

Saudi Arabia's Promotion of Sports is a Win, Win.

On January 15, Dalia Adel, a forward on Saudi Arabia's women's national soccer team scored a goal against Comoros during the maiden Women's International Friendly Tournament which was hosted by the kingdom. Her reaction was priceless. Upon confirming that the ball had gotten past the opposing team's goalkeeper, she covered her face with her hands, ran up the field, let out a scream and burst into tears as her teammates hugged her in the middle of the field. The stadium was perhaps only a third full and the match was not being broadcast to over a billion people around the world the way the men's World Cup soccer tournament had been just a few weeks prior. None of that mattered. Dalia and her teammates, who went on to win the tournament, were elated that they finally had an opportunity to pursue their dream; to play the sport they love and to proudly represent their country. That is one of several reasons why Saudi Arabia is investing in and promoting sports.

At a press conference in Riyadh also earlier this month announcing that Portuguese soccer superstar Cristiano Ronaldo had signed a contract with local team Al Nassr, the team issued a statement saying, "This is a signing that will not only inspire our club to achieve even greater success but inspire our league, our nation and future generations, boys and girls to be the best version of themselves."

For his part, Ronaldo added that he had "won everything" in Europe and that he was looking forward to this new challenge. His direct response suggested that he was likely aware of the supposed controversy surrounding his signing. Critics argue that he, or any athlete who participates in sporting events hosted in Saudi Arabia or that are sponsored by a Saudi entity is engaging in "sports washing". For those who are unfamiliar with the term, it is the notion that a country invests in its sports sector simply to detract from other issues or challenges. That could not be further from the truth.

As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, investing in and promoting the sports sector is a win, win (pun intended). For starters, sports, much like music and film have universal appeal. They transcend language, borders and politics. Playing a sport – in addition to being essential to good health – also improves the quality of life, so does attending a sporting event.

Making sure that Saudis and expatriates living in the kingdom have a wide selection of leisurely activities and enjoy a good quality of life is one of the main objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. Broadly speaking, the Vision, which was unveiled by HRH Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, is a wide array of economic and social reforms that is diversifying Saudi Arabia's economy, dramatically improving the delivery of government services and redefining the kingdom's place in the international community.

As the Vision was being devised, it became evident that one of the sectors that had tremendous yet largely untapped potential was entertainment, including sports. After all, Saudi Arabia's population just crossed thirty-five million, making it one of the biggest markets in the Middle East. Our population is also predominantly young, with some 70 percent being under the age of 35. While soccer has always been the most popular sport in the kingdom, Saudi youth of both genders have been flocking to attend events for sports they were previously unfamiliar with.

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Whether it was the Formula E race, the Dakar Rally, WrestleMania, golf or tennis championships, it is abundantly clear that Saudis relish the opportunity to see world-class athletes at the top of their game. The popularity of these events is not only evident by how quickly many of them sell out but also by the fact that thousands of young Saudis of both genders have begun competing with fellow athletes around the world, proudly carrying the Saudi flag. For example, thousands of young Saudi women and girls registered for training camps when the national women's soccer team was announced.

Just as importantly, sports has generated millions of Riyals to the Saudi economy and has created thousands of good-paying jobs, as it has in the United States and other countries for decades. The newfound interest in sports has resulted in thousands of Saudis looking to pursue careers as coaches, trainers, event promoters, agents, and a host of other jobs that are generated any time a sporting event is held.

The so-called "sports washing" charge also belies a troubling level of ethnocentricity that is seemingly lost on those making it. It suggests that Saudi Arabia is investing billions of dollars into sports simply to improve its image in the eyes of others –especially the Western world. The reality is that every policy, project or initiative that Saudi Arabia has implemented or pursued is done primarily to advance the interests of the kingdom or to improve the lives of Saudi people. That is not to say that the kingdom has not embraced the fact that it is part of an increasingly interconnected world. On the contrary, the kingdom is leading the Middle East and often the broader international community find solutions to the most pressing challenges of the day, many of which are global in nature. We have led to stabilize international energy markets, been at the forefront of the international community's effort to push back against militant groups and in its capacity as the president of the G20 group in 2020, Saudi Arabia played a central role in advancing collaborative efforts to mitigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, our main focus is on ensuring that our youths are empowered to compete with their counterparts around the world and that our economy is thriving and growing.

Ronaldo's joining of Al Nassr is one of many initiatives that has allowed Saudi Arabia to create an entertainment - and tourism - sectors from the ground up in a mere few years. We are seeking to attract the best of the best in their various fields so that they can inspire Saudi men and women as they lead this exciting stage in our development process forward. In other words, it is not about how others see us; it is about us.

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