

Policy Report

Special Issue

*Young Leaders' Perspectives on Potentials and
Prospects for Saudi-German Cooperation*

No. 3

Preparing for the World Cup 2034: Seizing the potential for closer cooperation in football between Saudi Arabia and Germany

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Seizing the potential for closer cooperation in football between Saudi Arabia and Germany

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Introduction

Germany hosted the football European Championship 2024, and Saudi Arabia, as the only bidding nation, is set to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup ten years later. Football is by far the most popular sport in both countries, rooted in historical milestones. The emergence of the first football records in Saudi Arabia goes back to the early 1920s, when Indonesian students from the Islamic school in Mecca were allowed to play once a week, with players from Saudi Arabia and other countries joining.¹ Established in 1927, Al-Ittihad Football Club of Jeddah was the first team to play football in the Kingdom.² In Germany, two schoolteachers, August Hermann and Konrad Koch, introduced the game in circa 1874.³ There are indeed fascinating similarities between both states' long relationship with football.

To that end, this paper will elaborate on domestic development plans and policies concerning significant football events in both countries. EURO 2024 and the 2034 FIFA World Cup hold immense potential to drive advancements in men's and women's football, fandom, and volunteerism, and could promote enhanced cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Germany. These world-class events can serve as catalysts for football development, fostering opportunities for both societies to establish closer networks on a personal and institutional level, practicing together physically and engaging in administrative collaboration. The increased visibility of football through those events can stimulate aspiring athletes and leaders in both societies while challenging social and cultural stereotypes that each holds about the other.

This policy paper thus intends to provide suggestions for collaboration and learning opportunities through football by focusing on professional men's football, the promotion of women's football, fandom, volunteerism, and health as concrete fields of cooperative action between Germany and Saudi Arabia. The paper sheds light on those aspects because they encapsulate diverse cultural and societal issues. Accordingly, it will discuss the mentioned aspects sequentially, beginning with addressing the men's and women's football scenes in Germany and Saudi Arabia, followed by discussing fandom and spectator culture in both countries. Volunteerism and health promotion through football are the third and fourth areas that the paper will highlight. After discussing the four aspects, the paper ends with a set of

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recommendations for Saudi Arabia and Germany to deepen football- and sport-based cooperation between the two countries.

Domestic Developments in Professional Men's Football in Germany and Saudi Arabia

Germany has long been recognised as a global leader in professional men's football, known for its well-developed infrastructure and successful national team. However, since winning the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the men's national team has struggled, exiting at the group stage of the last two World Cups. As a result, the German Football Association (DFB) has sought to reform the talent development system in order to systematically develop a greater number of potential stars. Recent reforms in Germany have primarily focused on talent development, especially in youth structures, such as the establishment of the Funiño children's football reform⁴ and Youth leagues of the German Football Association.⁵ The latter leagues aim to provide all football academies a starting spot and emphasise winning knockout matches to secure the league title rather than prioritising relegation matches. Meanwhile, the regulations ensure that each player gets an equal opportunity, in terms of playing time. Critical voices argue that the talent development stream and football academy pathway do not focus enough on developing players' profiles, strengthening leadership skills, and establishing coping mechanisms under pressure.⁶

Guided by Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has also undergone significant policy reforms in its professional football landscape, particularly in the Saudi Pro league. Vision 2030 aims to put Saudi Arabia in a better regional and global position by socially and economically transforming the Kingdom. To do so, Vision 2030 has focused on sports and entertainment projects.⁷ Those two areas are predominant in a young nation and society where 63 percent of the population is under the age of 30.⁸ Thus, the Kingdom initiated a comprehensive revamp in its football sector to enhance competitiveness and facilitate the integration of international players. This has garnered global recognition for Saudi Arabian football, especially following their FIFA World Cup victory against Argentina in Qatar in 2022, which gained considerable media attention and constituted a massive confidence boost for Saudi ambition in the world of football.

Moreover, two months after the win against Argentina, the Riyadh-based club Al-Nassr announced the signing of renowned footballer Cristiano Ronaldo. This move, along with subsequent signings of high-profile players such as Karim Benzema, Neymar Junior, and Sadio Mané, has brought increased media attention to the Saudi Roshn League and highlighted its potential to develop into a leading global football league. Those investments were led by the Public Investment Fund (PIF), Saudi Arabia's largest sovereign wealth fund, which the Kingdom uses primarily in its domestic and global projects and policies to realise Vision 2030 targets and rebrand the country.⁹ In 2023, the PIF acquired 75 percent of the big four clubs in the country: Al-Ahly and Al-Ittihad from Jeddah, and Al-Nassr and Al-Hilal from Riyadh. The four clubs are divided between the biggest two cities in the country, Riyadh and Jeddah, which is a testament to the centralisation of football in Saudi Arabia. This influx of investments in the league has attracted critical voices in Germany and the West, generally claiming sportswashing while acknowledging the league's potential to attract established and emerging players.¹⁰

In January 2024, the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) made changes to its registration rules. The new rules reduce the number of players in the first team roster to 25, with each club allowed to register ten non-Saudi players.¹¹ Of the ten non-Saudi players, two must be born in 2003 or later, encouraging Saudi clubs to invest in young talent from abroad. This focus on younger players is a crucial step towards building a foundation for promising footballers to spend their entire careers in Saudi Arabia, thus strengthening the league in the long term. Additionally, clubs are encouraged to register one

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professional player born in Saudi Arabia after 1997. Though these reforms strengthen the Saudi Roshn League as a whole, their effect on the development of home-grown talent is more ambiguous. The focus on attracting foreign prospects and stars reduces opportunities for Saudi players to break into first-team rosters domestically, which in light of the dearth of Saudi footballers playing abroad means that opportunities to gain experience in professional leagues are limited for nationals of the Kingdom.

After comparing the men's professional football scenes in Germany and Saudi Arabia, it is evident that both countries have created thriving environments for the sport. Their national football competitions attract both domestic and international talent, offering exciting potential for collaboration between the two nations. While the presence of international football stars is impressive, it is crucial not to overlook the potential of domestic players. Therefore, sharing ideas and best practices for talent development is of paramount importance for nurturing aspiring talents in both Saudi Arabia and Germany. One potential area for cooperation could be investment in football academies, which could serve as a focal point for collaboration. Additionally, ensuring the involvement of domestic talents can be achieved by mandating the registration of a significant number of homegrown footballers.

Domestic Developments in Professional Women's Football in Germany and Saudi Arabia

Germany's women's national football team has enjoyed considerable success in international competition. They have won the UEFA Women's European Championship a record eight times and the FIFA Women's World Cup twice. The team is renowned for its strong performances, talented players, and for promoting the prominence of women's football in Germany. The German national team is considered one of the powerhouses of the women's game and continues to be a top contender at major tournaments. The team made it to the final of the 2022 European Championship, a tournament that provoked a significant shift in both media coverage and popular support for women's football in Germany. The thrilling final captured the attention of fans across the country, resulting in increased media coverage and support for the team, which boosted attendance at matches and the team's fan base. The team's success in major tournaments has also helped to raise the profile of women's football in Germany, inspiring more girls and women to participate in the sport and positively impacting the overall growth and development of women's football in the country.

The DFB has taken proactive measures to address gender disparity by encouraging women's football and improving support structures for female athletes. Notably, the DFB has championed the cause of Equal Pay, ensuring that female players receive fair and equitable compensation commensurate with their male counterparts. Additionally, sports scientific research initiatives undertaken by the DFB systematically include women in samples, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of women-related data. Addressing specific needs, the association has introduced menstrual-adequate sportswear and tailored training loads, acknowledging and accommodating the physiological differences between male and female athletes. However, challenges persist, notably the scarcity of female coaches in professional women's football in Germany, a factor that the DFB continues to work on to promote greater diversity and representation in coaching roles. Moreover, while women's football may receive comparatively less media attention than its male counterpart, investments and initiatives mirror the strides seen in the men's league, signifying a parallel commitment to fostering women's football.

In Saudi Arabia, a revolution in women's sports occurred in 2017, when the country granted women the right to establish women's clubs. This decision contributed to the creation of a women's football scene. Enhancing women's sports activities comes in line with the goals of Vision 2030, which aim to raise the rate of sports practice in society to one million Saudi athletes over the next 15 years, and to launch 900

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registered amateur clubs that offer various activities.¹² Accordingly, in the last seven years, a massive transformation in Saudi women's football took place, starting with women being allowed to attend football matches in 2017. Two years later, the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) organised a women's football tournament and, most importantly, officially launched the Saudi Women's Football League with teams from Dammam, Jeddah and Riyadh. Since the women's football department's establishment at SAFF in 2019, it has accommodated 450 players, 49 qualified referees, over 900 licensed coaches, and a FIFA-ranked women's national team.¹³ The 2022 establishment of the Saudi Women's Premier League has also been a pivotal step. The league has concluded strategic partnerships with media entities that aim to elevate the visibility and reach of women's football in Saudi Arabia.

Women's football is another area where Germany and Saudi Arabia can cooperate to energise the participation of female talents, not only as players but also as administrators, coaches, and recruiters. Women's football is growing globally, which opens up an area of competition and collaboration. Germany has a strong legacy in this field. Saudi Arabia might be a newcomer; however, as the discussion shows, the Kingdom is serious in its efforts to enhance women's sports and football precisely. An area that both countries can work on is to increase the number of spectators and commercial revenues in women's football, which in turn can be used to strengthen the development of the sport and offer new investment opportunities.

Fandom in Saudi Arabia and Germany

Fandom encompasses a passionate community of individuals who support their favourite teams, players and the sport as a whole, creating a vibrant culture of loyalty and enthusiasm. In both Saudi Arabia and Germany, fandom is deeply rooted in longstanding football cultures. In Saudi Arabia, the biggest football clubs find their roots deep within the bustling cities of Riyadh and Jeddah, creating a significant gravitational pull for local supporters. This centralisation often translates to a notable variance in attendance between clubs hailing from urban centres and those representing rural areas. Similar to those of their German counterparts, furthermore, the legacies of football clubs in Saudi Arabia extend far beyond the country's borders. Historically, fans of the big four – Al Ittihad, Al-Ahli, Al-Hilal, and Al-Nassr – can be found across the Arabian Peninsula. Chants of Saudi clubs are sung in the UAE, Yemen, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the rest of the Gulf. Moreover, with the current investments in football, highlighted by the signing of world-renowned stars like Ronaldo, Neymar, and Benzema, Saudi clubs have achieved a significant following across the Middle East.

In contrast to the centralisation that characterises the Saudi professional football landscape, fandom in Germany is widespread across different regions and cities within the country. While iconic clubs, such as FC Bayern München and Hamburger SV, are based in major cities, the landscape includes diverse fan communities in rural areas and small towns from Kaiserslautern to Cottbus, contributing to a more dispersed and expansive fan culture. Furthermore, the past has shown the ability of German fan communities to pressure clubs and associations on controversial issues, such as the DFL's plans to accept a private investor to purchase clubs.¹⁴ Similarly, in the run-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, a political initiative called 'Boycott Qatar' was launched by several European fan groups, highlighting the political stance of some German fan initiatives in support of human rights, particularly for marginalised groups, including LGBTIQ+, women, and migrant workers.¹⁵

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Football stadiums in Saudi Arabia can be seen as one of the biggest gathering venues in the country. Historically, football stadiums were considered the only entertainment outlet during the four-decade period between the 1970s and 2017, known as the religious *Sahwa*, when cinemas, concerts, and other events related to arts and entertainment were banned. During this era, women were not allowed to attend football matches. Nevertheless, stadiums offered a sense of solidarity and togetherness for male Saudi football fans, constituting a space of expression for all social classes in the country, especially at the height of state enforcement of *Sahwa*. In the present day, football stadiums have become a place of gathering and cultural expression for both men and women. Moreover, the state has taken an active role in supporting football fan culture, exemplified by the planned implementation of the 'Saudi Football Roads' initiative by Saudi Arabia's Music Authority. Through this project, 20 documentaries will be produced that tell the history of the Kingdom's sports clubs from the perspective of their football chants and anthems.¹⁶ In preparation for producing these films, the Authority selected 20 football clubs in Saudi Arabia, covering more than 97 percent of football audiences in Saudi Arabia.

Despite the differences in the spatial concentration of fan support between Saudi Arabia and Germany, citizens of both nations exhibit fervent allegiance to their respective clubs, fostering vibrant and dedicated football communities. Fandom in Saudi Arabia and Germany is intricately intertwined with the anticipation and significance of sporting mega-events like the UEFA EURO 2024 in Germany and the upcoming FIFA World Cup 2034 in Saudi Arabia. These events serve as monumental occasions that unite entire nations, fuelling immense excitement and fervour among football enthusiasts. In Germany, hosting the UEFA EURO 2024 was a celebration of football and a chance for fans across the country to converge, amplifying their collective passion and fostering a sense of national unity. Though the extent to which the tournament actually contributed to national unity remains ambiguous and hard to measure, Germans generally point to the 2006 World Cup, known as Germany's *Sommernmärchen* (summer fairy tale), as a home tournament that bolstered a feeling of togetherness and pride across the country.¹⁷ Similarly, for Saudi Arabia, the upcoming FIFA World Cup 2034 signifies a pivotal moment, providing a unique platform to highlight the country's footballing prowess on the global stage and ignite the spirit of fandom nationwide. These mega-events serve as catalysts, not just for the sport itself but for the unification of diverse fanbases, creating lasting memories and strengthening the fabric of football culture in both nations.

The football fandom in Germany and Saudi Arabia boasts a remarkably intricate and multi-faceted narrative that extends beyond the realm of sports. It encompasses a rich tapestry of social, economic, and cultural components that warrant comprehensive exploration. Despite the divergent social and cultural landscapes of these two nations, it is evident that football stadiums transcend their roles as mere venues; they serve as vital cultural spaces that reflect profound social and cultural dynamics in both countries. Moreover, the widespread appeal of football clubs from both nations domestically and internationally is a testament to their global significance. German football clubs are celebrated not only within Germany but also on a global scale, while Saudi football clubs have garnered widespread

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popularity at home and across the Middle East. With ongoing investments, this popularity has now transcended borders, reaching a truly global audience.

Volunteerism in Saudi Arabia and Germany

Volunteers play a crucial role in any major sporting event, acting as the welcoming face and backbone of its organisation. Their dedication, enthusiasm, and commitment contribute significantly to the success of matches and competitions.

The volunteer programme 'Football is so diverse' is a lighthouse project affiliated with UEFA EURO 2024, aimed at ensuring that the volunteers involved in the event reflect the social diversity of Germany.¹⁸ Irrespective of age, origin, religion, gender, sexual identity, or abilities, the programme seeks to set inclusiveness standards by incorporating a wide range of individuals. By fostering social inclusion in the Volunteers Programme, UEFA EURO 2024 promotes diversity and sends a powerful message of unity and acceptance. It creates an atmosphere that welcomes people from all backgrounds, ensuring that everyone feels valued and represented. Through embracing diversity, this initiative creates an enriching experience for all involved.

In Saudi Arabia, the increase in the number of sports events taking place across the country and the Gulf Cooperation Council more broadly has precipitated a noticeable rise in the prevalence of volunteers.¹⁹ The Saudi Ministry of Sports announced the participation of more than 500 volunteers in the Qatar World Cup 2022. Those steps create a volunteering culture in Saudi sporting events, especially football.²⁰ These volunteers are drawn by various incentives, including cultural capital, networking opportunities, and the acquisition of certificates or skills, which serve as significant motivators for their participation.

Despite this growing trend, there remains a need to foster and promote a more present culture of volunteerism in Saudi Arabia's sporting landscape, especially for sporting mega-events, such as the potential FIFA World Cup in 2034. Encouraging sustained and widespread community engagement in sports volunteerism is essential, particularly for ensuring long-term grassroots development. By emphasising the broader societal benefits and fostering a sense of ownership and pride in community sports initiatives, Saudi Arabia can encourage a more comprehensive and enduring involvement of volunteers at all levels of sports, thereby creating a solid foundation for sustainable grassroots development. A significant development to enhance volunteering in sports events in Saudi Arabia is the initiatives undertaken by the Saudi University Sports Federation. Students can obtain ECTS credits towards their university diploma by volunteering during sports events organised by their university and the Saudi University Sport Federation (SUSF). In return, the university obtains points for each volunteer that is recruited, resulting in additional SUSF funding.²¹ This incentive model further activates volunteer recruitment in sport among students.

Health promotion

In line with the World Health Organization (WHO)'s holistic perspective on health, the DFB and the SAFF recognise health as a state encompassing physical, mental, and social well-being. As such, the DFB utilised the UEFA EURO 2024 as a platform to advertise a healthy lifestyle. The 'Fit at UEFA EURO 2024' initiative included three central fields of action: Firstly, all stadiums involved in the tournament were designated as tobacco-free zones, creating a healthier and smoke-free environment for both players and spectators. Secondly, the DFB introduced alternative food and beverage offerings within the stadiums,

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providing healthier options for attendees. This initiative reflects the importance of promoting balanced and nutritious choices to support overall well-being. In line with the DFB's emphasis on health promotion and tobacco-free stadiums, the DFB may also consider establishing alcohol-free stadiums, taking inspiration from stadiums in Saudi Arabia, where matches are characterised by a peaceful and respectful atmosphere.

For its part, Saudi Arabia has made significant strides in improving the health status of its population by implementing numerous initiatives to address public health concerns. A particular focus has been placed on combatting obesity and promoting physical activity. According to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics, the obesity rate in Saudi Arabia has doubled in the past decade, with almost 24 percent of the population now classified as obese.²² This alarming statistic has caught the attention of Saudi policymakers, who have taken proactive steps to address this health issue head-on. Recognising the importance of physical activity in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, Saudi Arabia has developed a comprehensive strategy to promote exercise and outdoor activities as part of Vision 2030's 'Quality of Life' programme. This initiative includes community sport groups under the entity 'Sport for All'.²³

Recommendations

The policies in professional football in Germany and Saudi Arabia constantly evolve, reflecting both countries' aspirations to excel globally. Germany and Saudi Arabia's focus on professional men's and women's football, fandom, and volunteerism underscores their commitment to fostering holistic and inclusive sports environments. By sharing experiences and learning from each other's strengths, Germany and Saudi Arabia can further enhance their respective football landscapes, contributing to the development of the sport globally. Specifically, implementing the following recommendations would help Saudi Arabia and Germany capitalise on the significant potential associated with deeper cooperation between the two countries in the area of football. The initiatives we suggest are flexible and broad. They can be realised not only by the DFB and SAFF but also through the countries' respective Olympic Committees and educational sectors, including schools and universities. Generally, these initiatives should be funded by both governments, and the private sector could also contribute by financing the projects in exchange for significant financial benefits, such as increased visibility and potential business opportunities.

Connecting footballing cultures through tangible experiences

1. Implementing cultural exchange initiatives that centre around football, aiming to enhance mutual understanding between Germany and Saudi Arabia and appreciation for each country's respective football heritage and traditions. These programmes should take a holistic focus, encompassing the social, health, and economic spheres, and should actively engage youth and women to encourage diversity and inclusivity. Possible stakeholders include NGOs, as well as academic and educational institutions.
2. Developing joint youth development initiatives featuring the coordination of joint training camps, coaching seminars, and talent exchange programmes. We believe that the youth population plays a crucial role in driving social change. The goal is to cultivate and support young footballing talents while also exchanging cutting-edge coaching methodologies. Potential participants include youth organisations, academic and educational institutions, youth teams and clubs, and young coaches.

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Institutionalising partnerships between clubs to develop collaborations further

1. Organising regular friendly matches and exchange programmes between clubs from Germany and Saudi Arabia facilitates a deeper understanding of each other's playing styles, techniques, and strategies. Such club-level exchanges occasionally take place between Saudi and German clubs, but are often short-term and individually initiated. However, we believe that these collaborations should be expanded and institutionalised, for instance through organising short tournaments between popular professional clubs and smaller, promising clubs from Saudi Arabia and Germany during the annual winter break of the German Bundesliga. In both countries, the domestic football landscape is changing to include aspiring clubs looking to expand their domestic and global presence. Involving these clubs can ensure the sustainability, continuity, and inclusiveness of this initiative. In turn, this could foster a deeper bond and mutual understanding between the professional and amateur football communities in Saudi Arabia and Germany, as well as their fan communities, transcending the realm of football.

Establishing partnerships to foster institutional development of women's football and public-health promotion

1. Creating a long-term strategic partnership focused on developing women's football could involve sharing coaching methods, organising joint training camps, and hosting tournaments. These activities have the potential to significantly enhance the growth and exposure of women's football in both countries.
2. The popularity and influence of football can also be leveraged to bolster collaborative efforts and advance health and wellness in both countries. This can involve joint community outreach programmes, impactful campaigns advocating for active lifestyles, and educational initiatives emphasising the numerous health benefits associated with the sport. Such endeavours have the potential to significantly improve public health in both nations.

By fostering deeper collaboration through applying these recommendations, Germany and Saudi Arabia have the potential to build a robust foundation for a mutually advantageous partnership in football development. This will not only enhance their own football landscapes but also have a positive impact on the global football community.

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Imprint

Published by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2024,
Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany

This publication was published with financial support of
the Federal Republic of Germany.

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