

SPORTSWASHING AND THE LIV GOLF TOUR

Kathryn Hartzell

In 2022, a new professional golf tour challenged the Professional Golfers' Association's (PGA) monopoly position by offering competitive payouts for players and a more television friendly [tournament model](#). Funded by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), The LIV Golf Tour's aggressive recruitment of established players, such as Phil Mickelson, as well as the staging of two tournaments at Trump properties, set off a furor amongst stakeholders within golf, sports media, and politics.

[Journalists](#), [pundits](#), and organizations for family members of [9/11 victims](#) widely criticized the tour for "sportswashing" Saudi Arabia's image. The regime's poor human rights record, anti-LGBTQ+ policies, restrictive laws on women, and most infamously, the [assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#), rocked the longstanding bilateral relationship with the United States. However, focusing solely on the press discourses surrounding Saudi Arabia and LIV overlooks the systems and relationships that international tournaments like LIV help to foster. Only calling out athletes and public figures for their ethical positions actually limits criticism to visibility politics rather than addressing larger structures that enable human rights abuses.

"Sportswashing" describes political leaders who invest heavily in sports competitions and athletic spectacles to generate positive press and boost their global status. Although often applied to autocratic regimes, [Jules Boykoff](#) emphasizes that democratic countries also rely on these practices. LIV fosters prestige for Saudi Arabia and ties into the government's [Vision 2030](#) initiative to transform the nation into a world leader in entertainment. Saudi Arabia's foray into media and sports industries aims to follow in the footsteps of cities like Dubai, which have become playgrounds for the rich and famous.

Legitimization is not only the goal of Saudi Arabia. President Donald Trump, a famous golfer and owner of numerous clubs worldwide, hosted LIV events to boost his reputation and political relevance. Aligning with LIV also gave Trump the opportunity to spite the PGA, which had refrained from hosting any tournaments at his properties—a slight that

[reportedly infuriated the former president](#). At Trump's event in New Jersey, [ex-Navy Seals parachuted down](#) while holding an American flag. This continued a symbolic link between Trump, the U.S. military, and sports [that characterized his presidency](#).

[Simon Chadwick](#) and other scholars have questioned the relationship between sportswashing and [soft power](#), the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. They argue that the sponsorship of sporting events



Phil Mickelson at the LIV Golf Tournament at the Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, New Jersey

L.E.MORMILE/Shutterstock.com

by authoritarian governments fails to induce amnesia and may be used to advocate for humanitarian reform. Indeed, the participants and hosts of 2022 LIV events were repeatedly asked about Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

Throughout the summer of 2022, the press asked LIV golfers about their knowledge of [gay rights in Saudi Arabia](#). LIV also failed to inspire a great deal of support from golf fans. At the third event held at the Trump National Golf Club in New Jersey, a heckler yelled at Phil Mickelson, "[Do it for the Saudi Royal Family](#)." The press also highlighted [Donald Trump's participation](#) in the event and resurfaced criticisms of his close relationship with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, his refusal to back U.S. intelligence reports on the murder of Khashoggi, and the \$2 billion investment by PIF into Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner's hedge fund.

However, it is too early to determine if these failures to gain traction, as well as the negative reaction to athletes joining the new tournaments, mean that the project will fail. Moreover, focusing on the visibility of the event and public perceptions misses “[below the radar](#)” sportswashing. Tournaments like LIV build relationships and networks among numerous stakeholders in the public and private sectors, which can serve to bolster international clout and power—both soft and hard.

The global capitalist economy creates sites of interconnection for people who move between public and private sectors, relying on relationships to build economic, social, and cultural power.

[Sports diplomacy scholars](#) describe how stakeholders in international competitions participate in diplomacy to further national interests. The most promising relationship has been between LIV and Donald Trump, as this opened doors to government officials and media allies like [Tucker Carlson](#). In addition, LIV’s ties to the Republican Party extend to LIV’s media advisor, [Ari Fleischer](#), a former George W. Bush press secretary.

Less built up at this point are LIV’s ties to the commercial sector as many [sponsors have dropped LIV players](#) and avoided the league. However, should LIV be able to shift the narrative, its contracts with golfers make it clear that [LIV gets final say in any brands their golfers wear](#) across all

“ ”

LIV embeds Saudi Arabian officials within a larger network of political and commercial power in the United States and vice versa.”

competitions. Then, sponsors must establish connections with LIV itself if they want to keep working with athletes who are under contract. Altogether, LIV embeds Saudi Arabian officials within a larger network of political and commercial power in the United States and vice versa.

Finally, the goals of sportswashing must be understood in terms of hard power. International sporting events foster diplomatic ties that facilitate military intervention. In 2022, the United States [approved the sale of \\$3 billion](#) of “defensive” missiles to Saudi Arabia, a country that is [actively bombing Yemen](#). The decision reversed Biden administration pledges to cut military aid due to the humanitarian crisis. The United States justifies this aid by saying Saudi Arabia is an important partner and ally against regional threats. Saudi Arabian investment in sports like golf supports this argument. Sportswashing is not uncontested or unresisted, but its harms extend below and beyond the spectacle it produces. ■



Donald Trump at the LIV Golf Tournament at the Trump National Golf Club in Bedminster, New Jersey

L.E.MORMILE/Shutterstock.com

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR SPORTS COMMUNICATION & MEDIA

The Center for Sports Communication & Media brings together interests in the instruction, practice, and scholarship of sports journalism, broadcasting, media production, human communication, and more. It serves the mission of the Moody College of Communication and The University of Texas at Austin through its commitment to the highest quality of teaching, research, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The Center sponsors the Sports Media undergraduate minor, provides funding support for affiliate research, partners with organizations in sports media, and produces programming such as the Dan Jenkins Medal for Excellence in Sportswriting, the McGarr Symposium on Sports and Society, and the Frank Deford Lecture in Sports Journalism.

More information about the Center can be found at www.moody.utexas.edu/cscm, and our social media channels at Twitter ([@UT CSCM](https://twitter.com/UT_CSCM)), Facebook ([ut.cscm](https://facebook.com/ut.cscm)) and Instagram ([ut.cscm](https://instagram.com/ut.cscm)).

Support for this report comes from the Governor Ann W. Richards Chair for the Texas Program in Sports and Media.



The University of Texas at Austin
Center for Sports Communication & Media
Moody College of Communication

Read (and download) the complete
second annual Politics in Sports Media report

www.politicsinsportsmedia.org