

The Saudi Football Seizure

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Sports stars are making a heated rush for it, cresting on the money wave, and finding sanctuary in Mammon's big breasted glory. And that wave is coming, oddly enough, from a desert country, alien to such matters till recent decades, when oil came with blessings and political power.

After colonising international golf with a throat crushing ruthlessness, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is moving to consume another field with voracious interest: football. And to be fair to the recruiters, some of the most morally flabby, flexible and flatulent recruits are to be found among these overly paid bipeds of the European leagues. They may be beautiful to look at, admirable in kicking a spherical object, but they exhibit an ethical awareness less developed than that of a house budgie.

An initial target had to be found. Find the one least aware, most vain, and most likely to succumb to the next frontier of money paved opportunity. As it so happened, there was one that fitted the bill with almost harmonic ease. The Portuguese star, Cristiano Ronaldo, who seemed to have lost some of his shine, was nigh perfect. Following in the footsteps of previous figures keen to make a killing in a league in the twilight of their career, Saudi Arabia stretched out a cash-filled hand. Never the most morally, philosophically mature of types, Ronaldo was bound to grab it. These would be easy pickings for minimum effort.

In January this year, Amnesty International expressed their concern at the signing of the Portuguese national by Al-Nassr. The decision, [according](#) to Dana Ahmed, Amnesty International's Middle East researcher, fitted "into a wider pattern of sportswashing in Saudi Arabia." It was also "highly likely that the Saudi authorities will promote Ronaldo's presence in the country as a means of distracting from the country's appalling human rights record."

Highly likely are the keywords here. As Simon Chadwick, an expert on the geopolitical economy of sport at SKEMA Business School in Paris [puts it](#), "Saudi Arabia is Qatar on steroids." The Kingdom "sees itself as being at the centre of a new world order that is kind of a connecting note in this huge network between Europe, Africa, and Asia."

Sporting measures are not merely seen as efforts at mass distraction on the international stage; they are also seen as an effort to keep the youth of the country busy. Sebastian Castelner, [writing](#) in *Haaretz*, suggests that sports is being placed in the service of the state to prevent any potential rejection of a “monarchy which rules with complete and unchallenged authority”.

Haunting such figures as the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is the prospect of another Arab Spring. In Chadwick’s assessment, sport acts as a tool to leverage the “risks of potential political dissent or upheaval by offering the youth the fashion-music-entertainment-tourism lifestyle that comes with sports.”

Instead of dismissing Ronaldo’s sense of principle, which can only be seen as shallow at best, Ahmed sensed an implausible opportunity: he could eschew “offering uncritical praise of Saudi Arabia” and “use his considerable public platform to draw attention to human rights issues in the country.”

No indication of such a position was given in Ronaldo’s January 3 [press conference](#). Journalists duly witnessed an exercise of preening and self-praise. “I had many opportunities ... Many clubs tried to sign me but I gave my word to this club to develop not only the football but other parts of this amazing country.” He wished to “give a different vision of this club and country. This is why I took this opportunity.” Human rights can, it would seem, sod it, especially for an annual fee of \$200 million, with an additional \$200 million for aiding Riyadh promote a joint bid for the 2030 FIFA World Cup.

A slew of stellar performers, hypnotised by the lucre, now find themselves on the blood speckled payroll of the House of Saud. Karim Benzema, N’Golo Kante, Kalidou Koulibaly, Edouard Mendy and Ruben Neves have all added their names to teams in the Saudi Pro League, all owned by Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund.

The notable absentee in the list is the Argentinian master, Lionel Messi. Instead of joining the Al-Hilal club, [he preferred](#) a move to Inter Miami in the United States. “If it had been a matter of money, I’d have gone to Arabia or elsewhere.” He suggested, without elaborating on any details, that his final decision was not exclusively motivated by money. Not exactly profound, but hardly surprising.

It is incumbent on anyone looking at Saudi Arabia’s efforts to mention the obvious. But as is so often the case, the obvious tends to be avoided with a combination of ignorance, willful blindness and deceit. The Kingdom arbitrarily detains, tortures and murders dissidents and journalists. It specialises in sham trials and takes delight in mass executions. It wages wars in the name of theocratic reassurance, claiming to have a monopoly interpreting the tenets of Islam. For all that, the genius of the regime is very much in keeping with the methods of all effective propagandists: preach about distractions long enough, be they about performances, trinkets, and hope, and an amnesiac slumber will follow.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He

currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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