effective sport used by countries to demonstrate their identity and shape global perceptions, a fact the political

leaders are well aware of and often utilize football as a sports diplomacy tool to project soft power and enhance their image both domestically and internationally (Dichter, 2023, p. 6; Rofe, 2018, p. 153). Football is also a powerful tool used to shape national unity (Bianco & Sons, 2023, pp. 96). It was briefly touched upon in the previous chapter that Asian countries such as Japan, strategically used football as a tool to help the government with to re-brand Japan's unfavourable image. Japanese government aimed to improve the reputation which has been affected by persisting stereotypes associated with WWII (Murray & Pigman, 2013, pp. 1102).

China can account for another example as it too, similarly to Japan, chose football as a tool to shape its international image and boosts its soft power. China has been known for its desire to become a "world football superpower". This strategy was outlined in official plan, which aimed to reach the status of football powerhouse by 2050. This objective is to be achieved through the improvement and promotion of football on domestic level, well as hosting prestigious mega-events (McNicol & Raine, 2023; Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2020, pp. 64-72).

The following section focuses directly on football in Saudi Arabia, as similarly to other parts of the world, football undoubtedly the most popular sport in Saudi Arabia too (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025a).

## **2.2.1 Acquisition of football mega-stars**

### **2.2.1.1 Cristiano Ronaldo**

Cristiano Ronaldo is without a doubt a football superstar. Ronaldo's transfer from Manchester United to Al-Nassr made history, as he was the first of high-profile footballer player from Europe who signed with a Saudi Arabia's football club (Costa & Moriconi, 2024, p. 9). The two-year deal was signed on the 30th of December 2023, with Ronaldo securing more than 200 million USD per year making him the highest paid player in history<sup>3</sup> (Ebrahim 2023; Westwood 2023). Al-Nassr is a one of 18 Saudi football clubs which are currently part of Saudi Pro League, the highest football league of Saudi Arabia and one of the highest-ranked leagues in Asia (SPL, 2025; Hussain Alawi, 2024, p. 3). It is important to point out, that in 2023 Al-Nassr, together with four other clubs, Al-Hilal, Al-Ahli and Al-Ittihad became part of PIF's portfolio as it secured a 75 % majority stake of each of the clubs (Choukeir & Saba, 2023).

---

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing the thesis, Cristiano Ronaldo's contract with Al-Nassr has been extended. The contract, which was due to expire in the summer of 2025, has been extended until June 2026 (Japan Times 2025).

The fact that the Saudi government viewed Ronaldo as a valuable asset even before Ronaldo was professionally affiliated with any Saudi football club, can be seen the fact that in 2021 he was offered a role of a tourism ambassador which he ultimately turned down (Sim, 2022). Although the focus of this thesis is not celebrity and influencer marketing, the author however feels strongly to incorporate this part as a demonstration of how much importance a global superstars can have both on the pitch and off the pitch. According to Chadwick (2023), there are multiple reasons behind the purchase of a football superstar as big as Ronaldo as it “...brings image, reputational, branding, and soft power benefits” (Gibbon 2023). This is argument is also supported by John Duerden who emphasises the power of exposure tied to Ronaldo’s every move (Duerden, 2023). Especially in today’s age, having engaged social media fanbase is an important part of the player’s attractiveness because they contribute to the marketing potential. Chanavat (2017) mentions that when purchasing football players, not only are they considered based on their capabilities but also their marketability plays a huge role as they represent a notable market asset, which can help a certain club or country to attract more fans and generally gain more attention both domestically and internationally (Chanavat, 2017, p. 8; Garner-Purkis, 2020).

Cristiano Ronaldo is a complete social media powerhouse. Not only is he active on his YouTube channel with over 74 million of subscribers but at the time of conducting the research, Ronaldo currently has 650 million of followers on his Instagram account, making him the most followed person in the world (Cristiano, 2025; Forbes India, 2025). Together amassing one billion followers across his social media platforms, Ronaldo is not only the most followed person on Instagram, but the most followed person in the world while simultaneously being the most searched athlete in the history of Google (Duarte, 2025; Cristiano, 2023a). In the terms of social media popularity there truly is no competition to Ronaldo, as he reigns supreme.

The effect of Ronaldo’s superstar status is a real deal as it can be also observed across other social media platforms. Just a few days after the contract was signed, the official Instagram account of the Al-Nassr quickly rose up from 853k to over 10 million, currently sporting over 27 million followers (Al Nassr FC, 2025; Hayters TV, 2024; Wright 2023). Ronaldo's move to the Saudi Pro League increased the exposure of Al-Hilal and brought attention to Saudi Arabia as a whole. This can be proven by the extensive media coverage that followed and is attributed to something the media refer to as “The Ronaldo Effect”. Not only can the Ronaldo effect be seen across the digital world, but at that time Al-Nassr’s head coach Rudi Garcia expressed his shock by the sheer amount of attention Ronaldo’s move caused as he commented during the press conference that usually there “...are only three or four journalists

here to talk about the game.” (Duerden, 2023). After Ronaldo was present, the room was full (Duerden, 2023; Poindexter, 2023).

Acquiring famous footballers for domestic leagues serves as a tool through which country can exert soft power. One of the reasons for investing into known players is nation-branding as athletes are a useful tool to help boost nation’s image (Vila-López et al. 2024). Another important aspect is also aimed at making domestic league more prestigious by improving club's performance and gaining more publicity. It can also be seen as a gesture to please the local fans. In the case of Ronaldo all above mentioned aspect are present. Saudi Arabia seeks to become the international sports hub, particularly when it comes football. This behaviour aligns with the Vision 2030 goals as it explicitly mentions Saudi’s ambition to “excel in sport and be among the leaders in selected sports regionally and globally.” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 22).

In order to become the best of the best, the country needs to build a prestigious domestic league and Ronaldo’s experience, and star status can help achieve that. Schreyer and Singleton (2025) also mention that the decision to sign Ronaldo might have been a part of a broader strategy aiming to help secure the hosting of World Cup (Schreyer & Singleton, 2025, p. 260). At the same time, as it was mentioned in the previous sections, the government aims to improve health of the society and generally create a more active society with a better relationship with sports. In this case, Ronaldo can serve as a role model that will act as a catalyst for a change. Professional athletes are often utilized as an inspiration for children to pursue sport in their free time and maybe even take up football professionally. Crucial part of becoming a football superpower is building a good foundation by having a strong support for grassroots football. This is particularly important for raising a new generation of youth talent that can later transfer into professional sphere (Schreyer & Singleton, 2025, p. 261; Özsarı et al., 2018, p. 344). Ronaldo’s presence in Al-Nassr also led to a rise in match attendance while also improving visibility of the league altogether. However, it is not certain whether his presence will be able to sustain the increased interest (Schreyer & Singleton, 2025, pp. 267-268).

Important factor for nation-branding is also the way Ronaldo speaks about Saudi Arabia in interviews and in public in general. By speaking about Saudi Arabia and his experience in positive light, Ronaldo further shapes the public discourse on how the country is perceived. In an interview from January 2025, Ronaldo has expressed his contentment with life in Saudi Arabia referring to it as a “beautiful country” where he and his family is content (Saudi Pro League, 2025).

Based on the research conducted by the author of this thesis, it can be stated that since

Ronaldo signed a contract with Al-Nassr, posts affiliated to Saudi Arabia began to appear on his Instagram account. Majority of his posts are related directly to Al-Nassr as he regularly shares photos of himself or his team-mates from different matches, where Ronaldo can be seen sporting the Al-Nassr's yellow and blue jersey. As it was previously mentioned, in 2021 Ronaldo declined the offer to become an official tourist ambassador for Saudi Arabia, however, since his move to Al-Nassr he often shares posts promoting various tourist attractions that fall under Saudi Tourism Authority<sup>4</sup>. Saudi Tourism Authority oversees an enormous number of destinations and their associated attractions, while there are also numerous campaigns that promote tourism of Saudi Arabia – such as the “Visit Saudi” initiative as well as specific ones (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2025).

The first post related to Saudi Arabia on Ronaldo's Instagram account was posted in May 2023. Ronaldo was captured visiting Diriyah a popular touristic destination (Cristiano, 2023b). Since then, other tourism campaigns such as Visit Saudi with the hashtag #visitsaudi and another campaign Visit Red Sea #visitreasea have appeared on his profile (Cristiano 2024a, Cristiano 2024b).

Despite the frequent lack of a collaborative label, in this case Ronaldo and his status are being used to attract potential tourists. Ronaldo has also shared several photos where he is seen with leading figures of the Saudi family and the Saudi government. One of the examples being a picture of Ronaldo shaking hands with MBS on the occasion of celebrating the Founding Day of Saudi Arabia or with Turki bin Abdul Mohsen Al-Sheikh, the chairman of the General Entertainment Authority<sup>5</sup> (Elsborg et al. 2024, p. 11; Instagram Cristiano 2025, Instagram Cristiano 2025b).

Apart from Ronaldo, there are plenty of other football stars who are currently signed to Saudi Arabia's football clubs such as Neymar Jr.<sup>6</sup> (Al-Hilal), Karim Benzema (Al-Ittihad Club), Kurt Zouma (Al-Orobah), Sadio Mané (Al-Nassr), Kalidou Koulibaly (Al-Hilal), N'Golo Kanté (Al-Ittihad Club) (Costa & Moriconi, 2024, pp. 9; Hussain Alawi, 2024, pp. 3;

---

<sup>4</sup> Saudi Tourism Authority represents one of six sectors of the Saudi Tourism Ecosystem. The main responsibility of the Saudi Tourism Authority is to promote Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination both to domestic and international audience (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> One of his key responsibilities includes overseeing initiatives such as Riyadh Season, and he is also one of the prominent figures shaping the role of sport and entertainment within Saudi Arabia's broader policy framework (Elsborg et al., 2024, p. 11).

<sup>6</sup> Neymar Jr. and Al-Hilal have mutually agreed to terminate Neymar's contract in January 2025. The contract was signed in August 2023 for two years and Al-Hilal paid more than 90 million euros for Neymar Jr. During the fall of 2023, Neymar Jr. suffered an injury that limited him and he played only seven matches for Al-Hilal (BBC Sport, 2023; Onyeagwara 2025; Reuters, 2023a).

Sønderholm, 2024, pp. 7). It should be pointed out that all the above-mentioned football players transferred to Saudi football clubs after Ronaldo did. In this case, his superstar status may have played a role and been one of the deciding factors why others decided to opt for transferring to Saudi Arabia's clubs, but to what extent this statement is true is hardly verifiable.

Similarly to Ronaldo, Neymar Jr. is also popular on social media with his Instagram page reaching 229 million followers. Neymar Jr. also shares a decent amount of paid promotion related to Saudi Arabia's tourist spots as part of his Al-Hilal contract included a marketing clause, based on which he was paid more than 511 million euro per a sponsored post (Balogun 2023; Neymar Jr., 2025).

#### **2.2.1.2 Lionel Messi**

Another iconic name from the football world associated with Saudi Arabia is Lionel Messi, Argentine football superstar, who is the most decorated footballer in history with 46 awards, including winning the Ballon d'Or eight times (Ritchie & Hepburn 2025). Although Messi is not currently a player of any Saudi Pro League club and his status is thus different from Ronaldo, he is also an important example of how Saudi Arabia utilizes social media and the power of football stars for nation branding and exerting soft power.

Similarly to other famous football stars, Messi was also offered a deal to play in Saudi Arabia's domestic league as Al-Hilal came forward with their interested in 2023, with the final offer reaching 1.5 billion euros. Ultimately the offer fell through as Messi decided to sign with Inter Miami instead (Sanderson, 2023; OneFootball, 2023). As in the case of Ronaldo, his popularity is heavily reflected in his social media presence, as Messi takes the place of the second most followed person on Instagram, right after Cristiano Ronaldo with more than 504 million followers (Messi, 2025). However, despite Messi turning down the offer to become a player for Al-Hilal and join other football stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema who signed with a Saudi club, his name is still associated with Saudi Arabia for one simple reason. In 2021 he signed a deal with Saudi Arabia's Tourism Authority and became a tourist ambassador for Saudi Arabia. As New York Times mention, the three-year deal is rather lucrative with the possibility of Messi earning up to 22.5 million euro (Mosly, 2022, p. 14; Zidan & Panja, 2023).

According to Business Insider and the New York Times, one of the key aspects of the contract are the annual vacations paid by the Saudi government for Messi and up to 20 of his family. The crucial part lies in sharing pictures from various Saudi Arabia touristic spots to his millions of Instagram followers. This commitment alone is expected to earn Messi 1.8 million

euro annually. However, vacationing in Saudi Arabia is not the only commitment as he is obligated to participate in tourism campaigns in other different ways. A key component of Messi's contract is a clause that prohibits him from expressing himself in a way that could in any way damage the image and name of Saudi Arabia (Zidan & Panja, 2023).

This clause further supports that fact that Saudi Arabia uses the power of “poster boys” – in this case football stars as messengers whose job is to convey a favourable image of a country larger audience and promote its tourism sector (Leite Junior & Rodrigues, 2020, p. 72).

The effectiveness of this strategy is confirmed by an analysis conducted by media analysis company CARMA, which proves that celebrity endorsements ranks among the most effective ways used for nation branding. The analysis focused on the specific marketing collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Messi - *Go Beyond What You Think*. The results confirmed that using Messi's Instagram account was a very effective tool for increasing exposure. After the campaign was published, the success of this collaboration brought an immediate increase in interest in Saudi Arabia, which could be seen on the rise in search results on platforms such as Google. There was also a huge increase in how many people visited the official website [visitsaudi.com](https://visitsaudi.com), as well as other Saudi social media platforms (Harper, 2024).

### **2.2.2 Hosting football mega-events**

The power that lies behind hosting mega-sports events was touched upon in the first chapter of the thesis. States usually strive to secure hosting such events as it serves as a tool of exerting soft power both domestically and internationally. As Brun and Gomez (2022) highlight, hosting a World Cup is a privilege for the hosting country not many will have the chance to experience, therefore providing the countries who succeed in winning the bidding process with a sense of exclusivity (Brun & Gomez, 2022, pp. 47-48). Staging mega-events provides the hosting country with an opportunity to showcase their country in the best light possible thus influence the image that the international audience may have of a given country (Grix & Brannagan, 2016, p. 255; Taylor et al., 2025, p. 371).

On the other hand, partially the reasons why countries strive for the opportunity to host such events is the attention that comes with it. The attention can be beneficial in the sense that hosting country has the potential to use it as a soft power tool and possibly enhance its reputation. However, as it was previously mentioned in the first chapter, where there is soft power, there is the possibility of soft disempowerment. Hosting country is under the microscope of the international public which means while it can showcase its ability to stage spectacular

show for football fans all over the world the attention is not only focused on sports but media often highlight aspects such as domestic policies, which was also the case of 2022 World Cup in Qatar and its human rights record (Brun & Gomez, 2022, pp. 48- 55).

When it comes to Saudi Arabia and hosting mega-events the academic literature is essentially non-existent, this is due to the fact that not many authors strive towards analysing an event that hasn't taken place. Although Saudi Arabia secured hosting rights for World Cup, it is set to 2034. Brannagan and Reiche (2025) are among the first academic who focus their research on Saudi's World Cup, mainly on the strategy behind it. As mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia aims to boost tourism sector mainly by shifting the attention towards developing an attractive sports tourism. Hosting mega-events play a crucial role in this strategy as such events naturally entice influx of tourists who travel with the intention of attending. Although the World Cup is perceived to be the highest possible mega-event in the area of football, there are other renowned events Saudi Arabia seeks to organize, one of being the AFC Asian Cup which Saudi Arabia is set to host in 2027 (Saudi Arabian Football Federation, 2025).

#### **2.2.2.1 Saudi Arabia's bid for 2034 FIFA World Cup**

Following in Qatar's footsteps, Saudi Arabia also aimed to host the most prestigious football event there is - FIFA World Cup. The ambition was to host World Cup as soon as 2030, Saudi Arabia worked on a joint bid with Greece and Egypt with Saudi Arabia promising to help finance sports infrastructure such as stadiums for both Greece and Egypt. However, the idea of a joint bid was criticised mainly because its stained human rights record as well as leveraging its financial capital to secure the hosting rights. The joint bid ultimately fell through with Saudi Arabia shifting its ambitions towards the World Cup 2034 instead (Martin& El-Din, 2022; Sport Business Journal, 2023; Walker, 2023).

Although the event it set to take place in 2034, the notion of bidding process is tied to multiple controversies, as the FIFA Council has been accused of corruption and untransparent behaviour towards Saudi Arabia. In 2023 FIFA Council announced its decision that the sole candidacy for the World Cup in 2030 would be combined bid of three countries - Morocco, Portugal, and Spain, with a few matches being hosted by Southern America<sup>7</sup> (Elsborg et al., 2024, pp. 21; FIFA, 2024; Inside FIFA, 2023).

---

<sup>7</sup> The three chosen countries are Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay. Although their bid to host 2030 World Cup was unsuccessful, they will be hosting the first three matches. The matches are considered to be celebratory, as 2030 marks the 100th anniversary of FIFA World Cup (Reuters, 2023b; FIFA, 2024b; Spinetto, 2023)



Many have read this decision as a one that supposedly laid the foundation for Saudi Arabia's bid, as the Council has simultaneously announced that the bidding process for 2034 World Cup would be based on principle of *confederation rotation*. Given the fact that three confederations (UEFA, CAF, CONMEBOL<sup>8</sup>) will be hosting the 2030 World Cup, only countries which are part of the Asian Football Confederation and the Oceania Football Confederation were able to participate in bidding. Although Qatar, member of Asian Football Confederation has hosted in 2022 (Elsborg et al., 2024, pp. 21; Ogden, 2024; Play the Game, 2024).

Saudi Arabia was quick to declare its interest in bidding, which the country announced just 81 minutes after FIFA's decision was published. The Saudi Arabian Football Federation issued a letter of intent only a few days later, to officially confirm their interest (Elsborg et al., 2024, p. 21; Snape, 2023a; The World Cup 2034 Hosting Higher Authority, 2024). However, after the bidding period officially begun, Australia, the other eligible possible bidder, had a very limited time<sup>9</sup>, to decide whether or not they will participate in the bidding process. James Johnson, Chief Executive Officer of Football Australia, has mentioned that Australia was surprised by how short the period for declaring the bid was (Snape, 2023a; Snape, 2023b). Ultimately, Australia ended up not submitting its bid in hosting World Cup 2034, focusing their interested in securing hosting the 2026 Women's Asian Cup and the 2029 Club World Cup instead, therefore leaving Saudi Arabia to be the only bidder<sup>10</sup> (Snape, 2023b).

Despite the ongoing backlash, Saudi Arabia was officially named the host of the 2034 World Cup on 11th of December 2024 (FIFA, 2025). However, to many this announcement seemed to be a mere formality. Even before the official decision was made, FIFA was heavily criticised for its behaviour, being accused of already having decided on who gets to host even before the voting process took place (Millar, 2025).

Apart from assessing the technical aspects that come with hosting such a major event, in its bid evaluation report, FIFA marked that the risk regarding the state of human rights in Saudi Arabia as *medium*, emphasizing that hosting World Cup could help improve the current human rights situation and ignite further social reforms in the country (Crafton, 2024; FIFA, 2024, p. 94; Millar, 2025). It is also worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia's bid has received the

---

<sup>8</sup> UEFA stands for Union of European Football Associations, CAF stands for Confederation of African Football and CONMEBOL stands for South American Football Confederation (YourDictionary Staff, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> The bidding period was only open for 25 days (Snape, 2023a; Snape, 2023b).

<sup>10</sup> Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal, Minister of Sports, expressed that the score Saudi Arabia has been awarded "reflects our commitment to grow the game, our rapid transformation and our desire to host the best possible tournament for the entire world to enjoy. It is the result of our extensive efforts to present an exceptional bid." (Saudi 2034, 2025).

biggest technical score in history given by FIFA to a hosting country, 419.8 out of 500 (Arab News, 2024). FIFA, aware of the controversy their decision sparked, reacted by emphasizing that the process that follows after country presents its bid is very rigorous while highlighting the importance it places on the conduct of human rights in the hosting country (FIFA, 2024).

However, several human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, condemn this behaviour as they heavily criticize the decision to grant hosting to of the World Cup to Saudi Arabia (Human Rights Watch, 2024a; Amnesty International, 2024). One of the key areas subject to criticism concerns the rights of workers who serve as the backbone of the sports infrastructure needed for the upcoming World Cup. Similarly to other GCC countries, Saudi Arabia is also one of the countries where kafala system is still in place (Amnistia Internacional, 2024; Robinson, 2022; Pattisson, 2025).

It is important to note that Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record is not only specific to World Cup, but it is a deeply rooted and on-going issue. Given the enormous media attention that hosting such a major event brings, it can be expected that any further development will be closely monitored by the media, similarly as was the case with Qatar. Although Saudi Arabia has been implementing certain social reforms such as The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development recently introducing National Policy which aims to improve labour rights and working environment of migrant workers, the question is to what extent will these policies be implemented accordingly (Human Rights Watch 2024b; Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2025).

### **2.2.3 Investing into foreign football clubs**

The aspect of Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy which have gathered a lot of attention is without a doubt its investment into foreign football clubs, particularly the case of Newcastle United FC. Newcastle United FC is one of the 20 football clubs which are part of Premier League, which ranks amongst the most popular football leagues in the world (Chiliz 2024; Elsborg et al., 2024, p. 18; Premier League 2025). Saudi Arabia has been looking into expanding its sports portfolio by buying a renowned European football club since 2018 (Olivereau, 2022, p. 305). Although there have been speculations around MBS proposing a deal to buy Manchester United in 2018 backed up by Olivereau (2022) and Chadwick (2023), these claims were denied by Minister of Media Turki Al-Shabanah (BBC Sport 2019).

The interest in purchasing Newcastle United FC firstly came in 2020 when Saudi Arabia tried to buy Newcastle United FC through PIF but eventually failed for multiple reasons. One

of them being the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in relation to broadcasting rights of sports events. This issue had its roots in diplomatic disagreements between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in 2017 which among other things resulted in the blockade of Qatar's sports network beIN Sports (Chadwick & Widdop, 2022, p. 238). As an alternative, Saudi Arabia began endorsing beoutQ, a piracy broadcasting channel, which used beIN streaming and essentially passed it off as their own (LaMay, 2022, pp. 267). Eventually World Trade Organisation had to step in and decided that beoutQ was a case of state-led piracy and instead of fighting against it, Saudi Arabia endorsed it (Al Jazeera, 2020; Chadwick & Widdop, 2022, pp. 237).

Another crucial reason was connected to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi journalist famous for its criticism towards Saudi's government (BBC News, 2018). Khashoggi was brutally murdered while visiting Saudi Arabia's embassy in Istanbul in 2018 (BBC News, 2021). Right after the incident occurred, MBS was linked to brutal murder of the journalist, which was believed to be intended as a case of suppression of dissent against the regime. Although MBS denied the allegations, this scandal completely undermined Saudi Arabia's image on the international arena. Saudi Arabia faced a major wave of criticism not only from human rights organizations, but this also reflected in economic aspects as many companies distanced themselves from further working with the regime (Bouoiyour, & Selmi, 2018, p. 16; Boykoff, 2022, p. 348; Chadwick & Widdop, 2023, p. 150; Treisman, 2023; Trew, 2018).

As mentioned above, due to multiple reasons Newcastle United FC deal fell through but was later revisited in 2021. PIF was now considered to be an eligible buyer and acquired 80 % of Newcastle United FC for 300 million pounds (Bianco & Sons, 2023, p. 100; Sky Sports, 2021). The first time PIF was prevented from purchasing Newcastle United FC can be classified as an example of soft disempowerment. In this case, the tarnished public image of Saudi Arabia prevented the sale from taking place. The decision to purchase a famous football club is by many perceived as means through which Saudi Arabia seeks to cleanse its image in the eyes of international public. (Grix et al., 2023, p. 1). This notion is further expanded in the following chapter.

### 3 Sportswashing

This chapter focuses on the phenomenon of sportswashing, where it came from and importance in academic debate as it also discusses the controversy surrounding the concept. An important part of this chapter is also dedicated to sportswashing in the case of Saudi Arabia and whether or not can Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy can be labelled as sportswashing.

#### 3.1 History of sportswashing

When analysing the concept of sportswashing, one notices a major gap in the academic research. As sportswashing is a relatively new phenomenon in area of scholarly debate, there is still a visible lack of relevant resources. One of the key scholars who focuses on sportswashing is Simon Chadwick who explores this phenomenon in his many articles but primarily focuses on sportswashing in the book *Geopolitical Economy of Sport*. Another author who significantly contributed to limited scholarly debate on sportswashing is Jules Boykoff who in his article *Toward a Theory of Sportswashing: Mega-Events, Soft Power, and Political Conflict* explores the history behind using sports as political tools while simultaneously trying to provide a conceptual anchor (Boykoff, 2022). Michael Skey (2022) explores the inconsistency behind applying sportswashing mainly when describing sports strategies of Non-Western countries and the difference in media's portrayal of sports diplomacy when referring to Non-Western versus Western country (Skey, 2022). Similar approach can be seen in Brannagan and Grix's work as they focus on case studies of sports strategies of Qatar and United Kingdom (Grix & Brannagan, 2024). Even though there is no unified conceptualization of the term, the topic of sportswashing is slowly but surely starting to gain attention in the academic sphere.

As it was discussed in the first chapter, sports have always been intertwined with politics and various regimes have been using it as a means to serve their political agenda, either to legitimize their regime, cleanse their image or shift away attention from other events. The previously mentioned example of Nazi regime taking advantage of hosting 1936 Olympics supports this idea. However, as Grix and Brannagan point out, sportswashing as we understand it today is slightly different (Grix & Brannagan, 2024, p. 6).

Authors such as Skey (2022), Crossly & Woolf (2024) credit Gulnara Akhundova for firstly introducing the term sportswashing in media, while Boykoff (2022) regards Rebecca Vincent to be the first one who used the term sportswashing in her work. Although the authorship of the term might be disputable, both authors are human rights advocates, who used

sportswashing in connection to Azerbaijan hosting first ever European Games in 2015 (Collyer Merritt, 2024; Skey, 2022, p. 750). Akhundova denoted hosting European Games as a means through which the Azerbaijani government aimed to shape its image in a favourable manner on the international stage in order to conceal repressive practices of the regime, such as the suppression of dissent and other human rights related issues (Akhundova, 2015; Boykoff, 2022, p. 343).

However, even though sportswashing is a neologism, Chadwick says that the term sportswashing is nothing else than a just new label for a practice that is not new at all. He further supports his statement by providing an example of how the British empire used sports as a tactic to divert public from their unethical behaviour towards indigenous people under colonial rule. More specifically, at the beginning of the 20th century, the British were sending sports teams from their homeland to South Africa in order to conceal and perhaps distract the public from the horrific practices being committed such as the imprisonment of 150 000 people in 40 camps the British have built there (Chadwick & Widdop, 2023, p. 149; The 966 Podcast, 2023).

According to Crossley and Woolf (2024), term sportswashing started gaining momentum since 2018 as it was used in connection to multiple sports events for example World Cup in Russia 2018. However, since 2018 the use of sportswashing has only increased. This is also reflected in the fact that in 2021 Language Council of Norway labelled sportswashing as word of the year particularly in connection to many big sports events that were happening next year such as World Cup in Qatar (Crossley & Woolf, 2024, pp. 308-309; Elsborg, 2022; Språkrådet, 2021). Even Collins Dictionary listed the word sportswashing among top 10 words of 2022 (Crossley & Woolf, 2023, pp. 309; Sherwood, 2022). This does not come as a surprise in the slightest as 2022 was labelled as “year of sportswashing“ (Boykoff, 2022, p. 346; Shelley, 2022; Zidan, 2022).

The main question arises: what exactly is sportswashing? Boykoff (2022) defines sportswashing as a “phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front.“ (Boykoff, 2022, p. 342). Similarly to Kobierecki (2019) who puts emphasis on the fact that sports diplomacy is not only aimed at the international public as he highlights the domestic implications, Boykoff (2022) also emphasizes the importance of the implications sportswashing has on domestic audiences, a factor which often goes unnoticed.

Boykoff demonstrate this on the case of 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Russia’s Olympic Games were regarded as a success especially regarding domestic aspect, as the aim

was to strengthen national unity and pride which was achieved. Part of the reason behind rallying support among the Russian public and coming closer together, even in the case of Russians who are generally more pro-Western oriented was common enemy. The enemy being Western media and their portrayal of Russia in the negative light (Boykoff, 2022, pp. 345–348).

According to Ettinger (2025), sportswashing is being „understood as a form of reputation laundering in which public sporting events are staged as a way of rehabilitating an actor’s reputation as perceived by international and/or domestic audiences“. (Ettinger, 2025, pp. 533). Both Boykoff and Ettinger also point out a key aspect which is that sportswashing is not only exclusive to authoritarian regimes, but democracies also take up sportswashing to cleanse their image too, as demonstrated above by Chadwick (Boykoff, 2022, p. 342; Ettinger, 2025, p. 533). This is a particularly important argument as sportswashing is mainly in media and in certain cases, in scholarly debate, generally linked to autocratic regimes. It is particularly the Western based media and NGO’s which write about sportswashing in relation to non-western countries (Grix & Brannagan, 2024, p. 6). This is further supported by Skey (2022) who argues that portrayal of sportswashing is mostly reserved by media for certain type of regimes, particularly when referring to non-western actors (Skey 2022, pp. 760-761).

This behaviour could be seen as damaging in the sense that if the concept of sportswashing is to be taken seriously, by only applying it to certain cases it devalues the concept itself. If a country, regardless of whether it is a Western or non-Western one displays behaviour aligned with the concept, it should be labelled as such. Brannagan and Grix further add that the term sportswashing was coined by the media and is a „misnomer“. Meaning people who use this term generally don’t fully understand the meaning behind it which leads to exploitation of the term. Therefore, sportswashing then functions as a label used when referring to states with poor rights record (Grix & Brannagan, 2024, pp. 1-6).

A common theme that arises in the coverage of sportswashing is the presence of the double standards. When Western states utilize sports in order to enhance their nation-brand, rarely is this behaviour seen as sportswashing, in most cases these actions are seen as using resources needed to strengthen soft power (Skey, 2022, p. 757). This notion is further supported by Grix and Brannagan (2024) who focus on comparing sports strategies implemented by United Kingdom and Qatar. Even though both United Kingdom and Qatar use sports to achieve desired political outcomes, and both exhibit similar patterns of behaviour in the area of sports diplomacy, how come one state’s strategy is being labelled as soft power while the other state is considered to be a sportswasher? (Grix & Brannagan, 2024, p. 8-12). Howe (2023)

proposes essentially the same view as he questions why two mega events – Qatar’s World Cup on one hand and 2012 Summer Olympics on the other, are both being perceived in different light (Howe, 2023).

The term sportswashing has been primarily linked to GCC countries’ heavy investment into sports in the last few years. Part of the reason why activities of GCC countries are being labelled as sportswashing rather than soft power might be a deeply rooted issue, which goes beyond the concept of sportswashing, as research focusing on the Gulf area has often been characterized by orientalist bias (Thiollet & Vignal, 2016). This idea is supported by Thomas Griffin’s research in which explores how orientalist narrative influenced how Western media portrayed Qatar when reporting about the 2022 World Cup even before it even took place. He specifically draws upon the idea of how Arab states are being depicted as the „Others“. According to Griffin, Western media tend to present a curated picture of Non-Western countries in order to fit into their wider narrative rooted in imperialism. In the case of Qatar, the media portrayed an image of hostile, backward country undeserving of hosting such event. By becoming more involved in international sports, particularly football, Arab states are seen as a threat challenging the dominant position of Western states both in sports and in general (Griffin, 2017, pp. 170-180).

This pattern has been noticed by more researchers, for example Jones (2022) also focused on the coverage of Qatar by British media. In his analysis he concluded that majority of the coverage on Qatar, even when completely unrelated, was in connection to the 2022 World Cup, with the theme of human and worker rights being among the most mentioned across all articles, not to mention that most of the reporting had a negative connotation often rooted in orientalist discourse (Jones, 2022). It was mentioned in the first chapter that people often think of countries based on stereotypes, whether or not they are based on accurate information. The media are a powerful tool in shaping public awareness, because they contribute to the creation of stereotypes, which are damaging especially if associated with negative connotations (Arendt, 2023, p. 464). In conclusion, Western media continues to perpetuate an orientalist narrative when writing about Arab countries furthermore often sustaining negative stereotypes in society (Tomanić Trivundža, 2019, p. 6).

### **3.2 Sportswashing in Saudi Arabia**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, from securing the rights for hosting FIFA World Cup in 2034, to investing into acquiring foreign football powerhouses or investing into purchasing European football clubs, Saudi Arabia’s sports diplomacy has been right in the

centre of the debate on sportswashing. The previous chapter focused on Saudi's takeover of English football club Newcastle United FC, with the first attempt failing for various reasons one of them being the backlash that broke out after murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The ongoing poor record in the area of human rights has been targeted as one of the main reasons why Saudi Arabia aims to launder its image in the international arena (Olivereau, 2022, p. 306).

Everything has two sides which is also the case of British government, which was involved in negotiating sale of Newcastle United FC. This case shows a huge degree of hypocrisy, as despite the UK government publicly denied any affiliation to sale as well as criticizing Saudi Arabia, it clearly had its own intentions for the entire deal. The British government denied any connection to Newcastle United FC takeover multiple times. At the time prime minister Boris Johnson even told parliament that „the government was not involved at any point in the takeover talks on the sale of Newcastle United.” (Crafton, 2023). It was later proved to be false as according to The Athletic, the British government was working behind the scenes to make sure the deal was secured. The reasons were primarily linked to economic benefits as United Kingdom was aiming to revive the economy after Brexit and the global pandemic. Helping Saudi Arabia's PIF to strike a deal with Premier League's club seemed as a good opportunity to strengthen ties between Saudi Arabia and UK that was hoping to lead to influx of finances (Crafton, 2023). It was previously mentioned that the deal initially didn't fall through but nevertheless the PIF managed to buy Newcastle United FC, part of the reason being that Premier League was legally assured that Saudi's government would not have any control over the club (Crafton, 2023).

During and long after the takeover took place various media outlets and human rights organisation reported about Saudi's intention to purchase the club as a process of sportswashing. Particularly British media were one of the main driving forces behind shaping this particular narrative (Crossley & Woolf 2023, p. 314). Part of the controversy was also linked to the control over PIF as Saudi government claims the wealth fund is separate from the state. However, according to Play the Game and other human rights organisation such as Human Rights Watch, PIF is under direct control of MBS as he also takes on a role of the funds' chairman. Another important figure is Yasir Al-Rumayyan, who holds the position of governor of PIF while also being the chairman of Newcastle United FC (Elsborg et al. 2024, pp. 6-9). Nober (2022) views the direct linkage between government and club leadership as a curated attempt which utilizes football as a means to shape favourable public image (Nober, 2022, pp. 22-23).



Although the media has devoted generous amount of attention into covering Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy especially through the lens of human rights abuses, Taylor et al. (2023) point out that sport can serve as a tool which can help bring awareness to certain issue, in this case human rights, rather than being viewed as a tool which abuses sports to cover up such issues (Taylor et al., 2023, p. 375).

A key aspect are also the international fans. In the case of Newcastle United FC acquisition by Saudi Arabia's PIF, the reactions by English fans were rather mixed. After the deal was confirmed, number of Newcastle fans were seen celebrating in front of the Newcastle's home arena St. James' Park, some even dressed up in outfits resembling traditional Arab clothing (BBC, 2021; BeanyManSports, 2021). As it was mentioned, various British media outlets referred to the takeover as a sportswashing technique to help enhance Saudi's tarnished image. Those fans in favour of the acquisitions were also showing their support to Saudi Arabia by criticising the media outlook, which according to them was highly biased as Newcastle United FC was not the only club purchased by a foreign investor (Amlôt, 2020).

On the other hand, the British media were not the only ones critical of the deal as not all Newcastle fans were thrilled about PIF taking over the football club. Many fans expressed their disappointment and disapproval over the new ownership, as they morally are not able to justify to continuing to support the club mainly because of Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses (Miller, 2021).

But according to survey by The Athletic, these fans are in minority despite the fact that 83 % of Newcastle fans expressed concern regarding Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record, only 29 % of them said this fact would influence their decision to not attend a game (Burrow, 2021; Miller, 2021). The number Newcastle fans who were not hesitant to show their support to Saudi Arabia online was a surprise to many. But why is it important how Newcastle fans perceive the new owners? The opinions of fans are crucial because essentially, they are citizens with voting rights which gives them the ability to shape the stance of their home country towards other countries. Naturally, if the fans are in favour of Saudi Arabia, their positive perspective can thus prove to be beneficial asset to Saudi Arabia as it can help build a reputable image (Nober, 2022, p. 23).

### 3.3 Saudi Arabia's stance towards sportswashing

Reactions from Saudi Arabia on being accused of sportswashing are various, nevertheless the author has to point out that the reactions from the Saudi government or people shaping Saudi's sports diplomacy are very scarce. Chadwick and Widdop (2023) mention that in contrast to Western countries, the debate on sportswashing in the Gulf area is practically non-existent (Chadwick & Widdop, 2023, pp. 151). However, there are some reactions from Saudi's officials.

One of them being Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Saud, the Minister of Sport who said that the claims of Saudi Arabia participating in sportswashing are „very shallow“, while also mentioning that he perceives hosting mega sports-events as an opportunity to further reform the country (BBC News, 2023).

On the other hand, during an interview with Fox News, MBS was asked what his reaction to media labelling the massive investment into sports industry by Saudi Arabia are. The reaction was rather pragmatic as he mentioned that he does not care whether the public perceives their strategy as sportswashing or not adding that as long as their sports diplomacy continues to increase the country's GDP, they will „continue sportswashing“ (Reuters 2023c; Guardian Sport, 2023).

One of Saudi Arabia's Crown Princes and former ambassador to the United States, Turki Al-Faisal is one of the few public figures who shared his opinion on Saudi Arabia being accused of sportswashing mentioning that every country naturally strives to have a favourable public image. As the interview was conducted for a British TV channel, he pointed out the hypocrisy behind United Kingdom's sport strategy as he stated that 2012 Summer Olympics could also be regarded as sportswashing as the “United Kingdom washed their image very lavishly” adding that “sportswashing is not unique to Saudi Arabia”. (Channel 4 News, 2024; The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025b).

According to Abdel al-Jubeir, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, claims about Saudi Arabia's sportswashing are “crazy”. Similarly to Turki Al-Faisal, he mentioned that investment into sport is not a practice unique to Saudi Arabia, as many Western countries participate in it too. He also highlights the reasons behind Saudi's investment, previously elaborated in the first chapter, as sports is primarily utilized as a driver for healthier society and the boosting of economy (Sakajiri, 2023; The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025c). When it comes to reaction of the Saudi society to allegations of sportswashing, the sources are even more rare than in the case of Saudi's officials. The author unfortunately was not able to find

any opinion polls or interviews with regular Saudi citizens. Nevertheless, Walt (2021) in her article lightly touches upon the topic, mentioning that Saudi society, especially the younger majority generally don't think of the massive influx of investment into sports from the perspective of sportswashing. Rather, they welcome the changes that come with it, whether it's from a cultural or social perspective (Walt 2021).

General problem with sportswashing lies in the lack of a consistent definition within academic sphere, which also reflects the divided attitudes towards this concept. Many scholars find the problem in the concept of sportswashing with the inability to properly operationalize it. This is particularly problematic because how can we verify that country's government intentionally invests into sport in order to cleanse its image? This is supported by Herd (2024) who mentions that there is not enough tangible evidence on which basis it could be concluded whether country is sportswashing or not (Herd, 2024). Chadwick and Widdop (2023) question the existence of sportswashing as such, adding that if sportswashing is a real phenomenon, the actors utilizing it would have to have a clear strategy of what is behind their actions and what are they based on including motives and desired outcomes (Chadwick & Widdop, 2023, pp. 152).

Among some scholars as Costa and Moriconi (2024), Grix and Brannagan (2024), Howe (2023) seems to be a clear consensus that the use of sportswashing seems to be biased. If it's a Western country that uses sport to achieve desired political goals its behavior is generally described as sports diplomacy and it is seen as a legitimate use of sport to achieve soft power, but if the same case is applied to a non-Western country, the same behavior is being framed as sportswashing (Costa & Moriconi, 2024, pp. 4; Grix & Brannagan, 2024, pp. 8-12; Howe 2023). Moriconi (2024) also points out that states being framed of pursuing sportswashing essentially cannot do anything about the label they were given as any kind of justification of their action on their behalf would lead to more allegations, essentially creating a vicious cycle (Moriconi, 2024, pp. 168).

Based on the above arguments, it is difficult to assess to what extent Saudi Arabia is engaging in sportswashing and if Saudi's sports diplomacy strategy should even be labelled as such. It is necessary to note that sportswashing is a term that is primarily associated with non-Western countries, despite the fact that Western states are no strangers to deploying sports in order to improve their reputation or achieve desired political goals. Sport is undoubtedly used by Saudi Arabia as one of the tools through which the government seeks to improve its image and potentially exert its soft power. However, as has been mentioned several times and MBS's statement reflects, it is crucial to perceive every Saudi Arabia's sports decision as a means through which the country aims to fulfil their Vision 2030 framework. The author also finds

the use of the concept of sportswashing to be relatively redundant if the term is being used only to fit a certain narrative. If the concept of sportswashing is to be part of a relevant academic debate, it is necessary for it to be clearly defined and contextualized. If this does not happen, the decision as to whether sports diplomacy can be classified as sportswashing will be “in the eye of the beholder.” (Walt 2021).

## Conclusion

This master's thesis focused on the topic of sports diplomacy in the case of Saudi Arabia. The aim of the thesis was to analyse main drivers behind Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy and how Saudi Arabia utilizes football as a sports diplomacy tool to enhance its soft power. One of the aims was also to analyse the concept of sportswashing and whether or not is Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy a sportswashing practice. Based on the topic the author sought to answer three research questions: The author of the thesis sought to answer three research questions 1) *What are the key drivers behind Saudi Arabia's approach to sports diplomacy?*, 2) *How does Saudi Arabia utilize football to enhance its soft power*, 3) *What is sportswashing and to what extent can Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy be considered sportswashing?*

The first chapter laid out the theoretical framework of soft power. The author introduced the main notion of the concept of soft power while also including the criticism and shortcomings of the soft power definition. In order to contextualize sports diplomacy, the author had to firstly introduced the interrelated terms such as public diplomacy and nation branding. The second part of the chapter focused on sports diplomacy, its actors and how states can utilize sports diplomacy in order to enhance their soft power.

The second chapter focused on the sports diplomacy of Saudi Arabia and sought to answer the first research questions: *What are the key drivers behind Saudi Arabia's approach to sports diplomacy?* The evidence suggests that the main drivers are based on the Vision 2030, an ambitious plan crafted by the Crown Prince MBS, introduced to the public in 2016, which aims transform the country on the domestic level and to improve its image and enhance soft power on the international one. One of the key drivers behind Saudi's investment into sport is the need to diversify economy away from oil and gas industry, as the current economic model of Saudi Arabia is no longer sustainable given its population growth and oil reserves. The government also seeks to expand the private sector in order to provide more jobs for the rising Saudi population. Investment into sports industry therefore represents a logical step which seeks to produce new job opportunities, boost sports tourism, build new infrastructure and attract new investors.

Second driver is focused on the improvement of Saudi population's health and lifestyle. Saudi society, similarly, to other GCC countries, leads a rather passive and unhealthy lifestyle. Not enough exercise, poor eating habits result in a poor health, that significantly endangers the Saudi population by shortening their lifespan and quality of life. By investing into sports by building new sports infrastructure, supporting grassroots sports organizations aims to motivate

Saudi population to become more active. Another key driver is the need to satisfy the predominantly young population. Most of the Saudi population is Gen Z which have been showing dissatisfaction with current rigid social norms and lack of entertainment. Investing into expanding the entertainment industry, with the accent on sport seeks to satisfy the needs of the young population, make the country more liveable in order to prevent any anti-systematic ideas from arising as well as secure the regime legitimacy. Saudi government also introduced several reforms to slightly loosen up the rigid social norms, primarily aimed at improving gender inequality. Part of this initiative is also the focus on encouraging and improving the state of women's sports.

The second part of the chapter focused on answering second research question: *How does Saudi Arabia utilize football to enhance its soft power?* The author identified three key mechanisms. The first one is the acquisition of famous football players. The author of the thesis chose to focus specifically on the case of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. Ronaldo's presence in Saudi Arabia has multiple layers. His transfer to Al-Nassr managed to boost interest in the Saudi Pro League both home and internationally. He also serves as a role model to motivate both youth and adults to pursue a more active lifestyle. He is also active when it comes to the support of a grassroots football and motivating new talent to pursue professional careers. Undoubtedly, Ronaldo is one of the most successful and most popular players in the whole world. This also makes him a valuable asset from the marketing perspective. The Saudi government seeks to boost popularity of the country by utilizing his social media presence in order to promote the country. Similarly to Ronaldo, the thesis also focused on another example of a famous football player, Lionel Messi. Although Messi is not a part of any Saudi football club, he serves as tourist ambassador. Once again, this intention builds upon the massive popularity of Messi seeking to improve the international image of Saudi Arabia internationally and to attract potential tourists.

A second key mechanism is represented by hosting a major sport events. The most prestigious event in the field of football is the FIFA World Cup which Saudi is set to host in 2034. Although the event has not taken place yet, even the bidding process was highly controversial, and Saudi Arabia is already in spotlight for buying their way into the Cup. Similarly to Qatar, the poor human rights record and the kafala system is being heavily criticized. The last mechanism is the investment into foreign clubs, in this case the Newcastle United FC. The acquisition of 80 % of shares by the PIF was considered to be a controversial move, stirring up allegations of sportswashing.

The third chapter focused on the phenomenon of sportswashing with the aim to answer

the last research question: *What is sportswashing and to what extent can Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy be considered sportswashing?* The last chapter was the most challenging one as academic debate on the concept of sportswashing is rather limited. Sportswashing essentially portrays the activity of deliberately using sports in order to improve tarnished reputation. One of the issues with sportswashing is the lack of unified definition, some authors even debate its relevancy. The author of this thesis focused on the controversial acquisition of Newcastle United FC. Primarily British media accused the Saudi government of wanting to improve their image, tarnished mainly by poor human records. As there is a problem with operationalizing sportswashing, it cannot be concluded whether or not Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy can be regarded as sportswashing. Another problematic characteristic of this concept is the bias towards Non-Western states. The ambiguity in using sportswashing might be damaging to countries which are seeking to enhance their soft power.

It was briefly mentioned that Saudi government is introducing reforms regarding women's rights. Although the state of women's rights is still generally unsatisfactory, there is some progress in the area of women in sport as well. For this reason, an interesting topic for further research would be to focus on the development of women's football in Saudi Arabia and what impact it has on the overall position of women in Saudi society and how it translates into enhancing Saudi's international image.

## List of sources

- Abdi, K., Talebpour, M., Fullerton, J., Ranjesh, M. J., & Nooghabi, H. J. (2019). Identifying sports diplomacy resources as soft power tools. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 15(3), 147–155. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-019-00115-9>
- Abuamer, M., & Nassar, Y. (2025). The rise of Gulf states' investments in sports: Neither soft power nor sportswashing? *Project on Middle East Political Science*. Retrieved from <https://pomeps.org/the-rise-of-gulf-states-investments-in-sports-neither-soft-power-nor-sportswashing>
- Akhundova, G. (2015, June 12). Baku European Games 2015: A fearsome PR machine is using sport to sweep human rights under the carpet. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/baku-european-games-2015-a-fearsome-pr-machine-is-using-sport-to-sweep-human-rights-under-the-carpet-10314316.html>
- Al Arabiya English. (2021, April 28). *Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman interview on Vision 2030* [English subtitles] - Part 1/3 [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1HfRhHwUc>
- Al Jazeera. (2020, June 16). *WTO verdict summary on Saudi piracy operation beoutQ*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/16/wto-verdict-summary-on-saudi-piracy-operation-beoutq>
- Al Nassr FC [@alnassr]. (2025). *Instagram profile*. [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved April 16, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/alnassr/?hl=cs>
- Albujulaya, N., Stevinson, C., & Piggin, J. (2023). Physical activity policy in Saudi Arabia: analysis of progress and challenges. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 16(4), 609–624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2023.2228812>
- Alluhidan, M., Alsukait, R. F., Alghaith, T., Shekar, M., Alazemi, N., & Herbst, C. H. (Eds.). (2022). *Overweight and obesity in Saudi Arabia: Consequences and solutions*. International Development in Focus. World Bank. <https://shc.gov.sa/Arabic/NewStrategy/Documents/Obesity.pdf>
- Alqahtani, B. A., Alenazi, A. M., Alhowimel, A. S., & Elnaggar, R. K. (2021). The descriptive pattern of physical activity in Saudi Arabia: analysis of national survey data. *International health*, 13(3), 232–239. <https://doi.org/10.1093/inthealth/ihaa027>
- Alsulami, S., Baig, M., Ahmad, T., Althagafi, N., Hazzazi, E., Alsayed, R., Alghamdi, M., & Almohammadi, T. (2023). Obesity prevalence, physical activity, and dietary practices among adults in Saudi Arabia. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, Article 1124051. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1124051>
- Amara, M. (2012). Introduction. In: Amara, M. *Sport, Politics and Society in the Arab World*. *Global Culture and Sport* (pp.1-13). London: Palgrave Macmillan, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230359505\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230359505_1)
- Amlôt, M. (2020, May 20). Newcastle FC fans criticize 'negative' media about Saudi's Premier League deal. *Al Arabiya English*. Retrieved from <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2020/05/03/Newcastle-football-fans-criticize-negative-nonsense-media-coverage-of-Saudi-deal>
- Amnesty International. (2024, November 30). *Global: FIFA produces whitewash of Saudi Arabia World Cup bid and ignores own report to provide compensation for migrant workers in Qatar*. Retrieved from:



<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/global-fifa-produces-whitewash-of-saudi-arabia-world-cup-bid-and-ignores-own-report-to-provide-compensation-for-migrant-workers-in-qatar/>

Amnesty International. (2025, April 1). *Ten ways that Saudi Arabia violates human rights*. Retrieved from: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/saudi-arabia-human-rights-raif-badawi-king-salman>

Amnistia Internacional. (2024, August 5). *Global: Saudi Arabia Bid for the 2034 FIFA World Cup Whitewashes Human Rights Record While Joint Bid For 2030 Leaves Key Gaps*. Retrieved from: <https://www.amnistia.org/ve/noticias/2024/08/27054/global-saudi-arabia-bid-for-the-2034-fifa-world-cup>

Anholt, S. (2006). Is place branding a capitalist tool? *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 2(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.pb.5990039>

Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive identity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230627727>

Anholt, S. (2011). Beyond the Nation Brand: The Role of Image and Identity in International Relations. *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy*, 2(1), 6–12. Retrieved from: <https://surface.syr.edu/exchange/vol2/iss1/1/>

Arab News. (2024, November 30). *Saudi Arabia's bid to host 2034 World Cup has received the highest-ever rating: FIFA*. Retrieved from: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2581252/sport>

Arendt, F. (2023). Media stereotypes, prejudice, and preference-based reinforcement: toward the dynamic of self-reinforcing effects by integrating audience selectivity, *Journal of Communication*, 73(5), 463–475. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqad019>

Balogun, T. (2023, August 15). Saudi Arabia 'will pay Neymar £430k for every Instagram post promoting his new home' as bonus clauses of his incredible £130m-a-year contract are revealed. *Daily Mail*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-12408005/Saudi-Arabia-pay-Neymar-430k-Instagram-post-promoting-new-home-bonus-clauses-incredible-130m-year-contract-revealed.html>

Barzani, H. (2022, April 4). Many European soccer teams are owned by Gulf states. But why? *Atlantic Council*. Retrieved from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/many-european-soccer-teams-are-owned-by-gulf-states-but-why/>

BBC News. (2018, October 9). *Jamal Khashoggi: Turkey searches consulate for missing Saudi journalist*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45796417>

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

BBC News. (2023, December 8). *Saudi Arabia sports minister calls 'sportswashing' claims 'very shallow'* - BBC News [Video]. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TloNP2\\_f-0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TloNP2_f-0)

BBC Sport. (2019, February 18). *Manchester United: Saudi Arabia prince Mohammed Bin Salman denies takeover bid*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/47276467>

- BBC Sport. (2023, August 15). *Neymar transfer news: Al-Hilal complete signing of Brazil forward from Paris St-Germain*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/66515890>
- BBC. (2021, October 18). *Newcastle United: Fans welcoming Saudis 'a sickness' MP says*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-tyne-58972424>
- BeanyManSports. (2021, October 7). *Newcastle Fans Party Into The Night Celebrating Takeover By Saudi-backed Consortium* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNx4BXnHNOw>
- Better Health Channel. (2021, December 20). *Exercise and mental health*. Retrieved from: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/exercise-and-mental-health>
- Bianco, C., & Sons, S. (2023). More than a Game: Football and Soft Power in the Gulf. *The International Spectator*, 58(2), 92–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2023.2196810>
- Bianco, C., Sons, S. (2021). Domestic Economic Plans and Visions and Opportunities for Cooperation with Europe. In: Abdel Ghafar, A., Colombo, S. (Eds.). *The European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Contemporary Gulf Studies*. (pp. 79-104). Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0279-5\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-0279-5_5)
- Borck, T. (2023, November). Saudi Arabia: The Kingdom of Oil. *Royal United Services Institute*. 1-26. Retrieved from: <https://static.rusi.org/saudi-arabia-energy-security-occasional-paper.pdf>
- Bouoiyour, J., & Selmi, R. (2018). *The gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi: Saudi Arabia's new economy dream at risk?* Retrieved from: <https://hal.science/hal-01965085/document>
- Boykoff, J. (2022). Toward a theory of sportswashing: Mega-Events, soft power, and political conflict. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 39(4), 342–351. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2022-0095>
- Brand, A. (2023). Sport Diplomacy. In: Onditi, F., McLaren, K., Ben-Nun, G., Stivachtis, Y.A., & Okoth, P. (Eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Diplomatic Thought and Practice in the Digital Age* (pp. 147-171). London Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28214-0\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28214-0_7)
- Brannagan, P. M. (2022). Global sport and human capital soft power: The Case of Qatar. In D. Reiche & P. M. Brannagan (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East (1st ed.)* (pp. 163–175). London, New York: Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003032915-19>
- Brannagan, P. M., & Giulianotti, R. (2014). Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals. *Leisure Studies*, 34(6), 703–719. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2014.964291>
- Brannagan, P. M., & Giulianotti, R. (2018). The soft power–soft disempowerment nexus: the case of Qatar. *International Affairs*, 94(5), 1139–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy125>
- Brannagan, P. M., & Reiche, D. (2025). Saudi Arabia and the 2034 FIFA World Cup: context, strategy, critique. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2025.2473319>
- Brun, E. E., & Gomez, C. (2022). Politics and geopolitics in staging the FIFA World Cup: What is at stake for the hosting nations? In S. Chadwick, P. Widdop, C. Anagnostopoulos, & D. Parnell (Eds.),

*The Business of the FIFA World Cup* (pp. 47–60). New York: Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003121794-4>

Burrow, T. (2021, October 12). Newcastle United survey: Ashley reign ‘disastrous’, fans want Conte and concerns over Saudi Arabia’s human rights record. *The Athletic*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/2881976/2021/10/12/newcastle-united-survey-ashley-reign-disastrous-fans-want-conte-and-concerns-over-saudi-arabias-human-rights-record/>

Cha, V. (2016). Role of sport in international Relations: National rebirth and renewal. *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 11(1), 139–155. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aepr.12127>

Chadwick, S. (2022). From utilitarianism and neoclassical sport management to a new geopolitical economy of sport. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 22(5), 685-704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2022.2032251>

Chadwick, S. (2023, March 10). In Saudi Arabia, everything must change for everything to remain the same. *Skema business school*. Retrieved from: <https://knowledge.skema.edu/saudi-arabia-change-sport-mbs/>

Chadwick, S., & Widdop, P. (2022). Saudi Arabia and sport in the 21st century: From oil and gas to event-driven change. In D. Reiche & P. M. Brannagan (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East* (pp. 231–241). London, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003032915-26>

Chadwick, S., & Widdop, P. (2023). Sport washing and the Gulf region: Myth or reality? In S. Chadwick, P. Widdop, & M. M. Goldman (Eds.), *The geopolitical economy of sport: Power, politics, money, and the state* (pp. 148–154). London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003348238-21>

Chadwick, S., Widdop, P., & Burton, N. (2020). Soft Power Sports Sponsorship – A Social Network Analysis of a New Sponsorship Form. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 21(2), 196–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2020.1723781>

Chanavat, N. (2017). French football, foreign investors: global sports as country branding. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 38(6), 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-04-2017-0053>.

Channel 4 News. (2024, September 14). 'Which country doesn't do sportswashing?', says Saudi Prince. Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4x43xHUo8qo>

Carr-Ellis, E. (2025). Saudi Arabia: the laws on what women can – and can’t – do. *The Week*. Retrieved from <https://theweek.com/60339/things-women-cant-do-in-saudi-arabia>

Chiliz. (2024, October 16). *The Global Fan*. Retrieved from: <https://www.chiliz.com/the-global-fan-report-powered-by-fan-tokens/>

Choukeir, J. & Saba, Y. (2023, June 5). Saudi wealth fund to take control of soccer star Ronaldo's club. *Reuters*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/sports/saudi-arabia-revives-sports-clubs-privatisation-plan-2023-06-05/>

Chulov, M. (2017, September 2). Saudi society is rigid, its youth restless. The prince’s reforms need to succeed. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/02/saudi-prince-reforms-society-rigid-youth-restless>

Collyer Merritt, E. (2024, March 20). Sportswashing: History, governing bodies, state investments and English football club ownership. *House of Lords Library*. Retrieved from: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/sportswashing-history-governing-bodies-state-investments-and-english-football-club-ownership/>

Costa, R. & Moriconi, M. (2024). Current political uses of sport revised: beyond public diplomacy and sportswashing. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 6. doi:10.3389/fspor.2024.1316732

Council on Foreign Relations. (2023, May 16). What is soft power? *CFR Education*. Retrieved from <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/what-soft-power>

Crafton, A. (2023, April 6). Newcastle's Saudi takeover: The UK government's emails revealed. *The Athletic*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/4375454/2023/04/06/saudi-newcastle-boris-government/>

Crafton, A. (2024, November 30). FIFA report: Saudi 2034 World Cup bid has 'medium' human rights risk. *The Athletic*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5957860/2024/11/30/fifa-2034-human-rights-world-cup/>

Cristiano [@cristiano]. (2023a, December 17). *Grateful to be honored as the most searched athlete in @google history. Check out the film at g.co/25YearsinSearch. 🌟 #YearInSearch* [Video]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/cristiano/reel/C09VyiZtoyx/>

Cristiano [@cristiano]. (2023b, May 6). *Indulging in history and gastronomy at @tatel.riyadh in @bujairiterrace with a stunning view of #at\_turaif @visitdiriyah* [Photograph]. Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cr6jSkzLj7W/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cr6jSkzLj7W/?img_index=1)

Cristiano [@cristiano]. (2024a March 30). *Recharging in Saudi Arabia with the family! ❤️ @visitsaudi @visitredsea* [Photograph]. Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/p/C4vbBC5IHP\\_/?img\\_index=3](https://www.instagram.com/p/C4vbBC5IHP_/?img_index=3)

Cristiano [@cristiano]. (2024b, July 24). *Happy days 🌞 #VisitRedSea, @VisitSaudi, #summer in saudi* [Photograph]. Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/p/C9pi9zJohLX/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C9pi9zJohLX/?img_index=1)

Cristiano [@cristiano]. (2025a, February 22). *Happy to celebrate Founding Day with His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and honored to attend the Saudi Cup horse race ceremony in Riyadh.* [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DGY1e3BAIRw/>

Cristiano [@cristiano]. (2025b, February 2). *@ufc Fight night with @turkialalshik and @danawhite.* [Photograph]. Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/p/DFkPNqUgpDo/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DFkPNqUgpDo/?img_index=1)

Cristiano. (2025.). *Home*. [YouTube channel]. YouTube. Retrieved April 16, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/@cristiano/videos>

Crossley, S. & Woolf, A. (2024) 'Fog on the tyne'? The 'common sense' focus on 'sportswashing' and the 2021 takeover of Newcastle United, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 16(2), 307-322, DOI: 10.1080/19406940.2024.2342394

Cull, N. J. (2010). Public diplomacy: Seven lessons for its future from its past. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 6(1), 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2010.4>

Design Indaba. (2020, April 27). *Wally Olins on the branding of nations* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP2o-VwLEQ>

Dichter, H. L. (2014, December 17). Sport history and diplomatic history. *H-Diplo*. Retrieved from: <https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/e122.pdf>

Dichter, H. L. (2023, June 12). Sport Diplomacy: An Old Frontier Rediscovered. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 30(1). Retrieved from: <https://bjwa.brown.edu/30-1/sport-diplomacy-an-old-frontier-rediscovered/>

Diwan, I. (2019). A landing strategy for Saudi Arabia. *POMEPS Studies*, 33, 25-28. Retrieved from: [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101386/1/Hertog\\_what\\_would\\_the\\_saudi\\_economy\\_have\\_to\\_look\\_like\\_to\\_be\\_post\\_rentier\\_published.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101386/1/Hertog_what_would_the_saudi_economy_have_to_look_like_to_be_post_rentier_published.pdf)

Dorsey, J. M. (2024, July 9). Gulf investment in European soccer becomes a hot potato. (2001, March 24). *Wilson Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/gulf-investment-european-soccer-becomes-hot-potato>

Duarte, F. (2025, March 27). *Most followed accounts on social media (2025)*. Retrieved from <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/social-media-following>

Dubinsky, Y. (2019). From soft power to sports diplomacy: a theoretical and conceptual discussion. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 15(3), 156–164. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-019-00116-8>

Duerden, J. (2023, November 1). Ronaldo in Saudi Arabia: bigger off the pitch than on. *Dw.com*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dw.com/en/ronaldo-in-saudi-arabia-bigger-off-the-pitch-than-on/a-64350274>

Ebrahim, N. (2023, January 6). Why Cristiano Ronaldo's move to Saudi Arabia means so much for the Gulf monarchy's sporting ambitions. *CNN*. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/06/football/ronaldo-saudi-soccer-sport-mime-intl/index.html>

Elneel, F. A., & AlMulhim, A. F. (2022). The effect of oil price shocks on Saudi Arabia's economic growth in the light of Vision 2030 "A combination of VECM and ARDL Models." *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*, 13(4), 3401–3423. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13132-021-00841-7>

Elsborg, S. (2024, December 9). Neom: A futuristic vision for sport on feet of clay. *Play the Game*. Retrieved from: <https://www.playthegame.org/news/neom-a-futuristic-vision-for-sport-on-feet-of-clay/>

Elsborg, S., Zidan, K., Zahle, N., & Nielsen, K. L. (2024). *Saudi Arabia's grip on world sport*. Play the Game. Retrieved from <https://www.playthegame.org/media/rxflxlp/saudi-arabias-grip-on-world-sport.pdf>

Fan, Y. (2008). Soft power: Power of attraction or confusion? *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 4(2), 147–158. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2008.4>

Faudot, A. (2019). *Saudi Arabia and the rentier regime trap: a critical assessment of the plan Vision 2030*. Retrieved from: <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02087364/document>



Fauzul, A. Y. & Basuni, I. (2023). The development dynamics of football and its influence on conservatism culture in Saudi Arabia. *International Review of Humanities Studies*, 8(2), 577-592. doi.10.7454/irhs.v8i2.1125

Fenton-Harvey, J. (2024, May 1). Can Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 still succeed? *The New Arab*. Retrieved from <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/can-saudi-arabias-vision-2030-still-succeed>

FIFA. (2024). *FIFA World Cup 2034 Bid Evaluation Report*. Retrieved from <https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/51d8a13714827f1d/original/FIFA-World-Cup-2034-Bid-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

FIFA. (2024, April 11). *Human rights and the bidding processes for the 2030 and 2034 FIFA World Cups*. Retrieved from [https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/FIFA\\_response\\_on\\_bidding\\_process\\_for\\_2030\\_2034\\_World\\_Cups.pdf](https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/FIFA_response_on_bidding_process_for_2030_2034_World_Cups.pdf)

FIFA. (2024b, December 11). *World Cup 2030: Morocco, Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay reactions*. Retrieved from <https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/news/world-cup-2030-morocco-spain-portugal-argentina-paraguay-uruguay-reactions>

FIFA. (2025). *FIFA World Cup 2034™*. Retrieved from <https://inside.fifa.com/tournament-organisation/world-cup-2034>

Forbes India. (2025, March 21). *The 10 most followed Instagram accounts in the world in 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/explainers/most-followed-instagram-accounts-world/85649/1>

Freedom House. (2025). *Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia>

Freeman, K. (2012). Sport as swaggering: utilizing sport as soft power. *Sport in Society*, 15(9), 1260–1274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2012.690403>

Gallarotti, G., & Al-Filali, I. Y. (2012). Saudi Arabia's soft power. *International Studies*, 49(3–4), 233–261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881714532707>

Garner-Purkis, Z. (2020, August 5). Cristiano Ronaldo's Instagram success: A glimpse into how social media is changing soccer. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakgarnerpurkis/2020/08/05/evidence-cristiano-ronaldos-instagram-is-more-important-than-his-soccer/>

General Authority for Statistics (2024a). *Population Estimates Publication 2024*. Retrieved from: <https://www.stats.gov.sa/documents/20117/2435273/Population+Estimates+Statistics+2024+EN.pdf/9b71e303-5fd9-19cb-9913-850a9d521639?t=1738859947691>

General Authority for Statistics. (2024b, November 18). *GASTAT publishes the results of Health Determinants Statistics Publication in Saudi Arabia 2024*. Dostupné z: <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/w/الهيئة-العامة-للإحصاء-تنشر-نتائج-نشرة-إحصاءات-ال>

- Gibbon, G. (2023, January 2). Ronaldo's signing goes beyond money for Saudi Arabia. *Arabian Gulf Business Insight*. Retrieved from <https://www.agbi.com/analysis/business-of-sport/2023/01/cristiano-ronaldo-al-nassr-saudi-arabia/>
- Goff, P. (2020). Cultural Diplomacy. In: Snow, N., & Cull, N.J. (Eds.). (2020). *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy (2nd ed.)* (pp. 30-37). New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429465543>
- Griffin, T. (2017). Football in the hands of the other: Qatar's World Cup in the British broadsheet press. *Arab World Geographer*, 20(2-3), 170-182. Retrieved from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323705390\\_Football\\_in\\_the\\_hands\\_of\\_the\\_other\\_Qatar's\\_World\\_Cup\\_in\\_the\\_British\\_broadsheet\\_press/link/5b029556a6fdccf9e4f6e7c4/download?\\_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6Il9kaXJlY3QiLCJwYWdlIjoicHVibGljYXRpb24ifX0](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323705390_Football_in_the_hands_of_the_other_Qatar's_World_Cup_in_the_British_broadsheet_press/link/5b029556a6fdccf9e4f6e7c4/download?_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6Il9kaXJlY3QiLCJwYWdlIjoicHVibGljYXRpb24ifX0)
- Grix, J., & Brannagan, P. M. (2016). Of Mechanisms and Myths: Conceptualising States' "Soft Power" Strategies through Sports Mega-Events. *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 27(2), 251–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1169791>
- Grix, J., & Brannagan, P. M. (2024). Sports Mega-Events as Foreign Policy: Sport Diplomacy, "Soft Power," and "Sportswashing." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642241262042>
- Grix, J., & Lee, D. (2013). Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: the lure of the politics of attraction. *Global Society*, 27(4), 521–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2013.827632>
- Grix, J., Dinsmore, A., & Brannagan, P. M. (2023). Unpacking the politics of 'sportswashing': It takes two to tango. *Politics*, 43(4), 423–440. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957231207387>
- Guardian Sport. (2023, September 21). *Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman 'will continue sportswashing'*. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrmqY9hyCCw>
- Hall, T. (2010). An unclear attraction: A critical examination of soft power as an analytical category. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3(2), 189–211. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poq005>
- Harper, J. (2024, March 7). Lionel Messi's Visit Saudi campaign reaches 747 million people. *Campaign Middle East*. Retrieved from: <https://campaignme.com/lionel-messis-visit-saudi-campaign-reaches-747-million-people/>
- Hayters TV. (2024, February 22). Analysing the impact Messi and Ronaldo have made in the MLS and Saudi Pro League. *OneFootball*. Retrieved from: <https://onefootball.com/en/news/analysing-the-impact-messi-and-ronaldo-have-made-in-the-mls-and-saudi-pro-league-39091153>
- Herd, K. (2024, March 27). *Dealing with sportswashing – an exercise in honour and popular culture*. Retrieved from <https://idrottsforum.org/feature-herd240327/>
- Hertog, S. (2019). What would the Saudi economy have to look like to be 'post rentier'? *POMEPS Studies*, 33, 29-33. Retrieved from: [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101386/1/Hertog\\_what\\_would\\_the\\_saudi\\_economy\\_have\\_to\\_look\\_like\\_to\\_be\\_post\\_rentier\\_published.pdf#page=25.08](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101386/1/Hertog_what_would_the_saudi_economy_have_to_look_like_to_be_post_rentier_published.pdf#page=25.08)
- Hitti, S., & Abed, G. T. (1974). *The economy and finances of Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/024/1974/002/article-A001-en.xml>

- Howe, T. (2023, July 13). Howay man: Sportswashing applies to the UK too. *UK in a Changing Europe*. Retrieved from: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/howay-man-sportswashing-applies-to-the-uk-too/>
- Human Rights Watch. (2024a, October 28). Saudi Arabia: Flawed Assessment of World Cup Bid. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/28/saudi-arabia-flawed-assessment-world-cup-bid>
- Human Rights Watch. (2024b, December 4). *Saudi Arabia: 'Giga-Projects' built on widespread labor abuses*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/04/saudi-arabia-giga-projects-built-widespread-labor-abuses>
- Hunter, S. (2013, September 4). *Bill Shankly in his own words*. Retrieved from: <https://www.liverpoolfc.com/news/first-team/111453-bill-shankly-in-his-own-words>
- Hussain Alawi, A. (2024, October 30). Sporting Diplomacy: The Role of International Players in Enhancing Saudi Arabia's Nation Branding and International Public Relations (PR) Strategies. *Journal fo Media & Management*, 6(9), 1-5. doi.org/10.47363/JMM/2024(6)180
- Hvidt, M. (2019). Saudi Arabia: Domestic factors underpin its sudden interest in sports. *Videnscenter om det modern Mellemøsten*. Retrieved from: [https://findresearcher.sdu.dk/ws/files/169619237/Hvidt\\_article\\_Dec\\_2019.pdf](https://findresearcher.sdu.dk/ws/files/169619237/Hvidt_article_Dec_2019.pdf)
- Inside FIFA. (2023, October 4). *FIFA Council takes key decisions on FIFA World Cup™ editions in 2030 and 2034*. Retrieved from: <https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/fifa-council/media-releases/fifa-council-takes-key-decisions-on-fifa-world-cup-tm-editions-in-2030-and-2034>
- International Monetary Fund. (2016). *Economic diversification in oil-exporting Arab countries*. Retrieved from: <https://www.imf.org/external/np/pp/eng/2016/042916.pdf>
- International Olympic Committee. (2024, March 19). *Declaration by the IOC against the politicisation of sport*. Retrieved from <https://www.olympics.com>
- International Olympic Committee. (2025). *Olympic Truce*. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/olympic-truce>
- Jo Dixon, S. (2024, May 2). Social media: active usage penetration in selected countries and territories 2024. *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282846/regular-social-networking-usage-penetration-worldwide-by-country/>
- Joffe, J. (2006). America, the Ubiquitous. When one nation dominates the world, its power breeds unease, resentment, and denigration. *Swarthmore College Bulletin*, 104(1), 13-17. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcollections.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/object/sc11642>
- Jones, M. O. (2022, November 1). UK press coverage of Qatar 2022: Hypocrisy and orientalism. *The New Arab*. Retrieved from <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/uk-press-coverage-qatar-2022-hypocrisy-and-orientalism>
- Karataş, İ. (2022, September 15). GCC Football purchases: Uncertain investment, soft power opportunity. *Gulf International Forum*. Retrieved from <https://gulfig.org/gcc-football-purchases-uncertain-investment-soft-power-opportunity/>
- Khateeb, A. A. (2025, March 4). *Shaping the Future of sports tourism: Saudi Arabia's vision beyond the game*. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/shaping-future-sports-tourism-saudi->



Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Saudi Vision 2030*. Retrieved from [https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi\\_vision203.pdf](https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf)

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2025b). *Vision 2030. Annual Report 2024*. Retrieved from <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/25042025ev1/En-Annual%20Report-Vision2030-2024.pdf>

Kobierecki, M. M. (2019). The domestic dimension of sports diplomacy. *Review of Nationalities*, 9(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.2478/pn-2019-0002>

Kobierecki, M.M., & Strožek, P. (2021). Sports mega-events and shaping the international image of states: How hosting the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups affects interest in host nations. *International Politics*, 58(1), 49–70 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00216-w>

Kohara, M. (2005). Information power and international security. *Progress in Informatics*, 1, 39-46. [https://www.nii.ac.jp/pi/n1/1\\_39.pdf](https://www.nii.ac.jp/pi/n1/1_39.pdf)

KPMG. (2022, March). *Competitive edge: The unfolding potential for sports tourism in Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from: <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/ae/pdf-2022/03/kpmg-sports-tourism-in-saudi-arabia.pdf>

LaMay, C. L. (2022). Politics and pirates: Sports broadcasting in the Middle East. In D. Reiche & P. M. Brannagan (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East* (pp. 265–275). London, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003032915-29>

Leite Junior, E. & Rodrigues, C. (2020). Belt, Road and Ball: Football as a Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy Tool. In: Leandro, F., Duarte, P. (Eds.) *The Belt and Road Initiative*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2564-3\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2564-3_4)

Lekakis, N. (2019, June 23). *The limits of soft Power-Sports Diplomacy Templates in IR research*. Retrieved from [https://www.e-ir.info/2019/06/23/the-limits-of-soft-power-sports-diplomacy-templates-in-ir-research/#google\\_vignette](https://www.e-ir.info/2019/06/23/the-limits-of-soft-power-sports-diplomacy-templates-in-ir-research/#google_vignette)

Martin, M., & El-Din, Y. G. (2022, November 29). Saudi Arabia Weighs World Cup 2030 Bid with Egypt and Greece. *TIME*. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/6237519/saudi-arabia-world-cup-2030-bid/>

Matarese, D., Ndiaye, L., Slattery, Q., & de Tilière, F. (2024). Understanding Saudi Arabia's Investments in Sports. *Geopolitical Risk Index*. Retrieved from: [https://www.geopriskindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Consulting-8\\_Report.pdf](https://www.geopriskindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Consulting-8_Report.pdf)

McNicol, A. & Raine, A. (2023, April 7). Xi Jinping wanted China to be a global soccer power. What went wrong? *CNN*. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/07/china/xi-jinping-china-football-dream-fail-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>

Melissen, J. (2005). The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice. In: Melissen, J. (eds) *The New Public Diplomacy. Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations* (pp. 3-27). London: Palgrave Macmillan [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931_1)

Messi, L. [@leomessi]. (2025). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved March, 15, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/leomessi/?hl=cs>

- Millar, C. (2025, January 24). FIFA criticised by Norwegian FA over 'flawed' 2030 and 2034 men's World Cup bidding process. *The Athletic*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5983701/2024/12/10/world-cup-fifa-hosts-criticism-norway/>
- Miller, N. (2021, October 15). 'I've never felt more disconnected to Newcastle': How fans against Saudi takeover are reacting. *The Athletic*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/2884937/2021/10/14/ive-never-felt-more-disconnected-to-newcastle-how-fans-against-saudi-takeover-are-reacting/>
- Ministry of Health Saudi Arabia. (2024, May 27). *Obesity*. Retrieved from <https://www.moh.gov.sa/en/awarenessplatform/ChronicDisease/Pages/Obesity.aspx>
- Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development. (2025, January 21). *Saudi Arabia introduces national policy for the elimination of forced labor*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/en/media-center/news/صدور-قرار-مجلس-الوزراء-باعتقاد-السياسة-الوطنية-لل قضاء-الفعلي-على-العمل-الجبري>
- Moriconi, M. (2024). Deconstructing Sportswashing: Analytical Concept or Ideological Prejudice?. In: Breuer, M., Forrest, D. (eds). *The Palgrave Handbook on the Economics of Manipulation in Sport* (pp. 157–176). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-63581-6\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-63581-6_8)
- Mosly, A. (2022, June). Sports Diplomacy in the GCC. *Gulf Research Center*. Retrieved from: <https://grc.net/documents/62c43cb9a4cfeSportsDiplomacyintheGCC.pdf>
- Murray, S. (2018). *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice (1st ed.)*. Oxon, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351126960>
- Murray, S., & Pigman, G. A. (2013). Mapping the relationship between international sport and diplomacy. *Sport in Society*, 17(9), 1098–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.856616>
- Nalwala, A. A. (2024, October 30). *From Melbourne 1956 to Brisbane 2032, Australia's Olympic legacy*. Retrieved from <https://www.olympics.com/en/news/how-many-times-australia-olympics-host>
- Neymar Jr. [@neymarjr]. (2025). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved April 16, 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/neymarjr/>
- Nober, A. (2022). HOW OIL-RICH NATIONS ARE INVADING GLOBAL SOCCER. *Harvard International Review*, 43(1), 18–23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27275724>
- Nye, J. (2017). Soft power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept. *Palgrave Communications*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.8>
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Nye, J. S. (2008). Public diplomacy and soft power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>
- Nye, J. S. (2009). Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power. *Foreign Affairs*, 88(4), 160–163. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20699631>
- Nye, J. S. (2023). *Soft Power and Great-Power competition: Shifting sands in the balance of power between the United States and China*. Singapore: Springer Nature. Retrieved from:

<https://www.springerprofessional.de/en/soft-power-and-great-power-competition/25288300?tocPage=1>

Nygård, H. M., & Gates, S. (2013). Soft power at home and abroad: Sport diplomacy, politics and peace-building. *International Area Studies Review*, 16(3), 235–243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865913502971>

Leber, A. (2025). Vision 2030 in the Home Stretch: Clear Achievements yet Limited Accountability. Retrieved from <https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Leber%20-%20Vision%202030-1.pdf>

Ochsenwald, L. W., Teitelbaum, Joshua, Philby, & St John Bridger, H. (2025, April 7). Economy of Saudi Arabia. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/Economy>

Ogden, M. (2024, December 11). 2034 World Cup: Why Saudi Arabia is hosting, explained - ESPN. *ESPN.com*. Retrieved from: [https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/\\_/id/42892121/saudi-arabia-2034-fifa-world-cup-explainer-human-rights-winter-world-cup-calendar-cost](https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/42892121/saudi-arabia-2034-fifa-world-cup-explainer-human-rights-winter-world-cup-calendar-cost)

Olins, W. (2005). Making a National Brand. In: Melissen, J. (eds) *The New Public Diplomacy. Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations* (pp. 169-179). London: Palgrave Macmillan, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931_9)

Olivereau, V. (2022). A Comparison of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In D. Reiche & P. M. Brannagan (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Sport in the Middle East (1st ed.)* (pp. 297–309). London, New York: Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003032915-19>

OneFootball. (2023, April 4). *Al Hilal offer Lionel Messi over €400 million to join them, could face Ronaldo in Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from: <https://onefootball.com/en/news/al-hilal-offer-lionel-messi-over-400-million-to-join-them-could-face-ronaldo-in-saudi-arabia-37111>

Onyeagwara, N. (2025, January 28). Neymar leaves Al Hilal after contract termination. *The Athletic*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6093149/2025/01/27/neymar-leave-al-hilal-contract-terminate/>

Ottaway, D. (2021). *Mohammed bin Salman: The Icarus of Saudi Arabia?* Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Oxford Business Group. (2020). Makkah & Medina. Retrieved from: <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/reports/saudi-arabia/2020-report/makkah-medina>

Özsarı, A., Fiçekçioğlu, İ. B., Çetin, M. Ç., & Temel, A. S. (2018). Sport diplomacy as public diplomacy element. *International Journal of Science Culture and Sport*, 6(3), 339–349. <https://doi.org/10.14486/IntJSCS765>

Pattison, P. (2024, December 9). Saudi Arabia's World Cup bid victory is a crushing defeat for migrant workers' rights. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/09/saudi-arabias-world-cup-bid-victory-is-a-crushing-defeat-for-migrant-workers-rights>

Pestana, A. (2020). The Brazilian Approach to Public Diplomacy. In N. Snow & N. J. Cull (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of public diplomacy* (2nd ed.) (pp. 273–280). New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429465543-40>

Peterková, J. (2006). Veřejná diplomacie – jen módní pojem nebo skutečná změna? *Mezinárodní vztahy*, 41(3), 83-99. Retrieved from: <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=212614>

Play the Game. (2024). *How FIFA helped pave the way for Saudi 2034*. Retrieved from: <https://www.playthegame.org/projects/saudi-arabia-s-grip-on-world-sport/how-fifa-helped-pave-the-way-for-saudi-2034/>

Poindexter, O. (2023, January 23). Ronaldo Boosts Saudi Pro League Exposure Across Europe. *Front Office Sports*. Retrieved from: <https://frontofficesports.com/ronaldo-boosts-saudi-pro-league-exposure-across-europe/>

Polok, B., & Akeel, M. (2024, October 16). Vision 2030 has done wonders for women. But there's still room to enhance their economic roles in Saudi Arabia. Atlantic Council. Retrieved from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/vision-2030-women-economy-saudi-arabia/>

Postlethwaite, V., Jenkin, C., & Sherry, E. (2022). Sport diplomacy: an integrative review. *Sport Management Review*, 26(3), 361–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2022.2071054>

Premier League. (2025). *Newcastle United FC squad information 2024/2025*. Retrieved from: <https://www.premierleague.com/clubs/23/Newcastle-United/squad?se=719>

Qasem, I. Y. (2015). Rentier Theory and Saudi Arabia. *Oil and Security Policies*. 4–27. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004277731\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004277731_003)

Reda, A. & Viviez, L. (2021, September 15). How sports events can transform the Saudi Arabian economy. *EY*. Retrieved from: [https://www.ey.com/en\\_ps/services/consulting/how-sports-events-can-transform-the-saudi-arabian-economy](https://www.ey.com/en_ps/services/consulting/how-sports-events-can-transform-the-saudi-arabian-economy)

Reiche, D. (2010). Energy Policies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—possibilities and limitations of ecological modernization in rentier states. *Energy Policy*, 38(5), 2395–2403. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2009.12.031>

Reiche, D. (2014). Investing in sporting success as a domestic and foreign policy tool: the case of Qatar. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 7(4), 489–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2014.966135>

Reuters. (2017, September 24). Saudi Arabia allows women into stadium as it steps up reforms. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/24/saudi-arabia-allows-women-into-stadium-as-it-steps-up-reforms>

Reuters. (2023a, August 16). *Neymar joins Saudi club Al Hilal from PSG*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/neymar-joins-saudi-club-al-hilal-psg-2023-08-15/>

Reuters. (2023b, October 4). Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay to host inaugural matches of 2030 World Cup, says Conmebol. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/uruguay-argentina-paraguay-host-inaugural-matches-2030-world-cup-says-conmebol-2023-10-04/>

- Reuters. (2023c, September 22). *Saudi crown prince says he does not care about 'sportswashing' claims*. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-crown-prince-says-he-does-not-care-about-sportswashing-claims-2023-09-22>
- Ritchie, C., & Hepburn D. (2025, March 4). 15 Most Decorated Players in Football History Ranked by Trophies Won. *GiveMeSport*. Retrieved from: <https://www.givemesport.com/most-decorated-players-football-soccer-history/>
- Robinson, K. (2022, November 18). What Is the Kafala System? *Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system>
- Roche, M. (2000). *Mega-events and Modernity: Olympics and Expos in the Growth of Global Culture* (1st ed.). London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203443941>
- Rofe, J. S. (Ed.). (2018). *Sport and diplomacy: Games within games*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv18b5kwn>
- Rothman, S. B. (2011). Revising the soft power concept: what are the means and mechanisms of soft power? *Journal of Political Power*, 4(1), 49–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379x.2011.556346>
- Sakajiri, N. (2023, January 20). Interview: Saudi minister calls 'sportswashing' claims 'naive'. *The Asahi Shimbun*. Retrieved from <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14819388>
- Sanderson, T. (2023, June 7). Al-Hilal Raise Messi Offer Past \$1.5 Billion to Block Inter Miami Move: Reports. *Forbes*. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomsanderson/2023/06/07/al-hilal-raise-messi-offer-past-15-billion-to-block-inter-miami-move-reports/>
- Satish, K., Portet, X. G., & De San Eugenio Vela, J. (2024). Football and nation branding: A case study of Saudi Arabia's strategy for global football recognition. *adComunica Revista Científica De Estrategias Tendencias E Innovación En Comunicación*, 27–52. <https://doi.org/10.6035/adcomunica.7776>
- SAUDI 2034. (2025). *FIFA announces the highest ever score in bidding history for Saudi Arabia's Bid to Host the FIFA World Cup 2034™*. Retrieved from: <https://saudi2034.com.sa/news/fifa-announces-the-highest-ever-score-in-bidding-history-for-saudi-arabias-bid-to-host-the-fifa-world-cup-2034/>
- Saudi Arabian Football Federation. (2025, January 7). *AFC announces dates for 2027 Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.saff.com.sa/en/news.php?id=3440>
- Saudi Pro League. (2025, January 3). *Two years of CR7 in Saudi Arabia: The interview* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhsS-3fDzWs>
- Saudi Tourism Authority. (2025). *Home*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sta.gov.sa/en/home>
- Schneider, C.P. (2005). Culture Communicates: US Diplomacy That Works. In: Melissen, J. (Eds.), *The New Public Diplomacy. Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations*. (pp. 147–168). London: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931_1)
- Schreyer, D., & Singleton, C. (2025). Cristiano of Arabia: Did Ronaldo increase Saudi Pro League attendances? *Contemporary Economic Policy*, 43(2), 260–270. <https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12661>



- Sharp, P. (2005). Revolutionary States, Outlaw Regimes and the Techniques of Public Diplomacy. In: Melissen, J. (eds) *The New Public Diplomacy. Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations* (pp. 106-123). London: Palgrave Macmillan [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931_1)
- Shelley, E. (2022, June 30). 2022: The Year of Sportswashing. *Australian Institute of International Affairs*. Retrieved from: <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/2022-the-year-of-sportswashing/>
- Sherwood, H. (2022, November 1). ‘Sums up 2022’: Permacrisis chosen as Collins word of the year. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/nov/01/sums-up-2022-permacrisis-chosen-as-collins-word-of-the-year>
- Sim, J. (2022, December 19). Report: Cristiano Ronaldo’s Al-Nassr offer includes Saudi 2030 World Cup bid ambassador role. *SportsPro*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sportspro.com/news/cristiano-ronaldo-saudi-arabia-al-nassr-2030-world-cup-bid/>
- Skey, M. (2022). Sportswashing: Media headline or analytic concept? *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 58(5), 749-764. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902221136086>
- Sky Sports. (2021, October 8). *Newcastle takeover completed: Saudi-led consortium end Mike Ashley's 14-year ownership*. Retrieved from: <https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11678/12427983/newcastle-takeover-completed-saudi-led-consortium-end-mike-ashleys-14-year-ownership>
- Smith Diwan, K. (2016, May 6). Youth Appeal of Saudi Vision 2030. *The Arab Ful States Institute in Washington*. Retrieved from: <https://agsiw.org/youth-appeal-of-saudi-vision-2030/>
- Snape, J. (2023a, October 5). Australia given 25-day deadline to challenge Saudi Arabia’s 2034 World Cup bid. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/oct/05/australia-fifa-world-cup-2034-bid-saudi-arabia-challenge>
- Snape, J. (2023b, November 8). Football Australia ‘caught by surprise’ by Fifa’s 2034 World Cup bid process. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/nov/09/saudi-arabia-fifa-world-cup-2034-football-australia-bid-response>
- Snow, N. (2020). Rethinking public diplomacy in the 2020s. In: Snow, N., & Cull, N.J. (Eds.). (2020). *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy (2nd ed.)* (pp. 3-12). New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429465543>
- Sønderholm, J. (2024). Saudi Arabia and professional football. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2024.2438636>
- Spinetto, J. P. (2023, October 4). Why a football-crazy continent gets just three World Cup games. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-10-04/world-cup-2030-to-include-3-games-in-argentina--uruguay-paraguay>
- SPL. (2025). *About the SPL*. Retrieved from: <https://www.spl.com.sa/en/about>
- Sport Business Journal. (2023, June 23). *Saudi Arabia withdraws joint 2030 World Cup bid*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sportsbusinessjournal.com/Daily/Global/2023/06/23/saudi-arabia-2030-world-cup/>

- Språkrådet. (2021, December 15). *Sportsvaske er årets ord 2021*. Retrieved from: <https://sprakradet.no/aktuelt/sportsvaske-er-arets-ord-2021/>
- Statista. (2023, December 15). *Proved oil reserves in Saudi Arabia from 1990 to 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264388/oil-reserves-in-saudi-arabia-since-1990/>
- Statista. (2024, August 9). *Population of Saudi Arabia 1800 to 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1067068/population-saudi-arabia-historical/>
- Statista. (2024b, December 6). *Global oil and gas GDP contribution share 2023, by select country*. Retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1451878/share-gdp-oil-and-gas-production-select-countries-globally/>
- Taylor & Francis. (2025). *Diseases of affluence*. Retrieved from [https://taylorandfrancis.com/knowledge/Medicine\\_and\\_healthcare/Pathology/Diseases\\_of\\_affluence/](https://taylorandfrancis.com/knowledge/Medicine_and_healthcare/Pathology/Diseases_of_affluence/)
- Taylor, T., Burdsey, D., & Jarvis, N. (2023). A critical review on sport and the Arabian Peninsula – the current state of play and future directions. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 15(2), 367–383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2023.2206399>
- Teach Mideast. (2023, October 25). *What is Sports Diplomacy?* Retrieved from <https://teachmideast.org/what-is-sports-diplomacy/>
- The 966 Podcast. (2023, June 30). *Professor Simon Chadwick on Saudi Arabia's sporting ambitions and the geopolitics of sports* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyLH4mzuMn4>
- The Economist. (2021, December 18). *After banning cinema for decades, Saudi Arabia is making movies*. Retrieved from: <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2021/12/18/after-banning-cinema-for-decades-saudi-arabia-is-making-movies>
- The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2025a). *About Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from <https://www.saudiembassy.net/sports-and-recreation>
- The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2025b). *His Royal Highness Prince Turki Al-Faisal*. Retrieved from <https://www.saudiembassy.net/his-royal-highness-prince-turki-al-faisal>
- The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2025c). *Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Climate Envoy Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir*. Retrieved from <https://www.saudiembassy.net/minister-state-foreign-affairs-and-climate-envoy-adel-bin-ahmed-al-jubeir>
- The Japan Times. (2025, February 11). *Ronaldo reaches deal with Al Nassr to extend contract, official says*. Retrieved from: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/sports/2025/02/11/soccer/ronaldo-al-nassr/>
- The World Cup 2034 Hosting Higher Authority. (2024, December 6). *SAFF Submits Official Letter of Intent to Bid for 2034 FIFA World Cup™*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wca34.gov.sa/en/media-center/news/11>
- Thiollet, H., & Vignal, L. (2016). *Transnationalising the Arabian Peninsula: Local, regional and global dynamics*. Retrieved from: <https://journals.openedition.org/arabianhumanities/3145>

- Tomanić Trivundža, I. (2019). Orientalism and Journalism. *The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*. 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0038>
- Treisman, R. (2023, October 2). 5 years after Khashoggi's murder, advocates say the lack of accountability emboldens Saudi Arabia. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from: <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/02/1202937036/jamal-khashoggi-mbs-murder-saudi-arabia-human-rights>
- Trew, B. (2018, October 23). 'Khashoggi's death was the final straw': Saudi's crown prince faces mounting backlash over Istanbul consulate killing. *The Independent*. Retrieved from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/jamal-khashoggi-saudi-arabia-mbs-turkey-consulate-istanbul-death-murder-latest-edited-a8597171.html>
- Twin, A. (2024, March 26). The World's 10 Biggest Oil Exporters. Investopedia. Retrieved from: <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/company-insights/082316/worlds-top-10-oil-exporters.asp>
- Veselý, Z. (2018). *Diplomacie (Teorie - praxe - dějiny)*. 3. upravené a aktualizované vydání. Plzeň: Aleš Čeněk.
- Vila-López, N., Pascual-Riquelme, I., Küster-Boluda, I., & Aragonés-Jericó, C. (2024). Sports icons in nation branding the interplay of motivations, culture and country attachment. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 61, 316-327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2024.10.012>.
- Vonnard, P., & Marston, K. T. (2020). Playing Across the 'Halfway Line' on the Fields of International Relations: The Journey from Globalising Sport to Sport Diplomacy. *Contemporary European History*, 29(2), 220–231. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0960777319000407>
- Walker, A. (2023, February 7). The secret Saudi plan to buy the World Cup. *POLITICO*. Retrieved from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/qatar-fifa-world-cup-the-secret-saudi-plan-to-buy-the-cup/>
- Walker, A. (2024, July 18). The Olympics have always been political. *POLITICO*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/article/paris-summer-olympics-2024-politics-sports/>
- Walt, V. (2021, December 10). Saudi Arabia faces accusations of 'sportswashing.' For young Saudis, it's a chance to enjoy new freedoms. *Time*. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/6127539/saudi-arabia-jeddah-f1-sportswashing/>
- Wang, J. (2006). Public diplomacy and global business. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 27(3), 41–49. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02756660610663826>
- Wang, Z. (2024, August 29). Decoding Saudi Arabia's Gen Z, a generation on the ascent. *The Current*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecurrent.com/ctv-media-saudi-arabia-genz-generation-advertising>
- Weijermars, R., & Moeller, J. (2020). Saudi Aramco Privatization in Perspective: Financial analysis and future implications. *Journal of Finance and Economics*. 8(4), 161-170. <https://doi.org/10.12691/jfe-8-4-2>
- Westwood, J. (2022, December 22). Ronaldo ready to sign seven-year deal at Al-Nassr that includes RISE in €200m wages after 2024. *Goal.com*. Retrieved from: <https://www.goal.com/en/news/ronaldo-sign-seven-year-deal-al-nassr-rise-200m-wages-after-2024/blt7cad2419a902cac8>



WHO Data. (2025). *Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from: <https://data.who.int/countries/682>

Wright, C. (2023, January 6). Cristiano Ronaldo's social media power boosts Al Nassr Instagram to over 10m followers. *ESPN*. Retrieved from: [https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/\\_/id/38680916/cristiano-ronaldo-social-media-power-boosts-al-nassr-instagram-10m-followers](https://www.espn.com/soccer/story/_/id/38680916/cristiano-ronaldo-social-media-power-boosts-al-nassr-instagram-10m-followers)

YourDictionary Staff. (2021, February 11). *FIFA Country Abbreviations*. Retrieved from <https://www.yourdictionary.com/articles/fifa-country-abbreviations>

Zaharna, R. S. (2004). From Propaganda to Public Diplomacy in the Information Age. In Y. Kamalipour & N. Snow (Eds.), *War, Media and Propaganda: A Global Perspective* (pp. 219-225). New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Zidan, K. & Panja, T. (2023, June 18). Lionel Messi, Saudi Arabia and the Deal That Paid Off for Both Sides. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/18/sports/soccer/lionel-messi-saudi-arabia.html>

Zidan, K. (2022, January 5). Could 2022 be sportswashing's biggest year? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/jan/05/sportswashing-winter-olympics-world-cup>

## **Abstract**

Sports diplomacy is a topic that has recently become quite popular in the academic sphere. However, there are still particular cases when the research of sports diplomacy is insufficiently explored. This thesis is a qualitative case study, focusing on the topic of sports diplomacy in Saudi Arabia. The aim of the thesis is to identify main drivers behind Saudi Arabia's investment in sports, while also exploring mechanisms of sports diplomacy Saudi Arabia utilizes for enhancing for soft power. The thesis primarily focuses on the football industry by analyzing examples such as acquisition football stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo or investing in foreign football clubs such as Newcastle United FC. An important part is also the analysis of the concept of sportswashing, which is mainly associated with the GCC countries. The author analyzes the concept of sportswashing and focuses on whether Saudi Arabia's sports diplomacy can be considered sportswashing.

Key words: Sports diplomacy, Saudi Arabia, Sportswashing, Soft power, Football

## **Abstrakt**

Sportovní diplomacie je tématem, které je v akademické rovině stále více populární. I přes to však existují případy u kterých je tato rovina stále nedostatečně prozkoumaná. Tato diplomová práce se věnuje tématu sportovní diplomacii Saudské Arábie.

Jedná se o kvalitativní případovou studii, jejímž cílem je přiblížit, jaké faktory vedou Saudskou Arábii k investicím do sportu ale především přiblížit skrze jaké mechanismy sportovní diplomacie Saudská Arábie usiluje o soft power. Práce je zaměřena odvětví fotbalu, kterému se věnuje z hlediska kupování fotbalových hvězd jako je Cristiano Ronaldo či investic do zahraničních fotbalových klubů jako je Newcastle United FC. Důležitou součástí je také analýza konceptu sportswashingu, který je převážně spojován se zeměmi rady GCC. Autorka analyzuje concept sportswashingu a zaměřuje se také na to, zda sportovní diplomacii Saudské Arábie lze považovat za sportswashing.

**Klíčová slova:** Sportovní diplomacie, Saudská Arábie, Sportswashing, soft power, fotbal