



**\$1.5bn**

**SAUDI ARABIA'S  
SPORTS-WASHING  
PROGRAMME**




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*Saudi Arabia should be treated as a pariah*

– that was the view of then candidate Joe Biden,  
and it's not hard to see why.<sup>1</sup>





When assessing the Kingdom's human rights record, three issues come up again and again – the conflict in Yemen, the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and the treatment of prisoners of conscience in Saudi prisons.

In Yemen, the Saudi-led bombing campaign has wrought death destruction and famine on the poorest people in the region. The UN estimates that quarter of a million have died in the conflict.<sup>1</sup>

Jamal Khashoggi was a respected Washington Post journalist living in Istanbul. He was also a Saudi dissident, a democrat and an activist. Incredibly, the first was no protection, and the second – on the orders of MBS – saw him brutally murdered by the Saudi authorities. That murder was brutal both in the raw despicable power of the state in silencing a peaceful activist in a foreign land, and the abhorrent way it was carried out – Khashoggi was murdered in cold blood and dismembered. We now have the clear verdict of the US security services – the Crown Prince was behind the killing.

Thirdly we have the treatment of prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia. Loujain al-Hathloul spent almost three years in prison for the 'crime' of campaigning for women's right to drive. A right that women in any other country in the world would take for granted. In prison she was tortured, sexually assaulted, separated from her family and lawyers for months on end in prolonged solitary confinement and forced into hunger strike. After years of international outcry, Loujain has been released but she is not free – she remains in probation, under a travel ban and unable to express herself freely. She has simply moved from the notorious closed prison of al Ha'ir, to the open prison of Saudi Arabia.

***But importantly, Loujain is not alone.***

Grant Liberty have detailed over 300 prisoners of conscience in the MBS era.<sup>2</sup> Some have been put to death, others have died mysteriously in custody, others still are missing. They have suffered beatings, psychological tortured, enforced disappearance and arbitrary arrest. Their 'crimes' have ranged from attending a peaceful protest at the age of 10, to sending a tweet calling for peace.

***This is modern Saudi Arabia.***

But that's not what the Kingdom's rulers want you to think of when you think of Saudi Arabia. Instead, under their 2030 Vision and expensive PR they want to reposition KSA as a tourism and leisure hub as they pivot the economy away from oil.

***But tourism and torture don't mix.***

Central to their plan is sport. As we reveal in this report, the Saudi authorities are seeking to co-opt global stars to launder their image. Some have honourably declined – we celebrate them here – but others, perhaps unknowingly have become pawns of a murderous regime.

This report shines a light on Saudi sports-washing and calls for a global boycott. We say to the world's elite sports stars – say no to Saudi blood money.

***Sports-washing***

The theory is simple. Sport is loved and played around the world, it is giant unifying force, and it's also a multi-billion dollar industry. It is young, it is fashionable and it is aspirational from the skill and fitness of the athletes to the giant rewards on offer to those at the top.



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By associating themselves with sport, leaders are seeking to position their country in line with that magic. They want to bask in reflected glory, and thus lighten their image – in Saudi Arabia’s case, they want the country to be associated with elite sporting events to change the global perception of a murderous and brutal regime.

In the following pages we set out just how much the Saudi authorities are investing in the strategy. Many of the fees that KSA pays to host or sponsor global sporting events are undisclosed, yet even so we have found a staggering \$1.5bn investment in sports-washing in recent years (and half a billions currently bid, and a further \$800m offered in rejected payments). That’s a £1.5bn investment to wash away the stench of murder and brutality that hangs over the MBS regime. But the reality is this – no one should feel comfortable being made complicit with this regime.

Sport can create change – the sporting boycott of Apartheid South Africa shows what can be done – and whether they like it or not, sport stars have a responsibility as role models. Our message is clear – women’s rights campaigners remain in prison, democrats and minority rights campaigners continue to be tortured, Yemen is still being bombed, Khashoggi is still dead, and his murderers continue to rule Saudi Arabia. While all this remains, there is a moral duty to boycott Saudi Arabia.

Some deals are opaque, many are undisclosed, but from widely reported figures we can put the size of Saudi Sports-washing investment at \$1.5bn spent, \$400m bid and \$500m failed.





**The scale  
of Saudi  
Sportswashing**

Sport Dates	Event	Spend (\$m)	Bid (\$m)	Failed (\$m)
<b>Boxing</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>200</b>	
December 19	Joshua/Ruiz 2	100		
July 19	Khan/Dib	7		
2021	Joshua/Fury		200	
<b>Chess</b> December 2019	<b>King Salman World Chess Championship</b>	<b>2</b>		
<b>Esports</b> 2020	<b>Neom Sponsorship</b>			<b>Undisc.</b>
<b>Football</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>406</b>
2019-23	Italian FA	24		
2019-21	Spanish FA	145		
2021	Visit Saudi Ronaldo and Messi offers		6	6
2021	Real Madrid Qaddiya		182	
2020	Newcastle purchase			400
<b>Golf</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>		<b>5.5</b>
2020-21	Saudi International	18.5		
2019	Tiger Woods			3
2020	Rory McIlroy			2.5
2020	LET event	0.5		
2020	Aramco	1		
<b>Horse Racing</b> 2020+21 (ongoing)	<b>Saudi Cup</b>	<b>60</b>		
<b>Motorsports</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>664+</b>		
10 years from 2021	F1	650		
2021	Dakar Rally	Undisc.		
10 years from 2019	Formula E	Undisc.		
October 2017	Race of Champions	Undisc.		
2021	E Extreme	Undisc.		
(multi-season deal) 2021	Neom Mercedes	14		
<b>Snooker</b> 10 years from 2020	<b>Saudi Masters</b>	<b>33</b>		
<b>Tennis</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>		<b>2</b>
2019-2020 (ongoing)	Driyah Cup	6		
Dec 2019	Nadal/Djokovic			2
<b>UFC</b>	<b>Total</b>			<b>100</b>
Feb 2020	MCGregor / Khabib Nurmagomedov			100
<b>Wrestling</b> 10 years from 2014	<b>10 yr deal</b>	<b>500</b>		
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,561</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>513.5</b>

# 2030

**Methodology:** The analysis is based on reported figures of deals between entities of the Saudi state and major sporting governing bodies or individuals. All deals were agreed in the Vision 2030 era (post April 2016), with the exception of the WWE deal which began in 2014 and is set to continue until 2023. The list includes vehicles directly controlled by the Saudi authorities (NEOM, Qiddiya, Visit Saudi etc), but excludes the financial dealings of Saudi individuals (eg members of the royal family) not under the direct control of the State. The source for each referenced figure is published in the footnotes. Where the Saudi investment in a deal is not readily available we have simply marked the cash sum as undisclosed. As such, these totals are likely to be an underestimate of the true scale of investment.



## Sport by sport, event by event

An overview of known Saudi investment in sports-washing in recent years

The figures presented below are almost certainly an underestimate, given that many fees are undisclosed.

### Boxing \$107m spent + \$200m bid

When it comes to stand alone events, no sport matches boxing. Its global reach is enormous and the pay per view audience for a single fight can be huge – especially house hold names and especially world title fights. At time of writing there are reports that Saudi Arabia is bidding \$200m to host the Anthony Joshua / Tyson Fury fight.<sup>3</sup>

KSA has already hosted Anthony Joshua once – the so-called Clash on the Dunes against Andy Ruiz Jr. For that fight alone the Saudi's are believed to have funded a purse of \$100m – including a \$50m payment to Joshua.<sup>4</sup> Earlier in 2019 as part of the build-up for the Joshua fight there was a purse to a \$7m purse for Amir Khan's fight with Andy Dib.<sup>5</sup>

Joshua has been known to speak up on social issues – notably a rousing speech to Black Lives Matter activists in London in 2020. Yet on Saudi Arabia he is sadly silent. When asked about human rights and his fight in 2019 – Joshua ducked the questions.<sup>6</sup>

### Chess \$2m spent

In 2017 Saudi Arabia hosted the King Salman World Chess Championship<sup>7</sup>, with an enormous \$2m prize fund - the World Chess Federation (FIDE) said the fund was “almost 350% more than the previous event.” The event saw the Ukrainian double champion, Anna Muzychuk refuse to attend in protest at the treatment of women in KSA.<sup>8</sup> She was stripped of both of her titles for refusing to attend.

Within a year Saudi Arabia had lost the right to host international chess tournaments after banning players from Israel.<sup>9</sup>

### Esports - Failed

Saudi Arabia has attempted to invest in Esports – one of few global competitions in which KSA can genuinely claim world class competitors. However, the NEOM sponsorship deal with Riot Games' League of Legends European Championship<sup>10</sup>, including a planned \$2m event in the Kingdom, was quickly scrapped following an outcry from fans.

### Football - \$174m spent + \$188m bid + \$400m failed

Of course, only one sport can really claim to be the world game – football. And so it's no surprise that it's here that the Saudi authorities have sought to invest hundreds of millions. Across the three most prestigious leagues in Europe – Italy, Spain and England KSA has sought to make major inroads. In Italy, Saudi Arabia paid \$24m to host the Super Cup 3 times in 5 years.<sup>11</sup>





Similarly, in Spain there is a \$145m deal with the FA<sup>12</sup> as well as an ongoing \$182m offer to Real Madrid through the Qiddiya project.<sup>13</sup> There have also been \$6m a year offers to both Messi and Ronaldo to be the face of Visit Saudi<sup>14</sup>.

In England the Saudi sovereign wealth fund PIF led a \$400m bid to buy Premiership's Newcastle United FC. The bid was eventually fought off through a combination of human rights activism – of which Grant Liberty was proud to play a part – and a television rights row that made the deal unviable.

#### **Golf - \$20m spent + \$5m refused**

Golf is one of the few truly global games. The Saudi authorities have made a range of efforts to tempt some of its biggest names to the Kingdom. In 2019 it was widely reported that Tiger Woods turned down a \$3m appearance fee, and Rory McIlroy is known to have refused a similar amount (\$2.5m). On the offer he said, "It's just not something that would excite me. You could say that about so many countries, not just Saudi Arabia, but a lot of countries that we play in that there's a reason not to go, but for me, I just don't want to go. One hundred percent, there's a morality to it as well."

Similarly Meghan MacLaren, who finished last season as the top British player on the LET, announced she would boycott events in Saudi Arabia, stating that she would not take part in "sportswashing". However, others have attended. Riyadh now hosts men's and Ladies' European Tour events. The Saudi International has a prize fund of \$3.5m – although appearance fees are reported to take that total to \$15m for the most recent event<sup>15</sup>. The prize-fund for the LET \$500,000 and the ARAMCO event is worth another \$1m, annually from 2019 spent after 60m on horse racing.

#### **Horse Racing - \$60m spent**

The Saudi Cup, which began in 2020, is the richest race in the world – with a prize fund of \$30m across the weekend, and \$20m for the cup itself.<sup>16</sup> In 2021 Grant Liberty worked with Lina al-Hathloul – sister of Loujain – to write to third place UK sports personality of the year Hollie Doyle, to ask her to boycott the race in solidarity with human rights activists in the Kingdom. Sadly the letter was ignored.

#### **Motor-racing - \$664m (+ large undisclosed investments) spent**

It is a dreadful irony that a country seeking to repair its reputation after years of protests at its arrest of women activists seeking the right to drive has sought to base much of its PR campaign around motorsport. Indeed, the Dakar Rally<sup>17</sup> passed just a few hundred metres from Loujain's cell whilst she languished in prison this January. That race, Formula E<sup>18</sup>, Extreme E<sup>19</sup>, the Race of Champions and the NEOM sponsorship of Mercedes (\$14m)<sup>20</sup> can all be seen to some degree as the warm up to the big prize – Formula One.



The first F1 Race in Saudi Arabia will take place in December 2021 at a reported cost of \$65m a year over ten years.<sup>2122</sup> Lewis Hamilton, the increasingly activist world champion – and greatest driver the sport has ever produced – has spoken enigmatically about racing in the Kingdom. He said: “Of course the human rights issue is a persistent and massive problem in some of the places we go”.

“I think this year has shown how important it is not just for us as a sport, but for all sports around the world is to use the platforms they have to push for change. I think we took a step in that direction, but we can always do more.

“Some steps have been taken for the countries we are going to, but it is important to ensure that they are implemented in the right way so that we not just say we are going to do something, but actually see it something is done. It will take some work behind the scenes from all of us.”<sup>23</sup>

The test of these words will come in December this year.

### **Snooker - \$33m**

The Snooker authorities have signed a ten-year deal for an annual event – the Saudi Arabian Masters – worth £2.5m (approx. \$3.3m) in the Kingdom beginning<sup>24</sup> in 2020. The \$500,000 prize for the winner, matches the fund for the World Championship. As part of the deal, the sports governing body has announced that any player can pass on playing at the event.<sup>25</sup>

### **Tennis - \$6m spent + \$2m failed**

As in golf, tennis is a global sport in which Saudi Arabia has sought to attract the best in the world through new events and one off payments to the game’s biggest stars. The Driyah Tennis Cup has an annual prize fund of \$3m beginning in December 2019<sup>26</sup>, and the Kingdom offered Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic \$2m<sup>27</sup> to play an exhibition game before a an outcry in the light of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi – and then a convenient injury – saw the tie called off.

### **UFC - \$500m failed**

Similar to boxing, UFC operates on a model that sees huge global interest in pay-per-view events. The biggest name in the sport is Conor McGregor. Saudi Arabia is believed to have bid \$100m to host a recently mooted bout between the Irishman and Khabib Nurmagomedov, though Khabib has refused.<sup>28</sup>

### **Wrestling - \$500m spent**

The first, and until the F1 deal discussed above, largest investment was the 2014 ten year deal with the WWE. By far and away the biggest reported investment in the Saudi Sports-washing campaign is the half a billion dollar deal with the WWE – World Wrestling Entertainment. The deal is worth \$50m a year, every year for a decade, and includes the hosting of marquee events such as the Royal Rumble.<sup>29</sup> Some wrestlers, most notably the now-movie star John Cena have refused to take part on moral grounds.

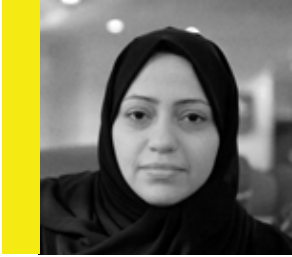


## Prisoners of Conscience still suffering in Saudi Arabia



### Loujain al-Hathloul

Loujain al-Hathloul is a celebrated human rights activist and former Nobel Prize nominee. She is primarily known for her iconic campaign for the right to drive. Loujain was arrested alongside other activists in May 2018. Along with several prominent Saudi women's human rights defenders and activists, Loujain was arrested in May 2018. Since her arrest in March 2018, Loujain has been subjected to threats of sexual assault, torture, prolonged solitary confinement and enforced disappearance, and was recently forced into a hunger strike to secure access to her family, after being subjected to enforced disappearance. Today she has been released from prison, but she is not free. She remains on probation, under a travel ban, and unable to express herself freely.



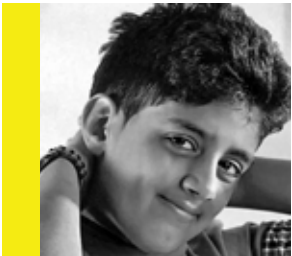
### Samar Badawi

Samar Badawi is a multi-award winning women's rights activist, who has been imprisoned on multiple occasions for her role in fighting two of Saudi Arabia's most egregious anti-women laws, the driving ban (now rescinded) and the male guardianship law. In 2018, she was arrested on July 30 as the authorities' summer purge came to an end. She remains in prison today, where since her arrest she has been victim to the systematic abuse of her human rights in prison including torture and sexual assault.



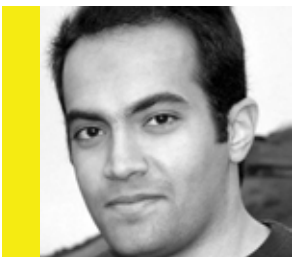
### Salman al-Odah

An iconic religious reformer, Salman al-Odah has frequently been arrested, and held by the Saudi state, beginning in 1994. Most recently, he was arrested in 2017, from which he continues to be held awaiting trial. In making the arrest, security officers made clear that the reason for his arrest was a Twitter post in which he had welcomed a phone conversation between the Emir of Qatar and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia as a step towards resolving the current Gulf crisis. In the tweet he said: "Praise the Lord... O God, soften their hearts toward each other for the good of their peoples." Although that crisis is resolved, al-Odah remains in prison.



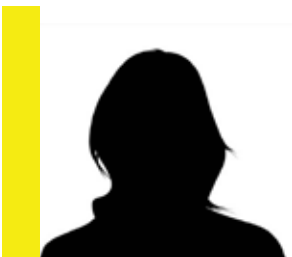
### Murtaja Qureiris

Murtaja Qureiris was arrested as a 13-year-old for crimes he allegedly committed as a 10-year-old. His crime was to lead 30 other children in a rudimentary protest march for human rights during the Arab Spring in 2011. He is believed to have spent a year and three months of his time in jail in solitary confinement, more than 5% of his life - he is just 20 years old.



### Abdulrahman al-Sadhan

A humanitarian, employed by the Red Crescent in Saudi Arabia, Abdulrahman was arrested in March 2018, apparently for voicing peaceful opinions on social media. Since his arrest he has been tortured, held in solitary confinement, separated from his family and forced into hunger strikes. His family are forced to rely on updates on his condition smuggled out of prison by his fellow detainees. He was first able to communicate with his family 23 months after his arrest. He is currently on trial, ludicrously, in Saudi Arabia's terrorism court.



### Aida al-Ghamdi

Aida al-Ghamdi and her youngest son Adel were arrested and brutalised by Saudi authorities in March 2018. Aida's son, Abdullah al-Ghamidi is a human rights activist granted political asylum in the UK in 2012. He has written movingly about his mother's condition, "the circumstances of their arrest makes it clear that my activism was the cause. My mother and brother were tortured in front of each other after they were arrested. They were severely beaten and cigarettes were extinguished on their skin. They were all kept in solitary confinement for extended periods of time."

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