

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Football recently has become a tool a diplomacy in IR by middle east countries and this kind of phenomenon has been gaining attention by the international community including by the people who have been part of the football industry. A lot of countries knew the potential of using sports for international influence is big which is not something new in IR as sports has been used as a tool of diplomacy multiple times before. International relations have benefited greatly from sports use as a forum for diplomacy, dispute settlement, cross – cultural dialogue, and maintaining national status while at the same time this complex effect dates back thousands of years and still shapes contemporary international relations.¹

It has long played a pivotal role in international relations, serving as a platform for diplomacy, conflict resolution and the projection of national prestige and example is how the ancient Olympic games in Greece. Where city – states would temporarily cease hostilities to compete, exemplify the potential of sports to foster peace and unity where everyone gets together and unified as a nation to compete in sports.² Other notable examples include the “Ping Pong Diplomacy” of the 1970s, where the table tennis matches between the United States and China helped ease tensions between the two countries and pave way for diplomatic relations and as a

¹ Trunkos, Judit, and Bobe Heere. “Sport Diplomacy: A review of How Sports Can Be Used to improve international Relationships.” 2017. Accessed July 4, 2024.

² Murray, Stuart, and Geoffrey Allen Pigman. “Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy.” *Sport in Society* 17, no. 9 (November 18, 2014): 10098-1118.

result of this exchange it improved relationships between the two countries which also led China open up to the world.³

The other example is India's Cricket Diplomacy which they used to each tension with their neighbor Pakistan with two of the countries play each other in a an official match. Which in this case, cricketers often act as informal diplomats with their interactions both on and off the field which help build positive perceptions and foster mutual respect and the sport serves as a form of soft power for India by promoting the sport and supporting cricketing infrastructure in other countries which could strengthen diplomatic ties with other countries.⁴ These were all examples on how sports has the potential as a tool of diplomacy as cultural and sports exchanges could be used to bridge political divides and foster international understanding.

This potential also exists in football or soccer as it is known in some regions and it is well known as the world's most popular sport with fans worldwide with billions of people around the world watching Football matches cheering for their teams.⁵ It became a huge industry with that huge number of viewership that could generate a huge amount of revenue, most notably the FIFA World Cup which generates huge amount of revenue every 4 years for FIFA and in Europe Football domestic leagues like the Premier League, La Liga, and other top European Leagues

³ Eckstein, Ruth. "Ping Pong Diplomacy: A View from behind the Scenes." *The Journal of American – East Asian Relations* 2, no.3 (1993): 327-342.

⁴ Showkat, Nayeem. "Cricket Diplomacy between India and Pakistan: A Case Study of Leading National Dailies of Both the countries (the Hindu & Dawn)." *Journal of Mass Communication & Journalism* 3, no. 1 (2013).

⁵ Dvorak, Jiri, Astrid Junge, Toni Graf-Baumann, and Lars Peterson. "Football is the Most Popular Sport Worldwide." *The American Journal of Sports Medicine* 32, no. 1 (Match 2004): 3-4.

boast massive global followings, with millions tuning in to watch matches weekly and this immense popularity is what makes football a powerful tool for international influence which allow nations to leverage the sport for political economic, and cultural gains.⁶

In today's modern world, football has spread around the world, and it has become an instrument for political and economic strategy and countries can use football to project soft power, enhance their international image, and foster economic ties, this includes investments in football clubs, sponsorship deals, and hosting major tournaments which are some of the ways nations engage with the sport to achieve these goals.⁷ The economic impact of football is huge and worth's a lot of money with a significant portion of which is driven by football – related activities, and this shows how huge the football industry is and with that huge amount of money could generate a huge amount of revenue that could also play a huge role in the country's economy.

Just as most governments in the world, the Saudi Arabian government have increasingly recognized the potential of sports including football to achieve broader geopolitical and economic objectives and they have invested in European football clubs, secured high – profile sponsorship deals, and bid to host major international tournaments.⁸ Saudi Arabia and alongside its neighbors such as Qatar and United Arab Emirates attracts a lot of attention as they invest in Football,

⁶ Bason, Tom, and Benoit Senaux. "The Football Industry." *Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks*, September 21, 2023, 7-28.

⁷ Rushworth, Kenn. "Football as a Weapon of Soft Power: The Beautiful Game hiding the Ugly Truth." *Political perspectives*, July 11, 2022.

⁸ Bianco, Cinzia, and Sebastian Sons. "More than a Game: Football and Soft Power in the Gulf." *International Spectator* 58, no. 2 (April 19, 2023): 1-15.

particularly in European clubs as their investments are huge as middle east countries have a huge amount of revenue from their wealth generated by the sale of Oil which is a huge commodity that these regimes depend on their economy while at the same time, the wealth generated from the sales of Oil have given them influence both domestic and abroad and this is why they were able to invest huge amount money in the football industry.⁹ With more than 70% of government revenue coming from oil exports, Saudi arabia's economy has been long characterized by its reliance on oil earnings.¹⁰ Although profitable this reliance makes the kingdom susceptible to changes in the price of oil globally as well as the long-term drop in demand for fossil fuels brought on by the worldwide energy shift.¹¹

The Saudi government responded by introducing Vision 2030, a thorough strategy to diversify the country's economy and lessen its dependency on oil.¹² Using international sports, especially football as vehicle for international influence, soft power, and economic expansion is a fundamental component of this strategy. Which is the reason why Saudi Arabia has been investing huge amount of money into sports in order to further their influence to pursue their national interest which is in line with their 2030 Vision which is a long-term project currently ongoing.¹³

⁹ Keating, Aileen. *Mirage: Power, Politics, and the Hidden History of Arabian Oil*. Prometheus Books, 2012.

¹⁰ International Monetary Fund. Middle East and Central Asia Dept. *Saudi Arabia: Selected Issues*. International Monetary Fund, 2022.

¹¹ International Energy Agency. "Slowing Demand Growth and Surging Supply Put Global Oil Markets on Course for Major Surplus This Decade." *IEA*, June 12, 2024.

¹² Dutton, Jack. "Saudi Arabia 'Conservative' on Oil Revenue as It Pares Back Vision 2030 Plans." *Al-Monitor: The Middle East's Leading Independent News Source since 2012*, May 14, 2024.

¹³ Roan, Dan. "Why is Saudi Arabia Spending so Much on Sport?" *BBC Sport*, December 14, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/67713269>.

They were aware that this sport could influence international relations and drive economic development, the Saudi Arabian government have made substantial investments in football, seeking to diversify their economies away from oil. While at the same time use the sport to enhance their global standing and promote cultural exchange and these investments invite academic curiosity and analysis, given their scale and impact on the global sports landscape.¹⁴ Which is why in this case the kingdom foster the sport's potential for their own benefit to fulfill their geopolitical goals and national interests.

For instances, Saudi Arabia's recent acquisition of Newcastle United are part of broader strategies to use football as tool for international influence and domestic development. These investments have caught a lot of people's attention as they improved the performance of the clubs by investing in their training centers and purchasing new players to join the team, and this allows the club to increase their fanbase and increase fan loyalty as football fans tend to focus more on the results in the pitch instead of the political aspect of the investment.¹⁵ However these initiatives that are being implemented by Saudi Arabia did not receive praises from everyone, as there are several critics who accuse the Saudi royal regime of carrying out the practice of sports washing in order to cover up the dark secrets and negative

¹⁴ Carosella, Vitas. *Football as Soft Power: The Political Use of Football in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. November 2022.

¹⁵ Taylor, Tom, Daniel Burdsey, and Nigel Jarvis. "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, no. 2 (April 27, 2023): 1-17.

practices that these ruling regimes by using sports to distract the public from the human rights abuses conducted by their ruling governments.¹⁶

However, despite its critics, these investments still receive praises from the from its critics towards the initiative that are being carried out by the ruling royal family of Saudi Arabia, their influence in football is still visible and their recipients are benefiting from their investment, including resulted with Newcastle United's fanbase increasing slowly and improved Saudi's image among their fanbase. That part is still understandable considering that most of them were not particularly aware or bother to care about the political implications of these investments, and their investments are technically legal as there are no rules that could bar foreigners from investing football leagues because doing so will violate the principles of the free market as the football industry itself in the rich leagues like the Premier League are open to any investment from any country as long as it benefits the game in the pitch.

The main point of this analysis will explore how the ruling royal government of Saudi Arabia use football investments to enhance their international influence, drive economic diversification, and achieve broader geopolitical goals. By examining the scale and impact of their investments, we can better understand the strategic role of sports in the political economy of Saudi Arabia and how the state benefits from their initiatives not just in the point of economic leverage over these investments but also image branding of the state in order to assert their soft power. On the other hand, this thesis highly emphasize that the football industry is changing

¹⁶ Grix, Jonathan, Adam Dinsmore, and Paul Michael Brannagan. "Unpacking the Politics of 'Sportswashing': It takes Two to Tango." *Politics*. November 9, 2023.

with the influence of governments with huge amount of wealth are looking forward to profit from it. While at the same time looking forward to improving their image abroad in order to improve their reputation and this should also be a wakeup up call for other governments and civil societies to act and pay attention to how sports especially in football could be used to cover up human rights violations that are conducted by authoritarian regimes and its political implications in international relations, therefore this thesis takes upon the title “*The Influence of Saudi Arabia Through Football Investments*”,

1.2 Research Question

Based on the research of the analysis of this thesis, there are two main issues that are needed to be focused upon over the phenomenon where the football investments are growing even more significant in the global stage. This research will identify the implications of how the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia not just how it benefits them but also how it affected other countries including the countries that are the main recipient of their investments. This analysis covers two research questions into the following:

1. What are the forms of Investments conducted by Saudi Arabia in Football?
2. How does the Saudi Government used football industry as a political instrument?

1.3 Research Objective

1. To Identify the forms of Saudi Arabian Investments.
2. To comprehend how the football industry used or utilize as political tools.

1.4 Research Significance

1. This research will help socialize how sports could be a political tool and also its implications and complexity in IR, especially as the research analyzes how Saudi Arabia were able to use football investments provides insights into their broader geopolitical strategies and allows readers to explore how states utilize soft power, economic leverage, and cultural diplomacy through sports to enhance their global influence.
2. This research could also help give an insight how readers could learn how not to only analyze sports washing but also raise awareness to help keep the football industry safe from interest groups that could use it to benefit themselves and it could also inform policymakers, businesses, and international organizations about the strategic implications of sports investments while at the same time providing actionable insights into how countries can leverage sports as a tool for their national development and relations with other countries.

1.5 Research Structure

The research in this thesis was structured and divided into five chapters, each designed to build upon the preceding one, offering a cohesive analysis of Saudi Arabia's football investments and how it influenced international relations. As the introduction, the first chapter gives the study's background information and it describes the importance of football as a diplomatic tool and a source of influence in international relations, emphasizing Saudi Arabia's strategic investments in

particular, while at the same time explaining how effective sports could be as a diplomatic tool. The chapter also includes the research questions and objectives, while at the same time offering the significance of this research and how it could give an insight to readers of how sports could be used as a political tool with the hopes raising more awareness to readers.

The second chapter covers the theoretical foundation in detail, which starts with an extensive literature review that looks at the use of football as a tool for soft power, the financial benefits of football investments, and the social and political ramifications of these kinds of endeavors. The next section of this chapter presents the theory of realism as the study's guiding theoretical framework in order, in order to comprehend Saudi Arabia's goals, plans, and motives for investing in football, the Realist viewpoint is utilized in order to analyze the actions that are carried out by the Saudi Arabian government through these investments. Important terms like power projections, national interest, and soft power are defined in this chapter as well and these definitions are essential for understanding the kingdom's actions in the international football scene.

The third chapter outlines the research methodology used to conduct the study on how all of the information used in this research is collected and analyzed to support this thesis. The chapter provides specifics on the qualitative research methodology, which is necessary to investigate the intricate and varied aspects of Saudi Arabia's football investments, and the research techniques used to collect and analyze data are covered in this chapter, including document and content analysis. The methods for gathering data are described, emphasizing the importance of using

both primary and secondary sources to have a thorough grasp of Saudi Arabia's approach. This chapter concludes with a discussion of data analysis methods, particularly thematic analysis, which aids in locating and interpreting the major themes associated with Saudi Arabia's application of football as a geopolitical tool.

The fourth chapter is the analysis, which presents a thorough examination of the discussion and results of the entire analysis of the research conducted in this thesis. This chapter looks at the ways in which Saudi Arabia's football investments conform to realism's tenets, especially with regard to national interest and power projection, and it looks at the results of these investments on a national and worldwide level and talks about how they affect Saudi Arabia's standing in the world and compare how they conduct it with other countries when appropriate or needed. With the use of this study, the fourth chapter shows how the kingdom effectively employs football to further its wider geopolitical objectives and bolster its soft power all around the globe.

The fifth and last chapter are the conclusions and recommendations, which summarizes the main conclusions drawn from the research to bring the thesis to a close. This final chapter offers suggestions for further study and policy concerns as well as ponders the larger effects of Saudi Arabia's football spending on international relations and it highlights how crucial it is to comprehend these investments in the context of the realist paradigm since they provide a distinctive viewpoint on how nations might use unconventional methods to further their strategic goals. This chapter also offers directions for future research, especially in figuring out how these investments will affect Saudi Arabia's standing abroad in

the long run and how international sports diplomacy operates, in summary this chapter is a closure of the entire thesis.

