

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### **WHAT IS RONALDO DOING IN SAUDI ARABIA? NEO-KEMALISM, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NEW NATIONALISM IN THE GULF STATES**

**DAN DUNGACIU\***

**Abstract.** This article aims to draw attention to one of the most overlooked issues in International Relations when discussing the Middle East. We refer to the issue of nationhood and nationalism as it unfolds today. Rarely do we find studies dedicated to this issue in the specialized literature, let alone specialized volumes or works. *What is Ronaldo doing in Saudi Arabia?* This question aims to draw attention to these developments. For even now, it is not just about what we see, i.e., the simple transfer of an international superstar, but about a deeper evolution with profound repercussions that will radically change the landscape. It is about the national landscape of the Gulf populations. The nationalization of the Gulf is one of the most profound and subtle changes we are witnessing today in the Middle East. We would like to draw attention to this in the article below.

**Keywords:** *Neo-Kemalism; National Identity; New Nationalism; Gulf States*

“*In Bulgaria? What was the German doing in Bulgaria?*” is Pampon’s anthologized reply in “D’ale carnavalului”, after the character Crăcănel had read him the contents of the fortune left on the table, in the yak, “by the fickle heart”, the seventh case of “translation” in his life: “*Mache, I’m tired of living with a ruble as faded as yours. Don’t come looking for me; I’ve gone to Bulgaria with my nephew.*

“What is the German doing in Bulgaria?” – Pampon reacts. Beyond the humor of the situation, the doubt was the expression of an incipient Romanian interest in developments south of the Danube. Developments there were becoming interesting for the strategic interests of a state, at the time incomparably better placed on the regional and European map. The “D’ale carnival” was first performed on April 8, 1885, the year of major transformations in the Bulgarian national project. On September 6/18, 1885, Bulgaria and the province of Eastern Rumelia, both semi-autonomous parts of the Ottoman Empire, proclaimed their unification. The peace treaty was signed on 19 February/3 March 1886 in Bucharest, and the European powers recognized the unification of Bulgaria, which had taken place on 6/18 September 1885.

---

\* Scientific Researcher, Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations “Ion I. C. Brătianu”, Romanian Academy, Bucharest; President of The Black Sea University Foundation; Professor at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work of the University of Bucharest.

*What is Ronaldo doing in Saudi Arabia?* is from the same picture. For even now it is not just about what you can see, but about a more far-reaching preoccupation with profound reverberations that will radically alter the landscape. It is, as in 1885 (still) about the national landscape, but not that of the Europeans, but of the people of the Gulf. *The nationalization of the Gulf* is one of the most profound and subtle mutations we are witnessing today in the Middle East.

This is what we want to draw attention to in the article below.

### *Sport and Football As “Cover”?*

When superstar Cristiano Ronaldo joined Saudi Arabia's state-owned Al Nassr FC in 2022 for \$241 million paid over two-and-a-half years, the record for the highest salary for a footballer in history had just been broken. The acquisition of the wealthy Saudis surpassed the acquisition of competitors from Qatar who, in 2017, paid for the Brazilian player Neymar from Paris St. Germain, 200 million dollars, at the time the most expensive transfer in the world.

Much has been said about this transfer, primarily in a football context; but not only. Outside the sporting register, the first explanation for this fabulous contract has entered the ‘traditional’ register of approaches, including at academic level, which foreground the idea of ‘sportwashing’. Essentially, the term means “the use of a sporting event by an individual, corporation or government to promote or enhance the reputation of the person or group/government, especially amid political, economic, etc. controversies or scandals” (Frommer, 2024). It is a practice mostly used by authoritarian regimes, or even those considered democratic, to camouflage, conceal or blur serious political or economic slippages in the short or long term. The term ‘sportwashing’ has made a career in the press, less so in extensive research, although there are exceptions (Blough, 2020).

The transfer of footballer Ronaldo has been put under the same label of “covering up” serious political/economic shortcomings, in the same series as previous spectacular sporting events such as the European Championships organized by Azerbaijan (2015), the Winter Olympics in Sochi (2014) and the World Cup (2018) organized by Russia or even Israel's hosting of a stage of the *Giro d'Italia* (Chadwick, 2018).

In a nutshell, the transfer of the Portuguese would have been (all) about camouflaging the real state of affairs in Saudi Arabia, by diverting domestic and international attention from the real and serious problems of this regime (human rights, transparency, etc.), even if such a strategy would be unsuccessful in the medium or long term (Aduamer, 2022).

Is that so? That it can be so, it's very possible. But it was by no means *just* that. It is more than that. For unwittingly, and perhaps unwittingly, superstar Ronaldo has unwittingly stepped into the vortex of unprecedented transformations in Saudi Arabia and the region, far deeper than developments in sport and even than an attempt to cover up political slippages incompatible with Euro-Atlantic values.

But first things first.

### *Beyond Sportwashing*

Saudi Arabia today, beyond the political or strategic news coming from there, is in an extremely complex situation, undergoing changes and transformations on a historic scale. It is what *you don't see in the news*. The benchmark, if we stick to the Middle East, is Iran's revolutionary change in 1979, the year of the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy (the Pahlavi dynasty, i.e. the overthrow of the pro-American Shah Reza Pahlavi) and the replacement of the form of government with an Islamic republic led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of one of the factions of the revolution. A radical and profound transformation of Iran, with consequences to this day.

The same thing is happening now with Saudi Arabia, only... *in reverse!* An eminently religious regime, the Saudi regime, is now striving, under its own power, and controlled from the top down, to *secularize* itself, to relativize religious, Islamic identity.

The most important transformation in the Middle East that could reshape the global political order, Karim Sadjadpour recently wrote, “is the battle between the two dominant powers of the region: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran”. Although this rivalry was seen primarily as an ethnic and sectarian conflict (between the predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabs and the Shi’ite Persian Iranians), “the key dividing line today is *ideological*. The clash centers on their respective strategic visions – Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 – to which we shall return, n.d. – and Iran’s Vision 1979. Each vision dictates the respective country’s domestic policies as well as how it deals with the others” (Sadjadpour, 2024).

Iran and Saudi Arabia are both “autocratic energy titans”, collectively controlling almost a third of the world’s oil reserves and a fifth of its natural gas. Yet the two states have different visions and projects, illustrated by opposing leaders: “Saudi Arabia’s *de facto* leader, 39-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, wants to rapidly modernize a state long steeped in Islamist orthodoxy and move it away from its dependence on fossil fuel production. He has created Vision 2030 to achieve these goals. Iran’s longtime leader, 85-year-old Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, remains committed to the ideological tenets of Iran’s Islamist revolution. Khamenei does not call his plan Vision 1979. But the name can still be appropriately applied because his vision is about preserving the Iranian Revolution’s ruthless commitment to theocracy” (*Ibid.*).

These two countries are historical rivals with irreconcilable goals, including in terms of strategic orientation: “Vision 2030 seeks a security alliance with the United States and normalization with Israel, Vision 1979 is based on the resistance of the former and the eradication of the latter. Vision 2030 is propelled by social liberalization, Vision 1979 is anchored in social repression.”

The dichotomy between Sadjadpour’s two “visions” is inevitably a simplification. What is happening in Iran is incomparably more nuanced, and developments in Saudi Arabia incomparably more complex. Indeed, the author himself recognizes them when he says: “At the moment, MBS seems to enjoy

widespread support for lifting social restrictions and for his country's strong economy. However, the success of Saudi Arabia's struggle is not as evident. At the moment, MBS seems to enjoy widespread support for lifting social restrictions and for his country's strong economy".

But for how long? Neither vision, that of Iran and that of Saudi Arabia, has a clear guarantee of success. What is clear is that "the fate of the two visions – one driven by change, the other defined by resistance – will have consequences that will extend far beyond either country. These visions will influence not only whether the Middle East becomes more prosperous and stable, but whether the world as a whole does so".

Although simplified, as I said, the dichotomy is illustrative of developments in the region. Including by what it describes but, more importantly, by what it leaves out. For, from the perspective of our material, MSB is not just a political leader, he is first and foremost *a national leader*, a profound reformer of the Kemal Ataturk type, who projects not only an economic vision but also a national identity vision for his country. The secularization of Saudi Arabia is today, as it was in Turkey 100 years ago, a simultaneous project of nationalization. We are witnessing the emergence of other *political identities* in Saudi Arabia, and the first major process of *nationalization* of Islam in the Gulf region.

And now we come to the 2030 Project/Vision, which we will read to illustrate these developments. For it is more than just an ideological or strategic document.

### *Saudi Vision 2030 – An Identity Document*

On April 25, 2016, under the aegis of Saudi Arabia's Prime Minister and Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, the government launches Saudi Vision 2030, a grandiose action plan designed to transform the great Gulf state not only economic.

The analyses devoted to this crucial document not only for Saudi Arabia, but also for the Gulf States, has been and is analyzed almost exclusively from the perspective of economic, possibly strategic, developments. Vision 2030 is often described as a technocratic roadmap towards a knowledge-based, post-oil economy, especially in the context of the "energy revolution" generated by the global green deal.

But it is not only that. Our thesis is that the foundation of the Vision 2030 projection is a nation-building project, initiated and co-orchestrated by the state, from the top down, concurrent with the projection of a new social and economic vision for Saudi Arabia. The ignoring of the national dimension in this Vision is peremptory to the blindness of the analysis dedicated to the region, where national identity, ethnicity, etc. are rarely addressed or explored.

One need only read the document carefully to understand its project more fully, and whose preamble is entitled "An Ambitious Vision for an Ambitious Nation": "We are building a country that is governed efficiently, transparently and accountably, encouraging all of society – citizens, businesses and non-profit

organizations – to take the lead in identifying and pursuing opportunities to advance our collective future. This empowers everyone to play a more active role in shaping our nation’s future.

Our government has many responsibilities and must adapt to changing tides and new challenges. That is why we are committed to being transparent and accountable, to managing our finances efficiently and effectively, to being agile and to tracking our performance.

Whatever sector we work in, we all have a role to play in building a better country. As a business owner, non-profit leader or concerned citizen, everyone contributes to the development of Saudi Arabia. The non-profit sector is an important part of our society and plays a crucial role in addressing the needs of our communities and promoting social progress. By responsibly enabling these efforts, we can work together to achieve our goals and fulfill our responsibilities to our country, society, families and ourselves.

Through these efforts, *Vision 2030 creates an ambitious nation that serves as the foundation for a vibrant society and thriving economy* (emphasis added).

Seemingly surprisingly, the Vision is structured around three broad themes: 1. A vibrant society; 2. A thriving economy; 3. An ambitious *nation*.

It’s not exactly natural for a strictly economic project to add a constituent section about ‘ambitious nation’, prefaced with the words ‘Welcome to our vision of an ambitious nation in Saudi Arabia’. The section stands under the aegis of this preamble: “We are building a country that is governed efficiently, transparently and accountably, encouraging all of society – citizens, businesses and non-profit organizations – to take the lead in identifying and pursuing opportunities to advance our collective future. This empowers everyone to play a more active role *in shaping our nation’s future*.”

This is a fundamental clarification, which is why we need to follow how ‘nation’, i.e. national identity, becomes the main subject of this Vision. And this can be done by reading the annual reports assessing the way and level of its implementation. For example, in the executive report that follows the implementation of Vision 2030 in the year 2024, the spirit of the text is telling. The chapter on social values is entitled “Promoting Islamic Values and National Identity” and informs its readers first of all that the number of religious pilgrimages has skyrocketed in recent years as a result of measures taken by the state that “reflect Vision 2030 and its goals of enhancing the pilgrimage experience and the ability of Muslims from around the world to visit our Kingdom with ease and pleasure”. The phrase is emblematic, the language secularized to the maximum, the pilgrimage here becoming more of a cultural matter, an element of identity and tourist promotion of the state. This impression is reinforced by the following section, which is devoted to the meteoric rise in the number of architectural sites in Saudi Arabia that have become UNESCO World Heritage sites. Why has this happened? As a result of the state’s efforts to promote ‘Saudi cultural heritage’. And these actions, going forward, “will lead to strengthening the positioning of Saudi culture globally and highlighting the depths of our history and identity”.

The examples could go on (Vision 2023 – Annual Report, 2024).

### *What's Happening There? Neo-Kemalism In the Gulf*

What is it really about? At its inception, the project of Saudi statehood was a shared political-religious project, “traditionally based on a religious *nationalism* rooted in narratives depicting Saudi Arabia as a purified Islamic utopia. From this vision, the ruling Al Saud family has historically sought to extract legitimacy” (Hoffman, 2023). Today, before our eyes, the content of “what it means to be Saudi” is changing. Paradigmatic for the Islamic space is the Turkish case, illustrated, more than 100 years ago, by Kemal Ataturk. Essentially, the legendary leader of Ankara illustrated the project of modernization/nationalization from top to bottom, by imposing national identity with an iron fist, including ethnic identity, purging religious identity from the public sphere and imposing a formula of *controlled democracy*.

Keeping things in proportion, we are witnessing something similar in the Gulf, minus the harshness of the anti-religious approach or the prospects of a democratic, multi-religious, even contralateral, formula.

Today, in Saudi Arabia, but in the Gulf States in general, it is not a question of taking religion out of the game – neither in the West nor in Turkey has this been done to the end – but of *de-politicizing* religion, that is to say of making it *an identity among many identities*. We in the West also have multiple identities, including, some of us, assumed religious identities. These have not disappeared, but their *political* function has diminished dramatically. National identity becomes *political*, as the main legitimizing and unifying force of the state. This is happening now in the Gulf – or that is the project. Although religion is, for now, prevalent, including as a state legitimizing identity, the effort to nationalize the nation and the state is there and, by dimensions, remarkable. As has been judiciously observed, everything that is happening at the societal level reflects this massive identity shift: “efforts to distance Saudi Arabia’s official history from Wahhabism; allowing women to drive, live alone, and travel without a male guardian; limiting the powers of religious police; allowing public entertainment venues such as cinemas and concerts; purges of government officials and members of the royal family under the guise of fighting corruption; arrests of clerics and religious scholars whom the regime has labeled extremists.” Add to this, as in any nation-building or state-building scenario of Western nation-states in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the revision of school textbooks and state education to “embrace this new nationalist narrative while distancing the country from pan-Arab or pan-Islamic causes”. Riyadh has also leaned heavily on “militarization as a way to reinforce this nationalist project”, using military symbolism to mobilize society and promote a shared sense of loyalty and devotion, while substantially increasing defense spending.

The crown prince has been accused that, in fact, through the objective of restructuring national identities, Mohammed bin Salman – and his counterpart in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), bin Zayed – is also creating a tool to re-

legitimize and consolidate his own power. That may be true, but it is precisely this that makes the project now unfolding in the Gulf similar to what happened 100 years ago in the West. There, too, the nation-building or state-building projects had this function. It was just not the most important in the medium and long term.

### *An Intermezzo: United Arab Emirates*

While we're on the subject of bin Zayed, it's worth digging a little deeper to reinforce our thesis. Almost mirror-image, but with local specificity in mind, things are also happening in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). UAE leader bin Zayed is also trying "to restructure the national identity towards a more coherent sense of being *Emirati*" (*Ibid.*). The seven emirates that currently make up the UAE – Abu-Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah, Umm al-Quwain and Ras al-Khaimah – gained independence from Britain in 1971; six immediately formed a federation, which Ras al-Khaimah joined in 1972. At its formation, the UAE was dominated mainly by a tribal hierarchy, "with little sense of national identity". Hence the need to forge a common identity to make the new state cohesive. Instead of starting from scratch, like Mohammed bin Salman, "UAE leader bin Zayed has simply dramatically accelerated these existing efforts to promote a common emirate identity, while consolidating power over the other emirates in Abu Dhabi and centralizing state authority in his own hands" (*Ibid.*). Among initiatives designed to promote a shared sense of identity, analysts cite the 'Year of Zayed', 2018, namely the opening of various national museums and libraries and an increased focus on the annual celebration of National Day. Education in the emirate has also continued to be heavily reformed, with leader bin Zayed "directing curricula to focus heavily on the emirate's national Emirati identity".

Like Mohammed bin Salman, bin Zayed also used militarization to support this nationalist agenda, introducing holidays such as Remembrance Day (or "Martyrs' Day") to honor the UAE military and fallen soldiers, while overseeing a significant increase in defense spending and the UAE's rise as a major regional leader (*Ibid.*).

### *Milestone Conclusions for Now*

*What is Ronaldo doing in Saudi Arabia?* Now it is hopefully clearer. Sport, especially soccer, the most popular form of entertainment, is a pillar of Crown Prince Bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform plan (Dorsey, 2023). Sport is becoming part of the development of a modern entertainment industry in a country where this was non-existent before the crown prince's ascension in 2015. Saudi Arabia wants to replace smaller Gulf states such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates "as the center for any major development in the Gulf, be it sports or the regional headquarters of multinationals and foreign corporations." To achieve his goal, Bin Salman must "project Saudi Arabia as a modern, internationally competitive

nation with a national rather than religious identity". Once again, soccer (backed by Ronaldo-like planetary personalities), a sport that evokes group loyalties and nationalistic passions, is a perfect tool to accomplish this. Ronaldo's move to Al Nassr was the first step in a bolder effort to position Saudi Arabia at the center of Middle Eastern sport. Things, it seems, are working. For example, in an interview with BBC Sports, the Kingdom's sports minister claimed that his country's sports strategy is producing results: "Mr. Ronaldo will support the sports ecosystem in Saudi Arabia and inspire young people for the future. The numbers don't lie – when you look at participation in boxing, from six gyms in 2018, we've reached 57 gyms today. A 300% increase in participation, 60% are women, which was a shock for us" (*Ibid.*).

All, as I said, in the name of a larger project. Essentially, the thesis we argue here is that Ronaldo's transfer is the tip of the iceberg of deeper transformations designed to diminish/secularize religious identity and resurrect Saudi Arabia's identity. Basically, we are witnessing there a concomitant process of state building or even nation building (more on this in Dungaciu, 2018), in which sport is summoned not to cover up a series of shortcomings but to *promote* a project. In this case, investment in football, unlike those who talk about sportwashing, has positive, *building*, not covering or concealing, valences. It is part of the nation-building process taking place today in the Gulf, initially through *secularization* achieved through *identity multiplication*, i.e. the creation of alternative popular identities to the religious identity, which does not disappear, but gradually becomes secondary to the national identity, which is intended to become, in this complex process, the main political identity.

Today in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf States, we are witnessing what we call neo-Kemalism, a form of modernization similar to that of the post-imperial Turkish space, even if it is lagging behind in time. Today, the national project is becoming a fundamental political project designed to de-politicize religion, to relativize religious identity and, at the same time, to encourage alternative identities: gender identities, sporting identities, club identities, etc.

What we have tried to illustrate here is the most spectacular national and identity project taking place in the Middle East today, which is influencing all further developments in the region: economic, strategic, security. Whether it will succeed, like similar processes in Turkey or Europe, it is far too early to say.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abuamer, Majd, "The Rise of Gulf States Investments in Sports Neither Soft Power nor Sportwashing", *POMEPS, Middle East Political Science*, 2022, [https://pomeps.org/the-rise-of-gulf-states-investments-in-sports-neither-soft-power-nor-sportwashing#\\_edn57](https://pomeps.org/the-rise-of-gulf-states-investments-in-sports-neither-soft-power-nor-sportwashing#_edn57), accessed May 3, 2025;

Blough, David, *Sportwashing – What has become of the values of sport?*, Rue Echiquier, 2020;

Chadwick, Simon, "Sport-washing, soft power and scrubbing the stains. Can international sporting events really clean up a country's tarnished image?", *Policy Forum*, August, 2018, <https://www.policyforum.net/sport-washing-soft-power-and-scrubbing-the-stains/>, accessed on May 3, 2025;

Dorsey, James M., “Ronaldo’s move to Saudi Arabia: A game of one-upmanship”, *Modern Diplomacy*, January 1, 2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/01/01/ronaldos-move-to-saudi-arabia-a-game-of-one-upmanship/>;

Frommer, Fred, “Sportswashing”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2 Aug. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/money/sportwashing>, accessed on April 30, 2025;

Sadjadpour, Karim, “The New Battle for the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran’s Clash of Visions”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, October 22, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/new-battle-saudi-arabia-iran-sadjadpour>, accessed on 10.05.2025;

Vision 2023 – Annual Report 2024, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/annual-reports>, accessed on 11.05.2025.