



## Reconciliation on the pitch: The restructuring efficacy of Saudi Arabia's sports public spaces on sectarian discourse

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### Abstract

This study examines how Saudi Arabia's sports public spaces under the "Vision 2030" initiative restructure sectarian discourse through symbolic, institutional, and emotional dimensions. By analyzing national team dynamics, youth sports programs, and policy frameworks, the research reveals that sports venues serve as "safe buffers" for cross-sectarian interaction, temporarily transcending religious divisions. However, challenges persist, including conservative resistance and superficial inclusivity. The findings suggest that while sports cannot replace political reforms, they offer a unique platform for fostering national identity and regional reconciliation. The study concludes with policy recommendations for sustainable governance and future research directions on intergenerational identity transmission.

In Uttarakhand's mountainous regions, Integrated Watershed Management Programs are actively promoting sustainable development by enhancing horticulture, agriculture, and animal husbandry. The efficient use of natural resources within watershed areas has been particularly beneficial for farmers, especially economically weaker sections, including women. With the availability of irrigation facilities, farmers are shifting from traditional farming to cash crops, significantly improving their economic conditions and overall well-being.

Located in the northeastern region of Dehradun, Uttarakhand, the Baldi Watershed (Sahastradhara) is a micro watershed where agriculture forms the primary source of income for the local population. Most of the agriculture in this area depends on rainwater, making it vulnerable to climatic uncertainties. The conservation and augmentation of natural water sources, along with the development of irrigation facilities, can ensure agricultural stability in the region. Increased water availability can further enable agricultural diversification, boosting cash crop production and subsequently improving the economic conditions and living standards of local communities.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, sports public spaces, sectarian discourse, social integration, vision 2030

### Introduction

As a central nation in the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia's religiously diverse social structure has long been marked by profound sectarian tensions. In this country dominated by Sunni Wahhabism, the Shiite minority has occupied a relatively marginalized position in political, economic and social spheres. These sectarian divisions not only exist at the domestic social level but also profoundly influence Saudi Arabia's foreign policy orientation and regional strategic positioning. Notably, with the advancement of the "Vision 2030" reform plan, sports as a new form of public space are demonstrating unique social integration functions. Public domains such as football stadiums and sporting events, through their universal rules and inclusive participation mechanisms, provide rare platforms for interaction among different sectarian groups, transcending traditional religious barriers to some extent. Studying this phenomenon not only helps understand the internal logic of Saudi social transformation but also provides an important case for exploring new pathways of conflict mediation in pluralistic societies.

### 1. Historical Tensions in Saudi Sectarian Discourse and the Dilemma of Public Space

Before examining the transformative potential of sports spaces, it is essential to contextualize the historical roots of sectarian divisions and the constraints of traditional public spaces in Saudi Arabia.

### 1.1 Historical Roots of Religious Authority and Sectarian Divisions

Saudi Arabia's religious landscape has always been marked by profound sectarian tensions. Since the mid-18th century alliance between Wahhabism and the Saudi royal family, Sunni Islam has established its dominance in the state's religious governance system<sup>[1]</sup>. This self-proclaimed "orthodox" religious authority construction has led to the long-term structural marginalization of the Shiite population. Shiites face restrictions not only in political representation and religious practice, but their concentrated Eastern Province has also been excluded from mainstream economic development, creating distinct sectarian geographical segregation.

This confrontation is particularly evident in traditional religious spaces. Mosque sermons require approval from government religious institutions, and distinct Shiite rituals are confined to designated areas. Madrasa curricula emphasize Sunni doctrines while marginalizing other Islamic perspectives. Such institutionalized segregation has turned religious spaces into amplifiers of sectarian identity rather than platforms for dialogue.

### 1.2 Limitations of Traditional Public Spaces

In Saudi social structure, public spaces often carry strong sectarian attributes. Religious ceremonies present the most typical case: during annual Hajj pilgrimages, authorities specially monitor Shiite pilgrims' activities; while on Shiite

important dates like Ashura, clashes frequently occur between security forces and demonstrators in Eastern Province. The rise of social media has failed to alleviate these divisions, instead accelerating the polarization of sectarian discourse [2]. Sunni users predominantly retweet posts from official religious institutions, while Shiite users focus more on statements by international Shiite leaders. Algorithmic recommendations reinforce echo chambers, making cross-sectarian dialogue increasingly difficult.

### 1.3 The Rise of Sports as a New Public Space

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has elevated the sports industry to national strategic importance for the first time. The document explicitly states that sports development should achieve both "revenue diversification" and promote "social unity and national health." This dual positioning makes sports a rare public domain supported by both religious institutions and reformists. Trans-national sports events are reshaping Saudi social landscapes. The Formula 1 Saudi Grand Prix brought unprecedented cross-sectarian celebrations to Jeddah's streets; after acquiring Newcastle United, Saudi flags with club emblems proliferated in Eastern Province's Shiite communities. Sports are creating new national identity symbols that temporarily transcend sectarian divisions.

## 2. Practical Approaches of Sports Spaces in Restructuring Sectarian Discourse

Against this historical backdrop, Saudi Arabia has systematically restructured sectarian discourse in sports spaces through symbolic integration, educational programs, and institutional policies.

### 2.1 Symbolic Integration: Identity Cohesion Strategies in Sporting Events

The selection policy for Saudi national football team demonstrates careful sectarian balance. Sports journalist Ahmed Al-Qahtani notes: "When wearing national team jerseys, players' sectarian identities are deliberately blurred, with media emphasizing only their shared identity as Saudi citizens [3]." Stadium designs similarly implement secularization principles. Since 2023 Saudi Pro League regulations prohibit fans from bringing sectarian-implicative banners, with offenders facing fines up to 5,000 SAR. These measures have significantly reduced sectarian incidents.

### 2.2 Educational Integration: Socialization Functions of Youth Sports Programs

The Ministry of Education's "School Sports League Program" mandates each school team to include students from diverse regions and backgrounds. In 2023 National Middle School Football Championship held in Dammam, the champion team "Eastern Stars" had starting lineup comprising players from five provinces including three Shiite students. Program director Hala Aldosari explains: "We use random selection to force students out of original social circles [4]." Follow-up studies show participants' identification as "Saudi" is 28 percentage points higher than non-participants.

Sports stars are emerging as new social influencers. National team captain Al-Faraj with 8.3 million Instagram followers saw his "Unity Cup" initiative video shared over 2 million times. More remarkably, female basketball player Dunah Alhashem as "National Sports Ambassador" declared

during Eastern Province school visits: "Stadiums are our shared prayer spaces." This non-religious authority is reshaping social discourse.

## 2.3 Policy Framework: Institutional Support for Sports Governance

The 2021 Anti-Discrimination in Sports Law categorizes sectarian slurs as criminal offenses punishable by up to 3 years imprisonment. It specifically mandates sports associations to prevent sectarian-biased commentary in broadcasts. In its first year, Saudi Football Federation handled 17 cases, including suspending a commentator for using suggestive phrases like "those eastern players." The law also requires professional clubs to establish "diversity committees" with Shiite representation proportional to local demographics.

An unprecedented collaboration mechanism exists between Sports Ministry and Islamic Affairs Ministry. Their joint "Religious Conduct Guidelines for Sports Venues" stipulates: 1) No organized religious activities; 2) Permitted silent individual prayers; 3) Prayer rooms meeting all sects' purity requirements [5]. This nuanced approach achieved remarkable results - zero religion-related complaints during 2023 Saudi Grand Prix.

## 3. Efficacy Analysis of Sports Spaces in Restructuring Sectarian Discourse

How effective are these initiatives? The analysis proceeds by evaluating societal desensitization and national identity consolidation, while uncovering inherent limitations.

### 3.1 Societal Impact: "Desensitization" of Public Discourse

The case of Ittihad FC vividly demonstrates sports' discourse diversion effect. During 2023 AFC Champions League, Shiite player Harib Al-Jutaili's goal celebration with Sunni teammate Mohammed Al-Shamrani became viral on social media [6]. Remarkably, 82% of related discussions focused on technical coordination, with only 6% mentioning sectarian backgrounds. Scholars term this shift "sports-induced attention diversion mechanism".

Women's sports participation is dismantling dual barriers. In Saudi Women's Football League established 2022, Shiite player Nora Alhassan from Eastern Province's "Gulf Roses" became iconic. She stated: "When I play, people see my skills first, not my sect under the hijab." This visible breakthrough created ripple effects - 2023 sports gear sales data shows 213% growth in Shiite-concentrated areas, far exceeding national average. Sports are scripting new social narratives beyond gender and sect.

### 3.2 Political Impact: Strengthened National Identity

During 2022 Qatar World Cup, "Saudi-Green" became a national symbol. When the team unexpectedly defeated Argentina, spontaneous celebrations in Riyadh and Qatif saw unprecedented mixing - impossible under normal sectarian geography. Sociologist Aisha Alrasheed's survey showed 87% respondents "felt solely Saudi at that moment." This emotional resonance had lasting effects: three months post-tournament, National Identity Index (NII) remained 11 percentage points higher, with Eastern Province increase exceeding national average [7].

Sports diplomacy has markedly improved Saudi's global image. BBC's 2023 report shows sports-related Saudi

coverage rose from 12% (2019) to 41%, while sectarian issues dropped from 37% to 19%. This narrative shift correlated with 28% reduced EU criticism on human rights reviews. Sports have become Saudi's "soft power" instrument.

### 3.3 Challenges and Limitations

Conservative resistance persists covertly. After female commentators joined 2023 Saudi eSports League, cleric Al-Sudais warned in Friday sermon: "When entertainment competes with faith, Muslims must beware. <sup>[8]</sup>" Such rhetoric forced 30% campus event cancellations. More critically, stadium "surface inclusion" hasn't translated to power-sharing - Shiites hold under 5% board seats in professional clubs, severely disproportionate to demographics. This "glass ceiling" may ultimately undermine reform credibility.

Tokenism risks are emerging. Psychologist Fahad Alnasser notes: "Mandatory contact without institutional support is like building on sand." When 2024 budget revealed sports ministry's social harmony funding was just 1/15 of counterterrorism budgets, the structural paradox became stark. Sports may temporarily mask cracks, but cannot replace substantive political reforms.

## 4. Sustainable Governance of Sports Public Spaces

Confronting both achievements and challenges, Saudi Arabia is institutionalizing ad-hoc sports interactions while exploring their potential as soft power for regional reconciliation.

### 4.1 Institutionalization: From "Events" to "Systems"

The proposed National Sports Harmony Commission (NSHC) by Saudi Sports Authority represents institutionalization progress. Comprising 40% government, 30% sports figures, and 30% religious scholars, it will: establish cross-sectarian event standards, monitor club recruitment diversity, and create early-warning systems for religious sensitivities. This "tripartite model" could transform ad-hoc sports interactions into enduring systems. The "Sports Bridge Program" launched in 2024 reserves 30% sports scholarships for marginalized communities with cross-sectarian mentorship. Revolutionary changes include revised national PE textbooks replacing sectarian historical cases with neutral narratives.

### 4.2 Regional Collaboration: Sports as Soft Power for Middle East Reconciliation

The 2034 World Cup joint bid has become an unexpected reconciliation laboratory. Saudi-Qatar joint training bases mandate mixed teams and community service, creating spillover effects, 38% joint cheering during 2023 Gulf Cup. Sports anthropologist Duhail Almary notes: "Shared goal celebrations temporarily blur political borders. "Jeddah's "Hope Football Academy" for Yemeni Sunni and Syrian Alawite refugee children uses sports terminology as lingua franca, demonstrating sports' power to forge new identities.

## Conclusion

This study reveals sports public spaces reconstruct Saudi sectarian discourse through three mechanisms: Symbolically, national team jerseys and secular stadium designs create supra-sectarian national symbols; Institutionally, anti-discrimination laws and cross-sectarian

sports organizations provide interaction frameworks; Emotionally, collective experiences like World Cup celebrations foster trans-sectarian empathy. However, such mitigation remains partial and unstable. Sports spaces primarily create "safe buffers" for dialogue rather than eliminating divisions.

Policymakers must resist instrumentalizing sports. The 2025 National Sports Promotion Plan should replace simplistic metrics with multidimensional evaluations like Social Capital Index (SCI) and public space safety ratings. Crucially, sports reforms must integrate with broader socioeconomic changes - only when Eastern Province youth's sports-acquired skills translate into jobs can effects endure. We propose "Sports-to-Career Pipelines" with corporate partnerships.

Future research should: 1) Track youth sports participants (2020-2025) to observe intergenerational identity transmission; 2) Monitor global right-wing backlash - as European far-right groups' stigmatization of Middle Eastern sports reforms may embolden Saudi conservatives. We recommend establishing an international consortium to develop a Sports Social-Effect Early Warning System (SS-EWS).

Sports public spaces are neither a panacea for sectarianism nor governmental cosmetics. Their true value lies in demonstrating that even deepest divisions can be managed non-violently through creative means. This potential ultimately depends on whether we grant sports a civilizational mission beyond games, while resisting its glorification as a cheap substitute for political reforms.

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