SPORT & POWER

WHY EVERY GULF STATE WANTS A GRAND PRIX ?

Bahrain just held its Grand Prix in Malaysia. That tells you what the race is really for.

Where sport meets power.

SWIPE →

WHY SUCH AN INVESTMENT

The Gulf states are preparing for life after oil. They need tourists, investors and a modern image, and few things put a country's name in front of the world like Formula 1: around 1.6 billion viewers in 2024, race after race, year after year.

Saudi Arabia shows the scale. It has put more than $6 billion into sport since its first Grand Prix in 2021, and it wants 150 million visitors a year by 2030. A race weekend fills hotels, sells out flights and, above all, tells the world the country is open.

Plain-language note: the "hosting fee" is what a country pays F1 for the right to stage a race. In Europe, private promoters pay it with ticket sales. In the Gulf, governments pay it themselves and treat it as an investment in their image

1.6B Total viewership of the 2024 Formula 1 season

THE TIMELINE

2004 — **Bahrain** becomes the first Middle Eastern country on the F1 calendar.

2009 — **Abu Dhabi** opens Yas Marina and takes the last race of the season, the one everyone watches.

2017 — **Liberty Media buys F1**. Under former boss Bernie Ecclestone, a deal had capped the Gulf at two races. That cap goes.

2021 — **Saudi Arabia** races in Jeddah and **Qatar** debuts at Lusail. Four Gulf races in one season.

2022 — A missile hits an Aramco oil depot about 16 km from the Jeddah circuit during practice. The race goes ahead.

2023 — **Qatar**, absent in 2022 because of the **FIFA World Cup**, returns on a 10-year contract.

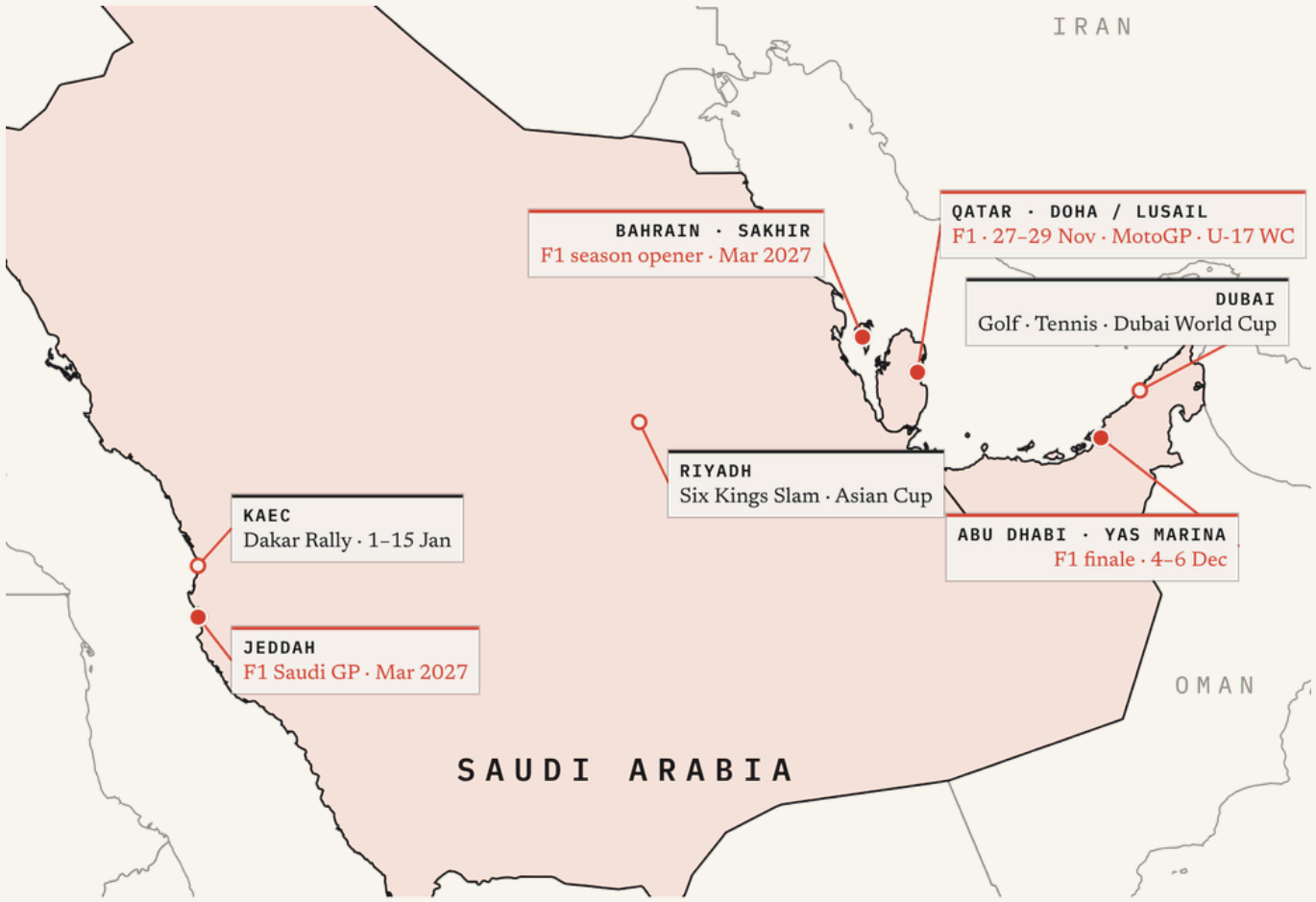
MARCH 2026 — With the conflict involving **Iran** spreading across the Gulf, **F1 cancels the Bahrain and Saudi races.**

OCTOBER 2026 — The **Bahrain** Grand Prix is held in **Malaysia**, at Sepang, **under Bahrain's name.**

NOV–DEC 2026 — F1 confirms **Qatar** (29 November) and **Abu Dhabi** (6 December) will **close the season**.

THE TRACK CAN MOVE. THE NAME STAYS.

THE GULF SPORTING CALENDAR



● FORMULA 1 ○ OTHER MAJOR EVENTS OCT 2026 ·

BAHRAIN

- ● **F1 · Bahrain GP**
  Sakhir · Mar 2027, season opener
- ○ **Golf · Bahrain Championship**
  Royal Golf Club · 28–31 Jan 2027

QATAR

- ○ **MotoGP · Qatar GP**
  Lusail · 6–8 Nov 2026
- ○ **Football · FIFA U-17 World Cup**
  Doha · 19 Nov–13 Dec 2026
- ● **F1 · Qatar GP**
  Lusail · 27–29 Nov 2026
- ○ **Golf · Qatar Masters**
  Doha · 3–6 Feb 2027
- ○ **Basketball · FIBA World Cup**
  Doha · 27 Aug–12 Sep 2027

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

- ○ **Golf · Abu Dhabi Championship**
  Yas Links · 5–8 Nov 2026
- ○ **Golf · DP World Tour Championship**
  Dubai · 12–15 Nov 2026
- ● **F1 · Abu Dhabi GP**
  Yas Marina · 4–6 Dec 2026, finale
- ○ **Tennis · Dubai Championships**
  Dubai · 14–27 Feb 2027
- ○ **Racing · Dubai World Cup**
  Dubai · 27 Mar 2027

SAUDI ARABIA

- ○ **Tennis · Six Kings Slam**
  Riyadh · 27–30 Dec 2026, postponed
- ○ **Rally · Dakar**
  Starts and ends at KAEC · 1–15 Jan 2027
- ○ **Football · AFC Asian Cup**
  Riyadh, Jeddah, Al Khobar · 7 Jan–5 Feb 2027
- ● **F1 · Saudi Arabian GP**
  Jeddah · Mar 2027

SOURCES: F1, AFC, FIFA, FIBA, DP WORLD TOUR, SPA, TENNIS MAJORS, REUTERS · AS OF 21 OCT 2026

THE PRICE TO PAY

$52 - 57M

The estimated yearly fee Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar each pay to host a Grand Prix.

In Europe, private promoters pay it with ticket sales. In the Gulf, the government pays, and calls it an investment in the country's image.

FOUR RACES, FOUR STRATEGIES

Bahrain, *the pioneer*. First in the region in 2004. The race brings about $100m a year to its economy.

Abu Dhabi, *the finale*. The last race of the season since 2009, often the one that decides the title.

Saudi Arabia, *the big spender*. Over $100m a year in total, counting Aramco's F1 sponsorship.

Qatar, *the hub*. After the World Cup, F1 is one more piece of a bigger events plan.

FROM HOSTS TO SHAREHOLDERS

Formula 1 made $3.87 billion in revenue in 2025, up 14% in a year. More than a quarter of the money F1 earns from its races comes from one source: the fees countries pay to host them. In the Gulf, the payer is not a private promoter but the state itself.

1: Hosting.

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar each pay an estimated $52–57m a year, among the highest fees on the calendar. The contracts run for a long time: Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia until 2030, Qatar on a 10-year deal from 2023, Bahrain until 2036.

2: Sponsoring.

Since 2020, Aramco, Saudi Arabia's state oil company, has been one of F1's top global partners, at an estimated $40–45m a year. It is also the title partner of the Aston Martin team. In 2023, Qatar Airways became F1's official airline. Its name is now on the Qatar Grand Prix itself.

3: Owning.

In September 2025, Bahrain's state fund Mumtalakat and Abu Dhabi's CYVN bought out McLaren Racing's last outside investors. One source put the team's value at around $5 billion, and it is now fully Gulf-owned. Saudi Arabia's PIF owns almost 8% of the Aston Martin F1 team and 17% of the carmaker. The Qatar Investment Authority holds a stake in Audi's F1 team, with a seat on its board.

4: What's next.

In 2023, PIF reportedly offered more than $20 billion to buy F1 outright. The sport's owner, Liberty Media, said no. In April 2025, the head of Saudi Arabia's motorsport federation said a Saudi-owned team "could happen soon."

THE GULF STARTED AS F1'S CUSTOMER. IT IS BECOMING ITS SHAREHOLDER.

RIVALS ON THE SAME GRID

The Gulf states are not one bloc. They compete for investors, tourists and global attention, and F1 is one of the places where that rivalry plays out.

A CAPPED REGION.
Under F1's former boss Bernie Ecclestone, a deal limited the Gulf to two races. When Liberty Media bought F1 in 2017, that cap went, and the race for races began.

RIVALRY, THEN RECONCILIATION.
In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut ties with Qatar and closed their borders. The blockade only ended in January 2021, with the Al-Ula Declaration[1].
Ten months later, Qatar hosted its first Grand Prix. Today, partners and rivals sit side by side: Bahrain and Abu Dhabi co-own McLaren, after Saudi Arabia sold its stake to Bahrain.

A STAGE THAT CAN BE HIT.
In 2011, Bahrain cancelled its race during the Arab Spring protests. It went ahead in 2012 despite clashes, with a protester killed two days before the race. Human rights groups called for a boycott, and the Crown Prince argued that cancelling would "strengthen extremists." In 2022, a missile hit an oil depot near the Jeddah circuit during practice.

2026, THE STRESS TEST.
War across the region cancelled the Bahrain and Saudi races, which could cost F1 up to $200m. The WTA Finals left Riyadh for the United States. Bahrain refused to give up its slot and raced 6,000 km away, in Malaysia, under its own name.

[1] Al-Ula Declaration: signed on 5 January 2021 at the Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia. It ended the boycott of Qatar that began in June 2017 and restored diplomatic relations.

IN THE GULF, A GRAND PRIX IS FOREIGN POLICY WITH A STARTING GRID.



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