

# EASY CITIES TO BUY



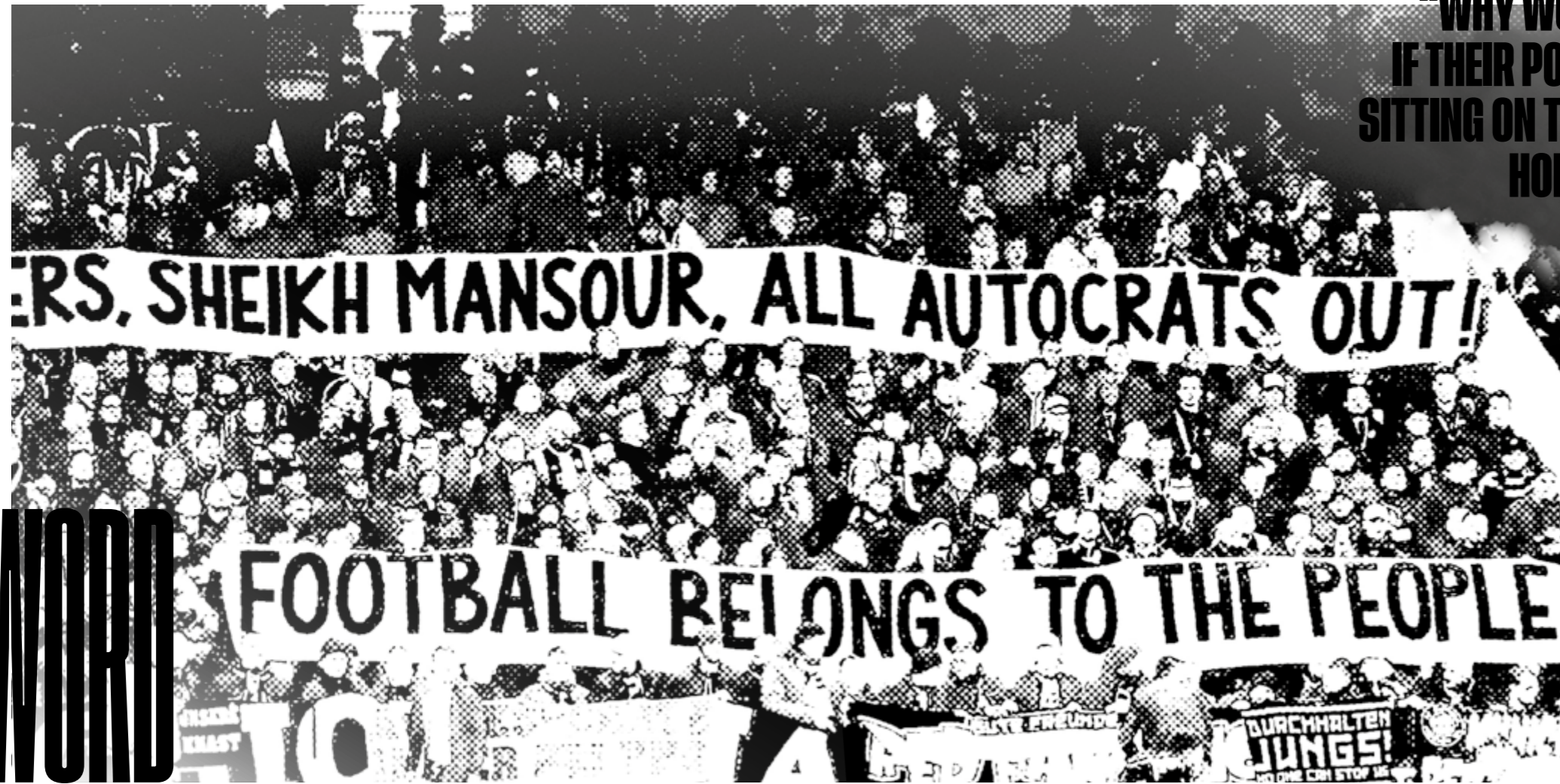
COUNTING THE COST OF UAE  
AND SAUDI ARABIAN SOFT POWER  
IN MANCHESTER AND NEWCASTLE



# EASY CITIES TO BUY

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# FOREWORD

When the man who controls the United Arab Emirates decided to buy Manchester City in 2008, the term 'sportswashing' had yet to be coined. Thirteen years later when the man who controls Saudi Arabia decided to buy Newcastle United, it was the question on everybody's lips. "It's not sportswashing. It's investment," said Amanda Staveley, the acceptable public face of the Saudi takeover.

Those seeking to define sportswashing do so for the obvious reason that it gets to the critical questions of why the UAE bought Manchester City, why Qatar bought Paris Saint-Germain, and why Saudi Arabia bought Newcastle United. But the reasons are not so complex that we need wrestle too long on the question of motivation. Not only is the world's most popular sport great PR for the image-conscious autocrat, it also opens up commercial opportunities and it's great for political networking. When there's no oversight of how you spend the billions that you've appropriated from your people and when none of them can complain about it without being thrown in jail, with or without scars of torture, why would you not buy a football club? When Manchester City's chairman Khaldoon Al Mubarak [tells the media](#) that their ownership of the club is about "showing the world the true essence of who Abu Dhabi is and what Abu Dhabi is about", it's reasonable to believe him. When the head of the Saudi Arabia branch of the PR company brought in by Newcastle United's new owners after the Saudi Arabia takeover [muses](#) that maybe the purchase is a piece of "sports diplomacy" that will "enable its foreign policy via international sporting events," it's reasonable to think she might have the inside track on their motivations.

The more interesting questions about such acquisitions relate to the impact of states buying football clubs and there are multiple dimensions worthy of future investigation. Social scientists will be able to analyse surveys and tell us how these takeovers have shaped public perceptions of Saudi Arabia's despotic ruler Mohamed bin Salman in Newcastle, and provide useful data on the casual football supporters' view of Abu

Dhabi. Financial and data analysts will be able to tell us precisely what the impact has been on the game's finances and its competitive integrity, although anyone even remotely familiar with the professional game could point to how it has transformed English and European football. Fifteen years ago, Manchester City were also-rans in England, finishing ninth in the Premiership. In the weeks before the release of this report, they won their fifth Premiership title in the last six years, and confirmed their status as the dominant force in European football, winning the Champions League for the first and surely not the last time.

But off the pitch, what has been the impact on the cities in north-west and north-east England where the UAE and Saudi Arabia have planted their flags?

The idea for this report came from observing the local response to the protracted takeover of Newcastle United and seeing striking similarities with the manner in which Manchester responded to Abu Dhabi's investment. The acclaim of supporters, the majority of whom have enthusiastically supported their new owners, was not entirely surprising. Clubs like Manchester City and Newcastle provide a focal point for identity and civic pride in cities that have been crippled by deindustrialisation and austerity. One supporter we spoke to under condition of anonymity put it as follows:

*People do care about injustice, people do care about gay rights, women's rights, about children being [beheaded](#). Their voices are lost, silenced by an angry online mob in the main and also they've had the shit kicked out of them for decades. Be it socially, economically. There are many people who just don't care either, their lives aren't amazing, football is their joy.*

Another Newcastle United supporter commented that the city was "easy to buy" – a description can reasonably be extended to Manchester and goes far beyond the enthusiasm of football supporters for wealthy benefactors. In formerly industrial cities with radical histories and

with football clubs rooted in working-class traditions, it is remarkable not only that there was so little opposition to these clubs falling under the control of nation states, but that so many influential figures in both cities have effectively lent their political support to autocrats with such violent and blood-spattered rap sheets. This report is an attempt to explain why that happened and to offer some assessment of the impact of these takeovers on the institutions that underpin local democracy.

If we accept the premise that these takeovers are at least to some extent motivated by a desire on the part of the UAE and Saudi Arabia to curate their reputations, then what is the cost of these transactional relationships on the cities and their residents? In Christopher Marlow's play, when Dr Faustus sold his soul to the devil, he gained tremendous powers which he used for his entertainment and advantage for 24 giddy years, but the play ends with Faustus being dragged off to Hell by a group of demons. Anyone who recoils at the presentation of these deals as Faustian bargains would do well to read the United Nations' findings on the [murder of the Saudi journalist](#) Jamal Khashoggi, or consider the UAE's central role in killing the democratic aspirations of millions in the Middle East and North Africa.

This report draws on swathes of material that was already in the public domain including news articles, peer-reviewed research, parliamentary records and leaked emails, and complements this with new material that has not previously been published, including insight and analysis from seventeen academics, activists, journalists, supporters and politicians, the vast majority of whom are based in Manchester and Newcastle. It sets these takeovers in their historical, political and economic context, details how they happened, and examines their impact on Manchester and Newcastle. The key analysis in the report is in its first section, called City vs United, which compares and contrasts the two takeovers, drawing on information laid out in greater detail in the second and more descriptive section of the report.

**“WHY WOULD ORDINARY PEOPLE DO ANYTHING IF THEIR POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES ARE JUST SITTING ON THEIR HANDS? THEY’RE PUSHING THIS HOPELESSNESS WHICH WE DON’T AGREE WITH - FANS DO HAVE POWER.”**

**– JOHN HIRD, NUFC AGAINST SPORTSWASHING**

At the time of writing, a Qatari consortium is one of two groups bidding to take control of Manchester United and, in May 2023, a senior UK trade envoy and a UK government minister, both speaking under anonymity, expressed their [support for the Qatari bid](#). Britain should "absolutely be embracing foreign investment into this country from the Middle East, whether it's in football or green energy," said one. Meanwhile local politicians in Manchester have been [conspicuously silent](#) on the matter and local media has taken a neutral stance. This report does not address the Qatari bid for Manchester United, but irrespective of how that ends, it appears that history is repeating itself for a third time and this bolsters a few conclusions that were already evident.

Firstly, the UK government has been a central figure in state takeovers of English football clubs in part of the country where [vast reductions](#) in UK government spending have had the most damaging economic and social impact. The attempts of the British government to regulate football governance and create "a sustainable future" for the English club game are inconsistent with its efforts to encourage autocratic states to own football clubs.

Secondly, local politicians ought to be able to fulfil their need to secure investment and their responsibility to respond to the concerns of their constituents without at the same time serving the political interests of abusive, kleptocratic and profoundly anti-democratic states. In that regard, there have been serious failures in civic leadership in both Newcastle and Manchester. In the words of Newcastle supporter John Hird, "why would ordinary people do anything if their political representatives are just sitting on their hands?"

Thirdly, properly resourced, critically-minded local journalism is essential in holding these state projects and those who enable and defend them to account. In this regard, the decimation of UK local media, whose importance to democracy was highlighted in a [January 2023 report](#) by the UK Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee is something that states like the UAE and Saudi Arabia will continue to exploit to their advantage.

This report is not an attempt to weigh up the pros and cons of these investments. It accepts that investment has brought some benefits to Manchester and will bring some benefits to Newcastle, not least in terms of sporting success and the critical effect that has on important intangibles like hope and pride. These arguments should be factored into any debate on this issue. However, in an era when sport is increasingly coming under the control and influence of authoritarian regimes and in the context of the cultural, financial and emotional power of club football, it is imperative that we scrutinize these ownership models. Football clubs should not become political tools for autocrats and authoritarians, and a failure to arrest the increasing involvement of states will likely have devastating impacts for the game, and potentially for the clubs themselves and the cities whose political classes generally appear blind to the threat that they pose.



# CITY VS UNITED COMPARING THE TAKEOVERS

## Counting the cost of UAE and Saudi Arabian soft power in Manchester and Newcastle

### DEINDUSTRIALISATION AND AUSTERITY

Cotton and chattel slavery made Manchester [the manufacturing apex of the British Empire](#) in the nineteenth century, whereas it was coal and ship-building that drove Newcastle's industrial development. Just as both industrial cities were the product of nineteenth-century capitalism, their respective declines were, to quote [Steve Fothergill](#), "an almost inevitable consequence of the process of economic change within an 'advanced' capitalist economy." Austerity exacerbated the problems in both cities. Manchester has [one of the highest child poverty rates](#) by local authority area, with 35.5% of children under 16 living in poverty. The city council [reported in 2022](#) that a decade of austerity had led to a 15% reduction in spending power. Newcastle City Council has had to make [cuts totalling £347m](#) since 2010 with devastating impact on the provision of services. John Harris described "[the quiet poignancy](#) of parks smattered with broken slides and swings" in a visit in 2020. Even with their industries long gone, football has continued to form a central part of the identity of Manchester and Newcastle. "The game was in the air we breathed, and City and United were intermingled with it", said David Conn of growing up a long-suffering Manchester City fan in the shadow of the historically far more successful reds of Manchester United. Alex Niven referred to Newcastle as one of only a few UK cities where there is a "specific fierceness" in the sense of identity, with much of it revolving around Newcastle United, whose ground sits literally and figuratively in the heart of the city.

The economic decline of England's former industrial hubs stands in marked contrast to the billions of pounds that have poured into its biggest football clubs. Joshua Robinson and Jonathan Clegg's account of how the English Premier League became "[the richest, most disruptive force in sports](#)" notes how until the 1980s most club directors "rejected the very idea that the running of a football team might in any way mirror the operation of the factories, mines and foundries where the original players spent their weeks slaving away." It was the May 1992 decision of English football's top sides to break away and form its own Premier League that transformed the finances of the English game and ultimately set Manchester and Newcastle on a collision course with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

### UK GOVERNMENT ROLLED OUT THE RED CARPET

In February 2023, the UK announced via a white paper its plans to create a new independent regulator for men's elite football in England. Their proposed "fitness and propriety test" adjudges suitability for stewardship of a club to be based solely on an individual's "integrity, honesty, financial soundness, and competence", and takes no account of whether a prospective owner is acting in the political interests of a state. When asked about this omission by journalists, a UK government spokesman replied that "the state side of things is obviously a matter for the foreign office". The Department of Culture, Media and Sport told FairSquare in a March 2023 letter that "the regulator will not have the remit to assess the ... suitability of state ownership." Based on the evidence from Manchester and Newcastle, the current British government's efforts to ensure regulation of who can and cannot own and control English football clubs will not address arguably the most dangerous models of ownership. The UK government went to remarkable lengths to support Saudi Arabia's takeover of Newcastle United in 2021, and devoted significant resources to encouraging Abu Dhabi to increase its investments in Manchester.

Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's support for the Saudi takeover was hiding in plain sight well before proof of the British government's key role emerged. In August 2020, after the deal had faltered due to the



(top) The City Pub derelict on Tib Street, Manchester, 2021 © Mark Waugh / Alamy Stock Photo  
(bottom) Mohamed bin Salman Al Saud welcomes Boris Johnson in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 16, 2022. Picture by Andrew Parsons / No 10 Downing Street. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>

Premier League's concerns about the involvement of the Saudi state, and one week after Saudi Crown Prince's business partner Amanda Staveley had tearfully urged Newcastle United supporters to apply pressure to the Premier League, Johnson [sent an email of support](#) to a prominent supporters group. "I appreciate many Newcastle fans were hoping this take-over bid would go ahead and can understand their sense of disappointment," he said, urging the Premier League to provide "clarity".

But Johnson and the British government didn't want clarity, they wanted the Premier League to approve the takeover. As subsequently revealed by Adam Crafton, an email sent by Neil Crompton, the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, sent while the takeover had run into difficulty, read: "There are a number of ways in which HMG [Her Majesty's Government] can seek to facilitate dialogue with both the PIF and Saudi authorities on this to come up with the assurances the Premier League seek." The UK's deputy ambassador to Saudi Arabia noted that, "HMG is not neutral about UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia. It is a crucial and valuable relationship with an important partner, regionally and globally. The purchase of Newcastle United by KSA's (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) sovereign wealth fund would be a valuable boost to the relationship and signal of intent for further Saudi investment in the north east [of England]."

Crafton's investigation also uncovered an email that gives the impression that UK government officials sought to reduce the threat to the takeover caused by the fall-out from the gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Crafton revealed that the British government was aware that Khashoggi's fiancée had been publicly critical of the takeover, with an email from a redacted Foreign Office email address pointing out that Cengiz "has also spoken out". The email notes in the following bullet point that "we'll do some quick work with DIT [the Department of



International Trade] to ensure their PR offer is being shared.” The man, who had in the view of the US government [approved](#) the operation that murdered Khashoggi, Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, had, according to a [detailed account](#) in The Daily Mail, personally messaged Prime Minister Johnson in June 2020 and warned that there would be consequences for UK-Saudi relations if the deal did not go ahead.

The British government’s relationship with the United Arab Emirates is as strong as its relationship with Saudi Arabia, and after the UAE had established its foothold in Manchester with the purchase of Manchester City in 2008, the UK government encouraged the UAE to increase its investments in the city. The Conservative-led coalition government that took power in 2010, in the wake of the global financial crisis, immediately made boosting trade and investment ties with the Gulf states, [particularly the UAE](#), a [key foreign policy priority](#). A 10-person team of officials, codenamed “Project Falcon”, was set up in 2013 to reportedly give the UAE “privileged access to Britain’s political elite, prime land deals and world-famous institutions in academia and the NHS.” According to anonymous government sources, a Project Falcon member went to see Manchester City Council’s chief executive Howard Bernstein in June 2013, claiming he had a “message from the prime minister” [David Cameron] to sell the idea of the UAE investing in Manchester.

A year later Manchester City Council and the Abu Dhabi United Group announced the formation of a 10-year joint partnership to build 6,000 new homes, with council leader Sir Richard Leese calling it “[a world class exemplar of regeneration](#).” In July 2022, “[Manchester Offshored](#)”, a report by academics Richard Goulding, Adam Leaver and Jonathan Silver based in large part on a detailed accounting analysis of the publicly available data on the finances of the joint partnership, arrived at an altogether different conclusion. Manchester City Council had, they said, “sold the family silver too cheap” and that the partnership represented “a transfer of public wealth to private hands that

is difficult to justify as prudent.” A 2019 Sunday Times investigation had revealed that the council received no rental income from the joint venture with Abu Dhabi, that none of the apartments they built met the council’s own policy objectives on affordability and that the land provided to Abu Dhabi was not offered on the open market via a tendering process, with one developer calling the arrangement a “sweetheart deal between the council and Abu Dhabi.”

Thus, the same UK government that starved Newcastle and Manchester of funding via its austerity policies, which left them increasingly reliant on external investment, to a large extent enabled Saudi Arabia’s takeover of Newcastle United and instigated a significant increase in Abu Dhabi’s investment in Manchester. That investment has inarguably resulted in much-vaunted ‘regeneration’ of previously dilapidated and unsightly parts of east Manchester, but it has also led to a situation where a vast amount of unaffordable housing has been built in a city in the grip of a homelessness crisis and resulted in vast amounts of money being taken out of the city and beyond the reach of the UK tax authorities.

The UK government’s actions go a long way to explaining how the UAE and Saudi Arabia set up what academics have referred to as “[soft power enclaves](#)” in Manchester and Newcastle, but it is necessary to examine the response of local politicians in both cities to explain why two Gulf states with such dismal human rights records have had a relatively easy ride in two cities steeped in left-wing politics and with rich histories of protest and dissent.

### SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UAE: HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES AT HOME AND ABROAD

To properly contextualise the failure of civic leadership in Manchester and Newcastle, a brief examination of the human rights record of UAE and Saudi Arabia is required. “Human rights abuses” has been the preferable catch-all term in media coverage of the ethical issues associated with the ownership models of Manchester City and Newcastle United, but while this identifies the general problem, it gives little indication of the gravity of the abuses and harms that the states that ultimately control these clubs cause.

Over the last decade the UAE state has forcibly disappeared, locked up, exiled, or bullied into silence any Emirati who has offered even mild criticism of its rulers. Its model of authoritarian stability has effectively turned it into a totalitarian surveillance state. By the end of the 2010s, there was not a single independent human rights activist able to operate in the country. In 2016, Ahmed Mansoor, an engineer, poet and father of four who was by then known as the ‘last human rights defender in the UAE’, told an [interviewer](#):

*“The UAE is living in the worst time of its history, in [terms of] human rights. It’s the darkest era for the UAE — we’ve never been in this kind of situation, or anywhere close to this situation, throughout the history of the UAE, and even before that.”*

In 2018 a secret court handed Mansoor a 10 year prison sentence. For the past six years, he has been held in solitary confinement in a tiny, cold cell in Abu Dhabi’s Al Sadr prison, without access to reading materials or even a radio. The UAE’s activities outside its borders are arguably worse than its treatment of dissident nationals or the country’s migrant workers. The ruling Al Nahyan family have backed authoritarians and anti-democratic thugs around the world, from warlords to [Donald Trump](#) and [Marine Le Pen](#). It was UAE money that allegedly [funded the 2013 ousting](#) of the elected Muslim Brotherhood President in Egypt, and the installation of Abd el-Fattah el-Sisi, whose security forces massacred at least 900 people in a single day shortly after the coup. In Libya, Emirati drones and jets have coordinated with the mercenary [Russian Wagner Group](#) and provided it with direct finance.



# HORROR OF THE

## ‘Dissident’s fingers cut off one by one as envoy told thugs: Do this outside or I’ll get into trouble’

by Richard Pendlebury

**A**t 11pm on October 2, Jamal Khashoggi walked into the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul and all the doors closed behind him. He was never seen again. But the subject from his disappearance was the death of his wife, Huda, and the death of his two young daughters, Manal and Sara. The bodies were found in a car on the shores of the Red Sea. The bodies were found in a car on the shores of the Red Sea. The bodies were found in a car on the shores of the Red Sea.

**M**anual will have the same fate as the other women who were killed in the consulate. The bodies were found in a car on the shores of the Red Sea. The bodies were found in a car on the shores of the Red Sea. The bodies were found in a car on the shores of the Red Sea.

# TORTURE TAPE

## Chilling dossier that proves he wasn’t Saudis’ only victim

**T**he dossier proves that Khashoggi was not just a victim of Saudi Arabia but also of the United Arab Emirates. The dossier proves that Khashoggi was not just a victim of Saudi Arabia but also of the United Arab Emirates. The dossier proves that Khashoggi was not just a victim of Saudi Arabia but also of the United Arab Emirates.

Saudi Arabia’s domestic human rights record is, if anything, even worse, which should come as no surprise in light of the conduct of the country’s ruler, Mohamed bin Salman (MBS). In June 2019, the United Nations expert on extrajudicial killings published a [100-page report](#) into Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s 2018 death in Istanbul, based on a detailed six-month investigation, and concluded that “his killing was the result of elaborate planning involving extensive coordination and significant human and financial resources”, that “it was overseen, planned and endorsed by high-level officials” and that “it was premeditated.” In March 2022 alone – less than six months after the Newcastle United takeover – Saudi authorities executed 104 prisoners, including 81 on a single day, approximately half of whom were from areas of eastern Saudi Arabia that had seen widespread demonstrations calling for reform during the previous decade. Despite government assurances in 2020 that no one in Saudi Arabia would be executed for a crime committed as a child, Abdullah al-Huwaiti, aged 14 when his alleged offence took place and subjected to a grossly unfair trial, was sentenced to death on 2 March 2022. On 9 August 2022, Saudi Arabia’s Specialised Court of Appeal [sentenced women’s rights campaigner Salma al-Shehab](#) to 34 years in prison, on charges based solely on her peaceful criticism of the Saudi Arabian authorities on social media.

MBS’s first notable act when elected defence minister in 2015 was to launch a Saudi-led coalition attack on Yemen, a move that had the full support of the UAE. The Saudis and the Emiratis have been partners in a bloody and fractious conflict ever since, leading to numerous accusations of war crimes and the UN describing the country as experiencing “[one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises](#)”, with 21.6 million people requiring some form of humanitarian assistance and 80 percent of the population struggling to put food on the table and access basic services.

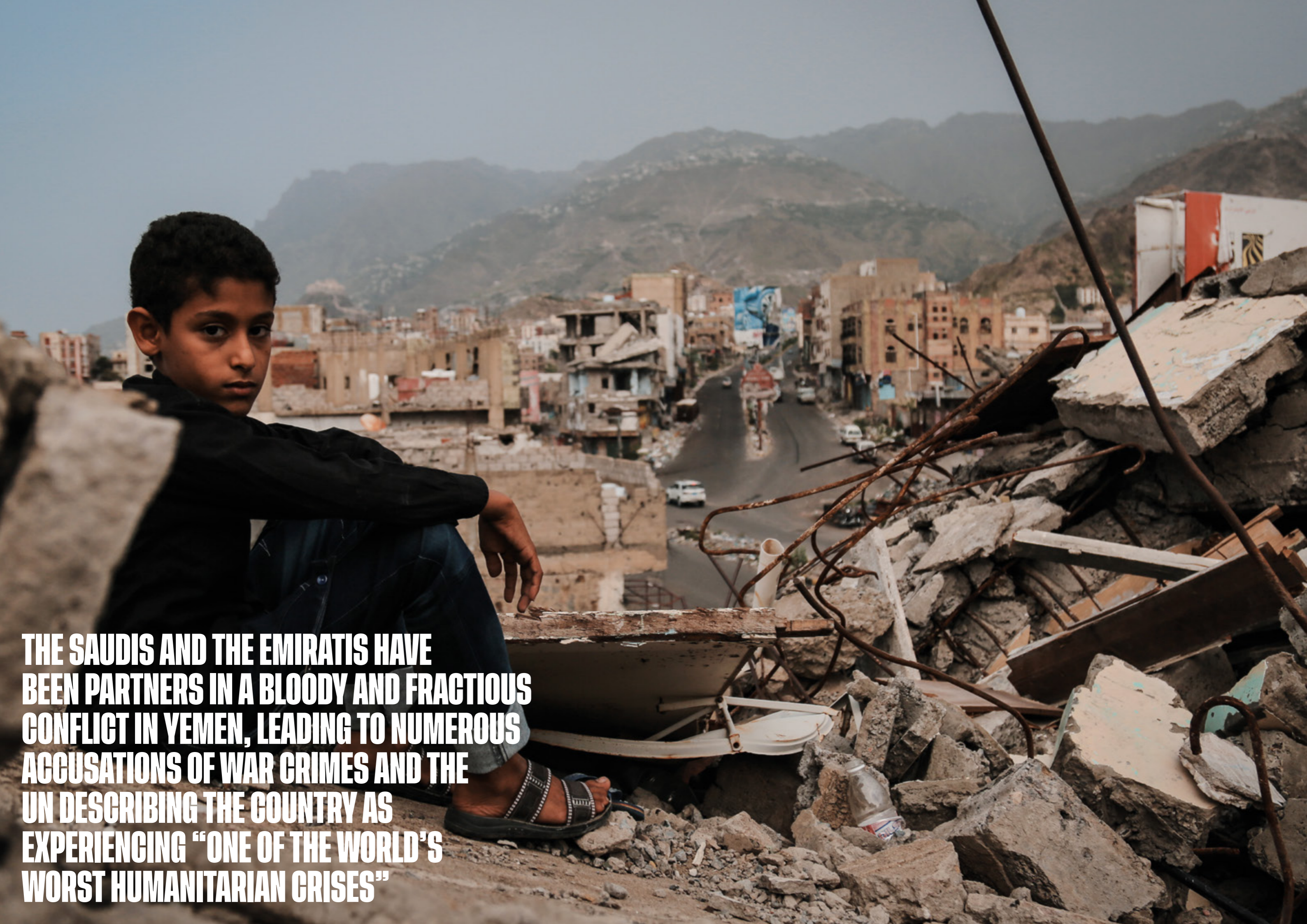
# IN MARCH 2022 ALONE SAUDI AUTHORITIES EXECUTED 104 PRISONERS, INCLUDING 81 ON A SINGLE DAY

Opposite page: (top) Donald Trump meets with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, May 15, 2017, in Washington, D.C. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead). (Bottom) Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin addresses his units in Bakmut, Ukraine, May 25, 2023. © LUP/Alamy Stock Photo.

This page: (top) Pages from the Daily Mail, October 18, 2018 © CBW/Alamy Stock Photo, (bottom) Men attending a funeral prayer at Fatih Mosque, Istanbul, for Jamal Khashoggi, November 2018 © Sadik Güleç/Dreamstime.com







**THE SAUDIS AND THE EMIRATIS HAVE BEEN PARTNERS IN A BLOODY AND FRACTIOUS CONFLICT IN YEMEN, LEADING TO NUMEROUS ACCUSATIONS OF WAR CRIMES AND THE UN DESCRIBING THE COUNTRY AS EXPERIENCING “ONE OF THE WORLD’S WORST HUMANITARIAN CRISES”**



# THE LEADERS OF MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL HAVE DEFENDED THE UAE AND SUPPRESSED CRITICISM OF THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD



Previous pages: Taiz City, Yemen, a child looks out over city, destroyed by war, August 2016 © Akram Alrasny / Dreamstime.com

This page: (top) Richard Leese [centre], Leader of Manchester City Council, with Howard Bernstein [right] Chief Exec of Manchester City Council, and Tom Russell [left], Chief Exec of New East Manchester, celebrating together © PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo. (bottom) Child injured in the war in Taiz, Yemen, 2017 © Akram Alrasny / Dreamstime.com

Opposite Page: (top) Newcastle United fans hold a Saudi flag outside St James' Park whilst celebrating the club's Saudi takeover, October 2021 © PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo (bottom) Newcastle United Co-Owner, Amanda Staveley, St James' Park, Newcastle, May 2022 © MatchDay Images Limited / Alamy Stock Photo

## FAILURES OF CIVIC LEADERSHIP

The most senior and influential politicians in Manchester and Newcastle have repeatedly declined to criticise the UAE and Saudi Arabia. More seriously, the leaders of Manchester City Council have defended the UAE and suppressed criticism of their human rights record, and MPs in Newcastle and the wider region allowed themselves to be manipulated into applying significant political pressure on behalf of Saudi Arabia's efforts to take control of Newcastle United.

In 2016 Manchester City Council leader Sir Richard Leese, when approached to [co-sign a letter](#) that was sent to the Emirati owner and chairman of Manchester City, calling for the UAE to release its political prisoners, investigate allegations of torture and commit to respecting human rights, responded by [saying](#) the Abu Dhabi government were "[exemplary business partners](#)" and that the "alleged" abuses detailed in the letter were beyond the council's sphere of influence. In 2016, Leese seemed in the words of Manchester journalist Danny Moran to enter a slightly "strange relativist dimension", when Moran asked him about [his views](#) on Abu Dhabi's human rights record. Leese first said

"Abu Dhabi isn't Qatar" (whose human rights record is very poor but by any objective scale less bad than the UAE's) adding, "you wonder why they [the UAE] are so disposed to the UK given what we've done to them over the years."

In 2019, as part of the commemorations of the 200th anniversary of Manchester's 'Peterloo Massacre', a seminal moment in the development of British democracy, multiple sources told us that a senior Manchester councillor insisted that reference to the city's relationship with the UAE be removed from a piece of open-air political theatre that the council had commissioned. A subsequent [internal council report](#) about the Peterloo commemorations noted that they were "underpinned by three central themes: Protest, Democracy, Freedom of Speech", but made no reference to the council's censorship of protest and freedom of speech, which in effect served as a defence of a profoundly anti-democratic state. "They [the council] will stand up and support free speech and protest when it suits them" said a local activist, who expressed shock at the failure of the city's political class to express any meaningful criticism despite their promotion of the city's radical history.

A former Labour councillor Ben Clay – one of only a handful of local politicians who has actively criticised the city council's links with Abu Dhabi – told FairSquare that there was "a lot of sensitivity over the relationship [with Abu Dhabi] when Leese was in charge." Clay referenced the censorship of the Peterloo commemorations and said that disciplinary proceedings were initiated against him after he publicly criticised the issuance of 'no fault' [eviction notices](#) issued by Manchester Life (the joint property development set up by the UAE and the city council) in 2019. "They [Manchester's Labour council leaders during Leese's tenure] did not like negativity and criticism of that relationship," said Clay.

Senior figures within the council have enjoyed a very close relationship with Manchester City FC. In 2013, Human Rights Watch's then researcher for the United Arab Emirates (a co-author of this report) filed a Freedom of Information request for a copy of the commercial agreement between Manchester City council and Manchester City FC. The council notified Vicky Kloss, then Chief Communications Officer at the club. "Vicky, suggest you google this guy," said one email to Kloss from a member of the Chief Executive's Department at the council. "Thanks. We know this guy well," replied Kloss before adding, "can we wait until the end of the statutory deadline to deliver this?" Emails from within Manchester City FC, obtained by the hacker [Rui Pinto](#) and published by [Der Spiegel](#), show that Kloss was acting under the instructions of Simon Pearce, who was the director of strategic communications at the Abu Dhabi Executive Affairs Authority and is also a board member of Manchester City FC.

In November 2017, Howard Bernstein left his role as chief executive of Manchester City Council and immediately took up a position as a [strategic development advisor with City Football Group](#). Howard Bernstein and Richard Leese have also both been appointed as honorary presidents of Manchester City Football Club. Bernstein was appointed while he was still serving in his role as Chief Executive of the council and Leese was appointed [honorary president](#) in May 2023.

The Saudi consortium that first launched its bid for Newcastle United in early 2020 appears to have been acutely aware of the role that local political support could play in its efforts to buy the club. "[It's up to the fans now](#)," British businesswoman Amanda Staveley told the media in Newcastle in July 2020 after the consortium withdrew its bid. "Because if the fans want this back on then they're going to have to go to the Premier League and say this isn't fair." Taking their cue from the business partner of Mohamed bin Salman, the fans mobilised their elected representatives to put pressure on the deal. The Newcastle United Supporters Trust (NUST) released a statement [demanding](#) "transparency" and "answers" about the collapse of the club's purchase, and provided a template letter for fans to use to send their local MP to support them in their calls for transparency. MPs received [1,143 letters](#) within 90 minutes. A subsequent template letter, [published in the local media](#), instructed readers on how to contact their MPs and spelled out what fans expected:

"As one of your constituents, I'm asked to attend a polling booth and vote for you ... I want to know if you are going to support our concerns or not. If you don't, this will leave me time to be able to pursue someone within our constituency to take this up on my behalf."

Alex Niven told FairSquare that it "would probably be political suicide for [a local MP] to oppose the takeover given the absolute fervour with which the support base had embraced it," but the fervour went far beyond simply neutering political opposition to the takeover. It led to many Newcastle politicians lobbying and advocating in effective support of the takeover.

In September 2020, Newcastle Central MP Chi Onwurah presented to the UK parliament what she called "[a petition](#) calling for Premier League transparency and accountability on behalf of my constituents." The petition criticised the Premier League's for failing to "provide

updates to supporters about the progress of takeover bids" and expressed "concerns that Premier League inactivity led to the collapse of the recent Newcastle United takeover". Finally it called on the UK government to "take action to review the way in which the Premier League assessed the recent Newcastle United takeover bid."

In December 2020 and January 2021, Ian Mearns, the MP for Gateshead, [wrote a series of written questions](#) about the takeover to the then UK Middle East Minister, James Cleverly. Mearns first [asked](#) whether the UK government met or exchanged correspondence with the Premier League to discuss the takeover. Mearns wrote three further letters on 11 January 2021 asking for details of the meetings that had taken place and another letter the following day asking "what assessment his Department has made of whether Prince Mohamed Bin Salman and the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia are separate entities for the purposes of investment in the UK."

On the day of the takeover in October 2021, two members of the Saudi consortium singled Onwurah out for thanks. "[A big thank you to @ChiOnwurah](#)" tweeted Mehrdad Ghodoussi. Jamie Reuben also took to Twitter and described Onwurah as one of the people "[who made this day possible](#)." In response to a letter from FairSquare and the Saudi rights group Al Qst, requesting that she call on the owner of Newcastle United to release Saudi activists and others facing the death penalty after grossly unfair trials, Onwurah said that "since the takeover of Newcastle United, I have spoken about the human rights record of Saudi Arabia and I will continue to do so," drawing attention to [comments](#) she made in the UK parliament after Saudi Arabia's execution of 81 people in March 2022 where she condemned what she called an "atrocious, horrific massacre". Her letter did not reference the fact that her comments then sought to push back against any suggestion that anyone other than the UK government had either the control or the influence to hold them to account, least of all anyone in Newcastle.







*“I speak for many, many of my constituents and Newcastle United fans. Does the Minister agree that whereas football fans have no control over or influence in the ownership of their beloved clubs — especially in a premier league awash with dirty money — the UK Government have both control over and influence in who they trade with and engage with? ... What is she going to do with that control and influence? Is she going to make it absolutely clear that sportswashing is not an option?”*

Onwurah says that “sportswashing is not an option,” while glossing over the fact that in response to the demands of a highly-mobilised element of their constituents, she and other politicians in Newcastle were instrumental in enabling the takeover to go ahead, providing the Saudi state with what its ambassador to Norway called a tool for “[soft power diplomacy](#)”.

in August 2022 the UK NGO Reprieve wrote letters to Nick Brown (Newcastle East MP) Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle North MP), Chi Onwurah (Newcastle Central MP) and four local councillors asking for their assistance in setting up a meeting with Newcastle Chairman Yasir al-Rumayyan to discuss the case of [Abdullah al-Huwaiti](#), a Saudi national facing the death penalty for alleged offences committed when he was 14. None of the MPs or councillors responded to their request.

Newcastle United supporters who oppose the Saudi Arabian ownership have expressed disappointment with the response from local MPs and have been scornful of the notion, [expressed](#) by some [prominent figures](#) in the city, that the Newcastle takeover would shine a light on human rights issues in Saudi Arabia. “That is the tail wagging the dog,” John Hird, who set up NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing, told FairSquare. “It’s not that Newcastle will change the Saudis, the Saudis are going to infect politics in Newcastle.” Hird drew particular attention to the silence of MPs. “Why would ordinary people do anything if their political representatives are just sitting on their hands? They’re pushing this hopelessness which we don’t agree with - fans do have power.”

John Paul Quinn, told FairSquare that he sent an email to all of the councillors in Newcastle to invite them to a public meeting to discuss the issues associated with Saudi ownership. “I got one response from a councillor who said she couldn’t attend but was interested in what we were doing. I haven’t heard from any of them since.”

## RESPONSE OF LOCAL MEDIA

The Saudi-led takeover of Newcastle United took place in 2021, thirteen years after the UAE’s purchase of Manchester City. During that time, the human rights record of Manchester City’s owners and FIFA’s decision to award the 2022 Men’s World Cup to Qatar had led to extensive coverage in the UK media about the ethics and consequences of authoritarian regimes’ money in football, and the term ‘sportswashing’ had entered the sportswriter’s lexicon. The 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia’s Istanbul consulate heightened public awareness of Saudi Arabia’s human rights abuses in particular and the fact that the Saudi coalition made no effort to distance MBS – the man credibly accused of [approving](#) Khashoggi’s murder – from the Newcastle United deal meant the takeover of the club was highly controversial long before it concluded, and attracted significant amounts of critical [local](#), [national](#) and [international](#) press coverage. This was in stark contrast to Manchester City’s purchase by the UAE, when human rights did not feature at all in media coverage of the takeover.

Since the takeover was completed, Saudi Arabia’s human rights record has continued to be referenced in the media, thanks in large part to the efforts of a small but vocal and well-organised pressure group. [NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing](#) has continued to provide regional media with the local angle that allows them to highlight criticism via news coverage as opposed to editorial criticism or pro-active investigation.

**“I THINK THAT THE ABU DHABI UNITED GROUP RECOGNISED SOMETHING MORE MUNDANE AND DEPRESSING ABOUT THE WORLD, WHICH IS THAT PEOPLE ARE REMARKABLY FORGIVING IF YOU GIVE THEM SUCCESS IN THE THINGS THAT KIND OF MATTER TO THEM ON A DAY TO DAY BASIS.”**

**– PROFESSOR ADAM LEAVER**

There is no equivalent group of Manchester City fans mobilising publicly against Abu Dhabi’s ownership.

Speaking to FairSquare, John Hird, the man who set up NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing, described local media’s coverage of the Newcastle takeover as “fawning” and it is certainly true that the occasional references to human rights abuses have been set in the context of overwhelmingly positive coverage of the new owners, with Amanda Staveley – white, British, female, and not accused of either war crimes or of having had a Saudi journalist brutally murdered in an embassy – proving a far more palatable face to the media than Mohamed bin Salman or his direct underlings. There has at least been some coverage of Saudi Arabia’s abuses in Newcastle. The evidence that mainstream local media has failed to effectively scrutinise petro-state investment in football is far more striking in Manchester.

In 2008, when Abu Dhabi’s ruling family took control of Manchester City, they sought to present the purchase as a private business venture and the UAE’s human rights record, while bad, had not yet declined to the point where it was attracting international attention. David Conn, writing in *The Guardian* in [June 2013](#), was the first UK journalist to draw a link between Manchester City and human rights abuses in the UAE. When Amnesty and Human Rights Watch lobbied Manchester politicians and civil society to speak out against the UAE’s worsening record in 2015, and numerous MPs and others, including prominent Manchester-based lawyers Pete Weatherby and Mark George, [signed a letter](#) criticising the UAE’s abuses, their interventions received no coverage in local press, radio or television.

When the city council censored protest against the UAE’s links with the city in its Peterloo anniversary commemorations, it was [The Sunday Times](#) that published the allegations in a broader examination of how the city council had put in place “sweetheart deals” with Abu Dhabi. With the exception of an article by Steve Robson [published in May 2021](#), it is difficult to find any critical coverage of Abu Dhabi’s links to Manchester in the Manchester Evening News (MEN) – Manchester’s most prominent local publication – and there has been scant coverage from the BBC’s regional radio and television outlets. The only local media outlet to have regularly published critical news or investigative pieces is the independent publication, [The Meteor](#). The Meteor’s former editor Conrad Bower described the mainstream media’s approach



as “feeble”, attributing this to local journalists not wanting to jeopardise relationships with Manchester City Council. Kate Feld, a lecturer in Digital Journalism at the University of Salford, who has been highly critical of Manchester’s links to Abu Dhabi, was more circumspect and addressed the capacity of local media to effectively take on such complex issues. “This is investigative journalism we’re talking about. It takes time and resources, particularly when you’re dealing with very rich and powerful people who are good at covering their tracks.”

The MEN lost 78 editorial jobs in 2009 and its owner, Reach plc, announced in 2023 that it would be [making 200 journalists redundant](#) across its titles, citing a 20.2% drop in print advertising and a 5.9% drop in digital ads. “I love the MEN, but Reach is a disaster,” one local journalist told FairSquare. “They’re not treating institutions like MEN with the respect they need.” Reach also owns The Chronicle in Newcastle. Joshi Herrmann, who runs the independent digital newspaper [The Manchester Mill](#), praised the MEN for “some great reporting on important social issues”, but noted that some of its journalists have to write more than 10 stories a day. “It’s the result of media companies trying to make a living from the meagre earnings of online ads, an approach which just doesn’t fit with local journalism.”

In marked contrast to the cuts to the MEN’s resources and funding, the billions of pounds that Abu Dhabi has poured into Manchester City since 2008 led to a significant upgrade to its communications operations. City’s press officers now work under the direction of Manchester City director Simon Pearce, who for more than a decade has provided communications advice to the most senior levels of the Abu Dhabi government. “The dynamic changed after the takeover,” a local journalist told FairSquare. “The Manchester City press officers went from being in poorly paid local press jobs to having their salaries tripled overnight. Nowadays they can be very difficult to deal with. They play their favourites, give them exclusive interviews with, say, Pep Guardiola.” A national sportswriter described to FairSquare a professional “tiered communications system” that has alienated many national journalists who are “not wanting to be beholden to them [the club’s communications officials] or not wanting to take the line” and said that “the club’s view in the past has been that local journalists covering them should be more willing to present their side in national discussion.”

A local journalist described what he saw as a prevailing journalistic and editorial mindset:

*“Everyone was just so pleased at the prospect of the investment. Like Newcastle, Manchester had been deprived of private and public investment for years. In a way, you don’t blame the fans for not caring too much. They got Kevin De Bruyne and big shiny buildings. A local paper would never bash their main football club without some pretty good evidence. You could cause damage which you would never undo.”*

Even in cases where there has been strong evidence of obviously problematic aspects of the relationship between Manchester City’s owners and the city council, local media has largely left serious criticism to the national press. The most obvious example of this was in the aftermath of the publication of the *Manchester Offshored* report in July 2022, and its central and newsworthy accusation, backed up by meticulous forensic accounting techniques, that Manchester City Council had “sold the family silver too cheap”. Despite the report documenting how Manchester City’s owners were, via a property deal with the council, actually taking money out of Manchester and beyond the reach of UK tax authorities, it got scant local coverage. “We got great media attention”, Jon Silver, one of its authors, told FairSquare. “[The Guardian](#), [The New York Times](#), [BBC North West](#) and BBC radio all covered it. It makes a convincing case for being featured as a local public interest story. We just didn’t get anything from the MEN.” The MEN did ultimately give the report coverage, but did so in the context of a [largely positive](#) article on the regeneration

of east Manchester which they published four weeks after the release of *Manchester Offshored*, with the findings referenced towards the end of the article.

In January 2023, the UK Parliament’s Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee released a report on the [sustainability of local journalism](#). “Evidence we received for this inquiry was consistent in emphasising the importance of local journalism to democracy”, the report begins. It notes that a key aspect of this is, “the oversight and scrutiny provided by its reporting of local government”. Criticism of local media in Manchester, and to a lesser extent Newcastle, should take account of overarching structural factors: declining print revenues have decimated the UK’s local media, leading to 320 local newspaper closures between 2009 and 2019, and diminishing the resources of those who have survived. The DCMS also highlighted local journalism’s importance in “building community cohesion and pride of place by signposting local initiatives, businesses, charities, and events” and in doing so hints at a less immediately obvious reason why mainstream local media might not have taken on the task of scrutinising the owners of Manchester City and Newcastle United. There can be few, if any, local institutions that provide more pride of place and community cohesion than football clubs. One impact of these ownership models is that they arguably place local media’s critical role in upholding democracy in tension with its role in sustaining community cohesion and local pride. If that is the case, and with time and resources scarce when set against the communications operations of the football clubs they are covering, is it any wonder that local media takes the path of least resistance?



# LOCAL MEDIA IN MANCHESTER AND NEWCASTLE HAVE STRESSED THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE TAKEOVERS, GENERALLY LEAVING CRITICAL COVERAGE OF UAE AND SAUDI ABUSES TO THE NATIONAL MEDIA



Opposite page: Matthew Hedges, November, 2021 © Associated Press / Alamy Stock Photo.

This page: (top) A double page spread from the Daily Mail, October 18, 2018, © CBW / Alamy Stock Photo Below: (top) Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan meeting with President of Russia Vladimir Putin in Saint Petersburg, Russia © www.kremlin.ru (bottom) Unhoused man, Manchester, 2017 © MediaWorldImages / Alamy Stock Photo

Following pages: Activist in Indonesia holds a poster with the image of Jamal Khashoggi, October 2018 © Herwin Bahar / Dreamstime.com





**JUSTICE FOR  
JAMAL KHASHOGGI**





# FULL REPORT



**COUNTING THE COST OF UAE  
AND SAUDI ARABIAN SOFT POWER  
IN MANCHESTER AND NEWCASTLE**





(top) engraving of the Peterloo Massacre, Richard Carrile, 1819  
 (middle) Ashton Under Lyne, Greater Manchester, 4 June 2019 © Philip Openshaw | Dreamstime.com,  
 (bottom) Manchester City Etihad stadium © 4kolips | stock.adobe.com.

## MANCHESTER

Manchester has been the site of some of the UK's most formative economic and political developments. "At almost any point in its history," writes journalist [Jack Shenker](#), "Manchester has provided two things simultaneously: a window on to the prevailing economic orthodoxy, and a case study in the flaws and fightbacks that threaten it."

Made rich by cotton and chattel slavery, Manchester became [the manufacturing apex of the British Empire](#) in the nineteenth century. As documented by Frederick Engels in his 1844 essay on "[The Condition of the Working Class in England](#)", there were parts of the industry that had "an especially injurious effect" on those working there: "besides the deformed persons, a great number of maimed ones may be seen going about in Manchester," Engels wrote. "This one has lost an arm or a part of one, that one a foot, the third half a leg; it is like living in the midst of an army just returned from a campaign."

In 1861, Manchester mill workers offered their [support for Abraham Lincoln's blockade](#) of the Confederate states despite the decimating impact it had on the local industry, and strong opposition to Lincoln's blockade from the mill and shipping industry. Lincoln wrote a letter to the mill workers in 1863, praising them for their selfless act of "sublime Christian heroism, which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country." The words are inscribed on the pedestal of the statue of Lincoln that stands in Manchester's Lincoln Square. Manchester's radical tradition is rooted in such acts of protest and civil disobedience. In August 1819, a gathering of 60,000 people met in Manchester's St Peter's Fields to demonstrate against the corn laws and for parliamentary reform, at a time when only about 2% of the population had the [right to vote](#). Local magistrates ordered Manchester Yeomanry to arrest its leader, the radical campaigner Henry Hunt, but the soldiers attacked the crowd, killing at least 11 and injuring 500. Hunt was sent to prison for two years. The [Peterloo Massacre](#), as it came to be known, paved the way for parliamentary democracy in the UK and was key to the founding of the Manchester Guardian.

The UK's deindustrialisation dramatically [reshaped](#) Manchester's local economy and there were approximately 400,000 fewer jobs in manufacturing in 2011 than there had been in 1911. The centralisation of policy-making and taxation during the Thatcher administration of the 1980s reduced the revenue streams for Manchester City Council, forcing it to look for [alternative post-industrial urban development strategies](#).

The council pivoted to [adopting public-private partnerships](#) to drive urban regeneration. As Goulding, Leaver and Silver set out, specific political and economic conditions at the time predisposed the Council towards this 'entrepreneurial' approach and Manchester's planning committee – the councillors appointed by the leadership to decide on applications to develop land in the city – became amenable to the argument that [building flats, leisure, office and retail space](#) would revitalise the local economy.

Between 1997 and 2007, Manchester attracted [£2 billion in private investment](#). In the late 2000s, however, local private capital began to dry up and the city council began to look further afield for capital. It did so with great success. In 2022, Manchester was level with Edinburgh as the UK's [top Foreign Direct Investment \(FDI\)](#) location outside London. The huge influx of foreign direct investment has seen Manchester reshaped as a modern, post-industrial and cosmopolitan city. But the benefits of growth in Manchester have not been shared equally among its residents. While the city is one of the most economically productive areas in the country, it has [one of the lowest disposable household incomes](#). It also has [one of the highest child poverty rates](#) by local authority area, with 35.5% of children under 16 living in poverty.

This has been made worse by over a decade of cuts to local government since 2010. "A decade of austerity had resulted in £420 million

having been removed from the Council's budget, resulting in a 15% reduction in spending power compared to a national average of 2.4%," [Manchester City Council's budget committee](#) reported in 2022. The local authority saw a [£2.4m reduction](#) in its homelessness services budget in 2021-22 alone.

This decimation of council services has further exacerbated a chronic and acute homelessness crisis in the city. The number of people housed in [temporary accommodation \(TA\)](#), which councils use to put up people who are homeless or who the council deems at risk of homelessness, has [soared almost 600%](#) since 2014, nine times faster than the national average. The costs of housing people in TA are eye-watering: the city council [spent £11.48m](#) in 2016-17, rising to [£29.16m](#) in 2020-21.

Politically, the Labour Party has dominated Manchester City Council politics for almost half a century, controlling a majority of seats in every election since the council was reconstituted in 1974. In 2022, 91 of the city's 96 councillors were Labour and the Conservative Party has not had a councillor in Manchester since the 1990s. In 2015, one commentator described Sir Richard Leese, leader of the city council from 1996 to 2021, as "[one of the most powerful Labour politicians in Britain](#)."

It should be noted that Manchester City Council is just one of ten councils that sits within the city-region of Greater Manchester. Labour MPs sit in all nine of the city's parliamentary constituencies and 19 of Greater Manchester's 27 constituencies. Greater Manchester also has a Labour Metro Mayor, Andy Burnham, who governs the combined authority.

Greater Manchester is also home to two of England's wealthiest and most successful clubs, Manchester City and Manchester United, and their contribution to the city goes far beyond their value to the local economy. One Manchester City fan, who preferred to remain anonymous, told us that "football is hugely important to Manchester's self-identity as a city." In [Richer Than God](#), his evocative and personal account of Abu Dhabi's takeover of Manchester City, football journalist David Conn wrote that, "the game was in the air we breathed, and City and United were intermingled with it ... You had to support one club or the other... and I, fatefully, was always blue."

Unlike United, who are steeped in European and domestic success, Manchester City had only sporadic success until relatively recently, enjoying a reputation for catastrophe and failure. "Initially I fell in love with the comedy," said a Manchester City fan we spoke to. "Then I fell in love with the football. And by the time I'd got through that I was an unapologetic fan. But I never made a conscious decision to be a City fan. I intuitively side with the underdog. It's kind of ironic where we've ended up now." Abu Dhabi's investment in Manchester City, which won two league titles in its history prior to 2008, has transformed the club's fortunes. In the ten years since United last won the English Premiership, City have won it six times and in June 2023, they won the UEFA Champions League for the first time in their history.

## NEWCASTLE

Like Manchester, Newcastle prospered as an engine of the Industrial Revolution. Newcastle's industrial and economic growth was based on coal and ships. By the mid-seventeenth century, the power of the burgesses of Newcastle upon Tyne who exported coal was such that they "had become [the bankers for the whole of North England](#)... their involvement in trade brought prosperity to the town, and many of the Newcastle hostmen, or coal-shippers, used their business gains as a nucleus for money-lending."

The North East continued to drive British industrialisation for several centuries. Two engineers from the area, George and Robert Stephenson, [designed the first locomotive](#) in 1814, which was used to haul coal on the Killingworth wagon way. At its peak in 1913, coal production



in Newcastle provided over 250,000 jobs and produced 56 million tonnes of coal a year from over 400 mines.

Newcastle shared Manchester's post-industrial fate, experiencing economic decline as Britain deindustrialised. During the 1960s and 1970s, Tyne and Wear's shipbuilding industry was decimated, while coal mines across the region closed down. In March 1985, the National Union of Miners called off a nearly year-long strike, a decision that signalled the death-knell for the north-east's coal industry. Government cuts to subsidies left the industry unable to compete with cheaper imported coal. At the time of the strike, the state-owned coal industry employed 221,000 people across 170 collieries; by 2005 its privatised equivalent employed fewer than 7,000 people across eight collieries. Between 1984 and 2007 the north-east lost around 100,000 manufacturing jobs alone.

The loss of employment associated with the deindustrialisation of the twentieth century was compounded by the austerity politics of the twenty-first. Despite some economic gains in the 2000s, a decade of austerity has taken a serious toll on Newcastle and the surrounding region. Due to budget cuts imposed by a series of Conservative-led governments, Newcastle City Council has had to make cuts totalling £347m since 2010.

In October 2018, the then head of Newcastle City Council, Nick Forbes, handed in a petition from county council leaders to the UK Prime Minister requesting that the UK government not proceed with a further series of budget cuts for local government. Commenting on the impact of austerity on Newcastle, social and political commentator John Harris noted "an awful symbolism in the fall in the number of lollipop men and women from 64 to seven; on one trip, I was struck by the quiet poignancy of parks smattered with broken slides and swings."

The region also has the lowest healthy life expectancy of all UK regions, at 59 years, compared with 66 years in the south-east. Unemployment in Newcastle was 5.9% in 2021-22 and 5.3% in the north-east region, well above the UK average of 3.8%. Child poverty in Newcastle rose sharply between 2014 and 2021, from 28% to 42.4%. The data corroborates one fan's description of the region as "outliers" on key social metrics:

*"The North East has always been left behind, from industry, to education, to health, to investment by government, the place has lagged behind since the deindustrialisation of the 1970s and '80s. Labour, Tory, even a relatively short lived Lib Dem administration of Newcastle City Council have delivered no long-term material change to conditions for most people."*

Like Manchester, Newcastle has attempted to fill gaps in its funding from central government by attracting private investment, particularly foreign direct investment. When Newcastle beat nine other UK cities for investment from an international technology firm in 2021, council lead Nick Forbes announced that, "Newcastle is a city on the global stage... We are now building a strong digital sector, which includes a growing FinTech base, that can compete with other big cities and have the ingredients we need – good transport links, culture, beautiful open spaces, a vibrant night-time economy and a skilled versatile workforce to attract investors."

While the value of foreign direct investment in the North East increased from £16.2 billion to £24.5bn between 2015 and 2020, this still pales in comparison to investment in the North West, which stood at £73.9bn in 2020.

As in Manchester, the Labour Party dominates the political scene in Newcastle. There are three parliamentary constituencies in Newcastle and a further nine in the broader ceremonial county of Tyne and Wear. All of these seats are currently and historically held by Labour. Labour also controls the local council, with 50 councillors out of a total of 78.

Newcastle United is at the heart of the city, both figuratively and literally. "I can see it out of my window from the university," Alex Niven,

a writer, academic and Newcastle supporter told us. And unlike the majority of the UK's former industrial cities, the city is home to only one club, which means that loyalty is not just fierce, it is virtually undivided. "All of Newcastle and Northumberland, most of Tyneside and half of County Durham regards you as the local team. It's a population of well over a million, and the vast majority support Newcastle if they support anyone. A large portion of the population are Newcastle fans. We have around 52,000 seats in the stadium, all of them are sold out," said Niven, who also drew comparisons with Glasgow and Liverpool:

*"They have a specific fierceness of their sense of identity and their separateness [that] is more accentuated than in other cities. This had a profound impact on the atmosphere of the whole place."*

However, the passion of the club's supporters has not translated into success on the pitch. Newcastle last won the league in 1927 and the FA Cup in 1955 was their last major trophy. In 1996 and 1997 Newcastle were runners-up in the league. One supporter, speaking anonymously, described how his hopes for the team at this time coincided with the arrival of a Labour government: "Much like the Labour landslide of 1997, things would surely improve now. Our time was here, except it wasn't."

The club has been relegated from the Premier League to the English First Division twice, once in 2009 and again in 2016, both under the deeply unpopular ownership of English businessman Mike Ashley. In 2011, Ashley announced that St James's Park would be renamed the Sports Direct Arena, after his sports retail company, and in 2012 a worker armed with a crowbar, prised off the letters of St James' Park and replaced them with a Sports Direct banner. The Daily Mail quoted the worker as saying, "I don't want to do this, I should be doing this in the dark." And since the 1990s, the city's political and economic fortunes have mirrored that of the football club, as observed by one supporter. "There was no significant industrial investment, there were more call centres and state funded jobs in the civil service, NHS, local authority and universities, still three of the biggest employers in the city today."

As one interviewee put it, Newcastle was "an easy city to buy."

## THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven semi-autonomous emirates on the southern coast of the Arabian Gulf. Abu Dhabi is the wealthiest and most powerful of the seven and its rulers, from the Al Nahyan family, have always held the Presidency of the UAE. Made up of several former British protectorates, the UAE became fully independent from the United Kingdom in 1971. Abu Dhabi's oil and gas fields fueled the UAE's tremendous economic growth under the leadership of the 'father of the nation' Sheikh Zayed.

The Federal Supreme Council, comprising the dynastic rulers of the seven emirates, is the country's highest executive body. It selects a president and vice president from among its members, and the president appoints a prime minister and cabinet. The emirate of Abu Dhabi has controlled the federation's presidency since its inception in 1971. Political parties are banned and the political system grants the emirates' hereditary rulers a monopoly on power and excludes the possibility of a change in government through elections. According to Transparency International there is "little transparency, and mechanisms to protect against corruption and other abuses are lacking."

After Sheikh Zayed's death in 2004, the UAE came under the de facto control of his second son, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. MBZ, as he is known, became the President of the UAE in 2022 after the death of his brother Sheikh Khalifa. Enigmatic, charismatic and ruthless, MBZ has been described as the most powerful and influential ruler in the Middle East. Scarred by the memory of the first Gulf war, and the ease with which Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait and took control of its oil and gas reserves, he has



(top) Elswick Shipyard, 1885 © ART Collection / Alamy Stock Photo, (middle) derelict building with Sage Gateshead in the background, Newcastle, 2019 © Kerry Taylor / Dreamstime.com, (bottom) Newcastle United fans 2010 © PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo





(top) devastation after an airstrike, Tripoli in Libya, July 2019 © Associated Press / Alamy Stock Photo, (middle) A supporter of ousted Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi carries wood to burn in a fire barricade at the sit-in at Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square in the lead up to the Raaba Massacre, Cairo's, Egypt, August 14, 2013 © Associated Press / Alamy Stock Photo, (bottom) UAE Armed forces in BMP-3 IFV (Infantry Fighting Vehicle) at IDEX 2013 military exhibition, Abu Dhabi, February 2013 © YoungHwan | stock.adobe.com.

transformed the UAE into a regional military force, with its forces active in Yemen, and proxies operating in Libya and Somalia. In conjunction with its strategic partners in the west, notably the United States, the UAE has also developed a sophisticated and well-resourced [defence industry](#). Its EDGE group has revenue of \$5 billion and 12,000 employees.

Deeply suspicious of political Islam and its potential to undermine his dynastic rule, MBZ has [purged the UAE of all dissident voices and critics](#), and has implemented a highly sophisticated electronic surveillance network that can target critics and foes at home and abroad. Researchers at Citizen Lab christened the award-winning Emirati rights activist Ahmed Mansoor, “[the million dollar dissident](#)” after they found highly sophisticated malware on his phone in 2016. Mansoor was arrested by the UAE’s notorious state security forces in March 2017 and is serving a [10-year jail sentence](#). Mansoor is the most well-known of numerous critics now languishing in the UAE’s prisons and MBZ’s draconian rule has muzzled all domestic criticism. In May 2018, security forces arrested British academic Matthew Hedges at Dubai International Airport as he was preparing to leave the country following a two-week research trip to the UAE. Authorities held Hedges, then a PhD candidate at Durham University, in pretrial detention for more than five months. In November 2018, a UAE court sentenced Hedges to life in prison, accusing him of “spying” for the UK government. Five days later, following growing diplomatic pressure and international outrage, the UAE pardoned him. Hedges said he was [force-fed a cocktail of drugs](#) during his imprisonment and forced to sign a confession under extreme duress.

The ruling Al Nahyan family have backed authoritarians and anti-democratic thugs around the world, from warlords to [Donald Trump](#) and [Marine Le Pen](#). It was UAE money that allegedly [funded the 2013 ousting](#) of the elected Muslim Brotherhood President in Egypt, and the installation of Abd el-Fattah el-Sisi, whose security forces massacred at least 900 people in a single day shortly after the coup. In Libya, Emirati drones and jets have coordinated with the mercenary [Russian Wagner Group](#) and provided it with direct finance.

MBZ has surrounded himself with loyalists, including his two younger brothers Mansour and Tahnoon, and an array of “[liegemen](#)”, foremost among them Khaldoon Al Mubarak, who serves in a variety of roles, including chairman of the Abu Dhabi Executive Affairs Authority, which “[provide strategic policy advice](#)” to MBZ. Gulf experts Christopher Davidson described Mubarak as “[Abu Dhabi’s interface with the rest of the world](#)” and a man who “has the ear of the crown prince [MBZ]”. Mubarak is also the Chairman of Manchester City and City Football Group. Another members of MBZ’s inner circle who also sit on the Manchester City board is Simon Pearce, whose role is discussed further in this report.

The UAE has spent many millions of dollars cultivating its image in the west, projecting itself as a muscular hub of tolerance and stability, while at the same time systematically eliminating all vestiges of a critical civil society. If political freedoms were measured by the metric of the number of citizens who express criticism of their government, the UAE would rank near the bottom of any global league.

## SAUDI ARABIA

The modern state of Saudi Arabia [came into being in 1932](#) after the end of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, when Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, known as Ibn Saud, through a series of conquests, unified distinct regions and tribes from across the Arabian Peninsula. A year after its independence, [Ibn Saud signed an agreement with the American oil company Socal](#) (now called Chevron) for the rights to any oil and gas they could find in 360,000 square miles of eastern Saudi desert. Socal paid less than \$1 million in gold bullion to Ibn Saud, and went on to [extract fuel worth more than \\$1 trillion](#). Since

the 1940s, the US has acted as the guarantor of Saudi security, although [Chinese political influence in the Gulf is growing](#). Saudi Arabia is currently the [second biggest producer](#) of oil globally, and the biggest exporter of oil.

The Al Saud family’s [links with Wahhabism](#), an austere form of fundamentalist Islam, date back to 1744 and the Al Saud family have used the state’s considerable resources to establish Wahhabism at home and promote it abroad in return for the Wahhabist clerics’ support for their rule. It is this association that has given the country its reputation for brutal government, with the repression of women and public executions held up as evidence.

[Political parties are forbidden, and political dissent is effectively criminalized](#). As noted by [Freedom House](#), many of the country’s most prominent political rights organisations and activists, including founding members of the banned Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), have been arrested and sentenced to prison in recent years. One of ACPRA’s founders, Abdullah al-Hamid, died in custody in 2020. Many other political activists continue to serve lengthy prison sentences.

[Corruption remains a significant problem](#). The government generates massive revenue from the sale of oil, but little is known about state accounting or the various direct ways in which public wealth becomes a source of private privilege for the royal family and its clients.

Saudi Arabia is currently ruled by Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman (MBS). As the sixth son of King Salman, and largely unknown before, his elevation to the throne was unexpected. Salman made his son defence minister in 2015, and MBS’s first notable act was to launch a Saudi-led coalition attack on Yemen, a move that had the full support of the UAE. The Saudis and the Emiratis have been partners in a bloody and fractious conflict ever since, leading to numerous accusations of [war crimes](#). Despite this, between 2015 and 2021 UK firms had sold over [£20 billion worth of military equipment](#), and services to Saudi Arabia since 2015, according to the Campaign Against the Arms Trade.

As the de facto leader of Saudi Arabia, MBS wields vast and largely unaccountable power within the Kingdom. A February 2019 report from Human Rights Watch detailed how, under the auspices of an anti-corruption drive, Saudi authorities acting on the direction of Mohamed bin Salman carried out mass arrests, including of princes, current and former government officials, and prominent businessmen and detained them for several months at Riyadh’s five-star Ritz Carlton Hotel and forced them to turn over assets in exchange for their freedom. Human Rights Watch described the process as “[a shake down](#)” and The New York Times subsequently reported that [many of those detained had been tortured](#), including the case of an army general who was allegedly tortured to death.

MBS has shown himself willing to exercise this power not just against his own citizens or within his own borders. In late 2017, the [Lebanese Prime Minister](#), visiting Saudi Arabia, was invited to go on a desert trip with MBS. Instead, Saudi officials removed his mobile phone and held him for several hours, a period described by his staff as a “black box”. Eventually he was coerced to read out a resignation statement on camera. The Lebanese President said that the Prime Minister had been “[held captive](#)” in Riyadh. In June 2019, the United Nations expert on extrajudicial killings published a [100-page report into Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s 2018 death](#) in Istanbul, based on a detailed six-month investigation and concluded that “his killing was the result of elaborate planning involving extensive coordination and significant human and financial resources”, that “it was overseen, planned and endorsed by high-level officials” and that “it was premeditated.” Khashoggi had been critical of MBS’s leadership in his articles for The Washington Post. The report stated that “there



was credible evidence, warranting further investigation of high-level Saudi officials' individual liability, including that of the Crown Prince", and that "every expert consulted finds it inconceivable that an operation of this scale could be implemented without the Crown Prince being aware, at a minimum, that some sort of mission of a criminal nature, directed at Mr. Khashoggi, was being launched." In 2021, the CIA also assessed that MBS approved an operation to kill or capture Jamal Khashoggi.

Like his one-time mentor MBZ in the UAE, MBS has an inner circle of trusted confidantes, including [Yasir Al-Rumayyan](#), who was the CEO of a local bank until MBS installed him as the managing director of the Public Investment Fund in 2015 and the Chairman of Saudi Aramco in 2019. "The key thing Yasir offers MBS is trust", said a person who has worked with him and known him for more than 15 years in [a profile of Al-Rumayyan](#) by Vivian Nereim. "In countries like Saudi Arabia and for the ruling family, [trust is the key](#), capability not always."

Although MBS is understood to have relied less on UAE ruler MBZ in recent years, numerous analysts have pointed to the critical role and influence of MBZ both in MBS's rise to power and his actions in the years following. "In the major confrontations in the Arabian Peninsula, MBZ is in the driver's seat. ... [MBZ exploits the immaturity, the arrogance and the ambition of MBS to achieve his ends](#). MBZ is happy to let MBS have centre stage while he is in the wings, watching, working and manipulating," said Bill Law in 2020. MBS and MBZ have been at the forefront of [counter-revolutions](#) designed to entrench and harden authoritarian rule in the region, exerting their influence in Bahrain, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Sudan. As Jonathan Fenton-Harvey [remarked](#), they "have emerged as key protagonists in both thwarting popular movements and in shaping the political and economic policies of regional states in favor of liberalizing economies, hardening authoritarianism and repressing social protest." In doing so they "[have torn up the old rules](#)" and "replaced the old 'sheikhly' consensus systems of their predecessors with something more autocratic."

## 2008: ABU DHABI AND MANCHESTER CITY

Joshua Robinson and Jonathan Clegg's account of how the English Premier League became "[the richest, most disruptive force in sports](#)" notes how it was only in the latter part of English football's more than 150-year history that anyone thought a football club should be run like a business. "Until the 1980s, the game's origins as a loosely affiliated collection of working men full of amateur ideals had taught most club directors to ... reject the very idea that the running of a football team might in any way mirror the operation of the factories, mines and foundries where the original players spent their weeks slaving away." It was the May 1992 decision of English football's top sides to break away and form its own Premier League that transformed the finances of the English club game and set Manchester and Newcastle on a collision course with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. It would take some time but two sleeping giants - Manchester City and Newcastle United - would ultimately become UK entry points for two cash-rich autocracies, whose repression and human rights abuses meant that "the world's premier entertainment powerhouse" was the perfect public forum for them to promote more wholesome counter-narratives, and to do so in cities that were desperate for foreign investment and with clubs whose supporters were desperate for success.

### "A personification of the club with the values we hold as Abu Dhabi"

On 2 September 2008, [The Financial Times reported](#) that "a group of Abu Dhabi investors" had agreed to buy Manchester City from Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Thai prime minister. Initially the role of the state in the takeover was obscured, but it was quickly clear

that Abu Dhabi's ruling Al Nahyan family was behind the deal. The Guardian quoted "[senior courtiers](#)" who said that Sheikh Mansour [Al Nahyan] wanted to use Manchester City to "improve football in the Gulf and enhance the international reputation of the United Arab Emirates." At the time, and despite being significantly more powerful and wealthy, Abu Dhabi was still in the shadow of its neighbour Dubai, which was already playing host to European Tour Golf, ATP Tennis, and whose airline, Emirates, had an array of very public sponsorship deals in European club football, including the [naming rights to Arsenal FC's football stadium](#).

The takeover attracted little to no controversy. In 2009, the club's [chairman](#) Khaldoon Al Mubarak, who is also one of the most senior advisors to Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan [gave a telling interview](#) to the British journalist David Conn. On the one hand, Mubarak claimed that Mansour bought City with his own money and that he saw investment potential in the club. At the same time, Al Mubarak did not disguise the role of the state nor the benefits they sought to accrue:

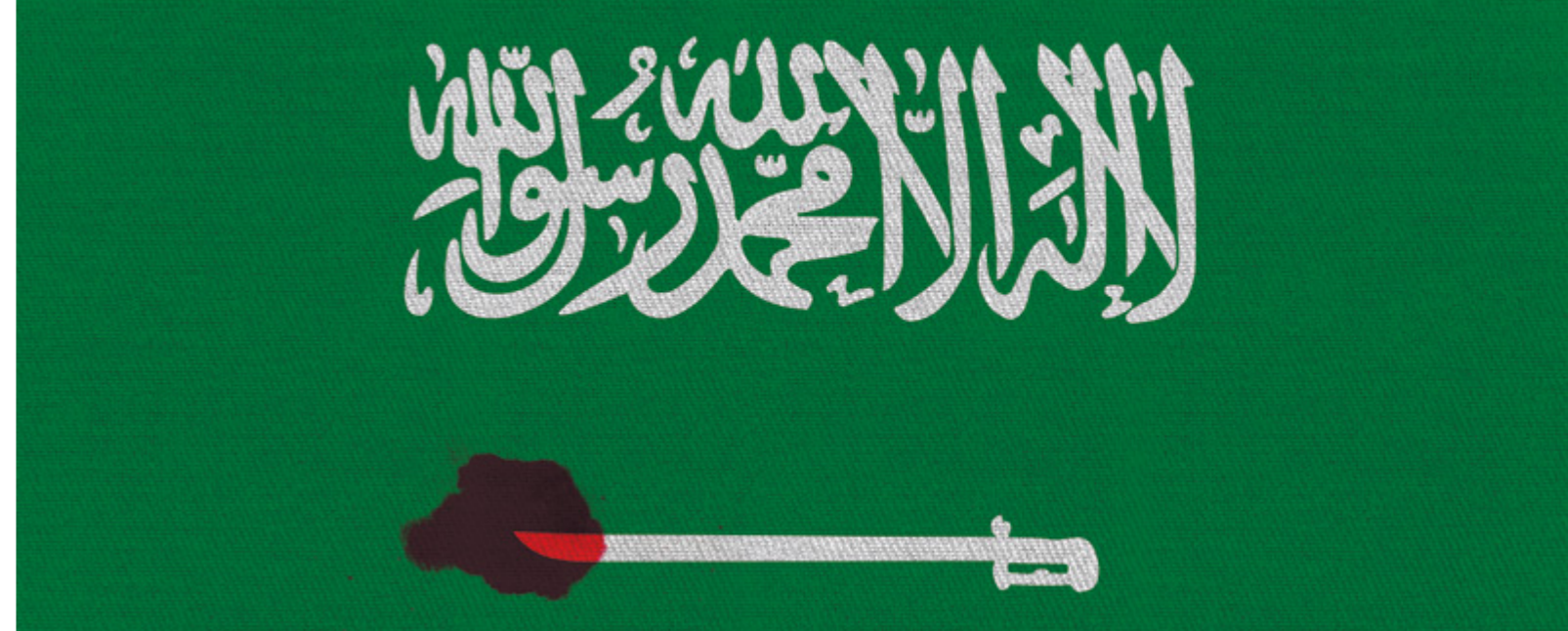
*"There is an appreciation of the association the club have with Abu Dhabi that we hold very dearly. There is almost a personification of the club with the values we hold as Abu Dhabi, as Sheikh Mansour. These are loyalty, commitment, discipline, long-term thinking, respect, appreciation of history... We are acknowledging that how we are handling this project is telling a lot to the world about how we are. The UAE is different from other Arab countries. People think the Arab world is one, but it is not. This is showing the world the true essence of who Abu Dhabi is and what Abu Dhabi is about. That is something new, something we didn't really plan for."*

Steffen Hertog, Associate Professor in Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics, has described how Gulf states like Abu Dhabi have designed domestic urban enclaves, with an audience that is almost exclusively international, as a means of gaining international recognition and diversifying their oil-rich economies. These 'enclaves', Hertog argues, include universities like NYU Abu Dhabi and museums like the Guggenheim and Louvre, which enable Gulf states to buy the accoutrements of 'good citizenship' and 'progressiveness', allowing them to appear to "comply with Western-defined 'liberal' international norms and tastes." One could argue that Manchester City has enabled the UAE to carve out a [soft power enclave](#) for itself in Manchester and beyond. Manchester City was the first football team purchased by Abu Dhabi, but it is now one of twelve clubs, including teams in New York and Melbourne, which operate under the [City Football Group \(CFG\) umbrella](#).

### "A message from the Prime Minister"

The purchase of Manchester City opened up commercial opportunities for Abu Dhabi, and the British government actively sought UAE investment in Manchester and elsewhere in the UK. In the wake of the global financial crisis, the Conservative-led coalition government that took power in 2010 immediately made boosting trade and investment ties with the Gulf states, [particularly the UAE](#), a key [foreign policy priority](#). As revealed by Randeep Ramesh in [The Guardian](#), a 10-person team of officials, codenamed "[Project Falcon](#)", was set up in 2013 to give the UAE "privileged access to Britain's political elite, prime land deals and world-famous institutions in academia and the NHS." According to anonymous government sources, Project Falcon member Martyn Warr, a former counter-terrorism official at the Foreign Office, went to see Manchester City Council's chief executive Howard Bernstein in June 2013, claiming he had a "message from the prime minister" to sell the idea of the UAE investing in Manchester.

In June 2014, almost exactly one year after Project Falcon sold the idea of the UAE investing in Manchester to Howard Bernstein, Manchester City Council and the Abu Dhabi United Group announced



(top) 3D render of Saudi Arabia flag with blood stain © Global News Art Sergio Lacueva | Dreamstime.com (middle) Ashton Under Lyne, Greater Manchester, 4 June 2019 © Phillip Openshaw | Dreamstime.com, (bottom) ruins in the Yemen war, 2017, © Akram Alrasny | Dreamstime.com, (bottom) Commemorative event held by POMED and 12 other human rights and press freedom organizations remembering the life of Jamal Khashoggi, Capitol Hill, September 2019 © April Brady/Project on Middle East Democracy





(top) Richard Leese, Leader of Manchester City Council celebrates with Chief Exec of Manchester City Council, Howard Bernstein, centre, and Tom Russell, Chief Exec of New East Manchester © PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo, (bottom), Unhoused man sleeps in pub doorway with passers by, Manchester, 2021 © horst friedrichs / Alamy Stock Photo

the formation of a 10-year partnership called Manchester Life to build 6,000 new homes. Sir Richard Leese said of the deal that it would “create a world class exemplar of regeneration” and that it would “deliver significant socioeconomic impact”. This narrative went unchallenged for five years until a 2019 investigation by David Collins in the Sunday Times, “[The City That Sold Out To Abu Dhabi](#)”, revealed that the council received no rental income from the joint venture with Abu Dhabi, that none of the apartments they built met the council’s own policy objectives on affordability and that the land provided to Abu Dhabi was not offered on the open market via a tendering process. One developer offered scathing criticism of the deal:

*“This is a sweetheart deal between the council and Abu Dhabi... They get the land without any fair competition process, they can build apartment blocks, and when the blocks start earning millions the council gets no rental income. They don’t even have to make section 106 payments, like lots of other developers. The whole thing stinks.”*

In response, the city council said that none of the schemes would have been “financially viable” had Manchester Life been obliged to meet standard requirements on affordable housing or financial contributions. They said that the tax, business rates and employment generated by the developments exceeded these contributions. Leese told [The Sunday Times](#) that opposition to the council’s deal with Abu Dhabi was “rooted in a Little Englander mentality” and said that the commitment of Mansour’s and Al Mubarak’s Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG) to the “ongoing regeneration of east Manchester” was consistent with Manchester’s history of international cooperation.

In July 2022, “[Manchester Offshored](#)”, a report by academics Richard Goulding, Adam Leaver and Jonathan Silver based in large part on a detailed accounting analysis of the publicly available data on the finances of the Manchester Life partnership, was heavily critical of the council’s joint property venture with Abu Dhabi, assessing that “Manchester City Council ‘sold the family silver too cheap,’” and the partnership “represents a transfer of public wealth to private hands that is difficult to justify as prudent.” The report details its basis for this conclusion:

*“The leaseholds for land were sold at low rates to Abu Dhabi interests, the council has no share of the property assets and does not receive rental income streams or asset sales income directly. ... We can find no income from the Manchester Life investment in the council’s accounts. On top of that, the project was given direct and indirect public financial support through government backed loans and the relaxation of affordable housing contributions.... it is not obvious why UK public funds would be used to support a development structure that is typically used in other examples to reduce tax returned to the UK Exchequer.”*

The report found that not only did Abu Dhabi get the land on the cheap, it also received UK government support, circumvented affordable housing regulations and took all of its profits from the deal to entities registered in Jersey and therefore not subject to UK income tax.

Alan Good, a Liberal Democrat councillor for Ancoats and Beswick, the ward where Manchester City’s Etihad stadium sits, told FairSquare that he believes the council could have got a better deal and that the council’s arguments that only Abu Dhabi investment could deliver the required regeneration did not stack up. Good also said that the council “absolutely could have enforced the affordable housing requirement”, noting that in his experience the council was generally too acquiescent to developers who cited low profit margins as a reason to circumvent affordable housing requirements. Good also drew a clear parallel with the Manchester Life deal and Manchester City’s homelessness crisis.

*“We have 14,000 people on the housing waiting list. When we approve luxury flats and money goes out of the country, or we lose money*

*on the sale of council land, that’s money that could end up in the homelessness budget.”*

Good attributed the council’s reticence to comment on the deal to embarrassment at having struck a bad deal with Abu Dhabi. “They know about the lack of transparency, they know about the lack of affordable housing. They know they sold the family silver too cheap.”

One Manchester City supporter we spoke to said he was not the only fan to have concerns about the findings of Manchester Offshored. “As a city if you’re going to do a deal with the devil, and take billions in development money, it’s your responsibility [to make sure] that an appropriate amount of that goes towards building genuinely affordable housing, doctors’ surgeries, schools and so on, not just building glittery tower blocks.”

#### “Exemplary business partners”

Manchester’s relationship with Abu Dhabi has been the subject of significant criticism. Manchester City Council has stoutly defended its relationship in more than commercial terms. It has not only refused to recognise any problematic ethical problems in its relationship with Abu Dhabi, it has actively suppressed criticism of its partner.

In Spring of 2016, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International wrote to Manchester City Council expressing concern over the city’s commercial ties with the UAE and called on Sir Richard Leese, then leader of Manchester City Council, and Howard Bernstein, then chief executive of the council, to take “simple and principled steps”, and call for the release of Emirati critics of the UAE government who had been jailed after demonstrably unfair trials tainted by credible allegations of torture. “Relationships involving the Council and the UAE should not and need not come at the cost of an abandonment of the values that Manchester proudly proclaims as part of its heritage,” said the letter. Meanwhile in August 2016, a coalition of activists, lawyers, artists and politicians [co-signed a letter](#) that was sent to the Emirati owner and chairman of Manchester City, calling for the UAE to release its political prisoners, investigate allegations of torture and commit to respecting human rights. One unnamed Labour Party source described the failure of some local MPs to sign the letter as a “[betrayal of Labour’s campaigning heritage](#)” in the city, but several local MPs did sign, including Angela Rayner, Andrew Gwynne, Jonathan Reynolds, Graham Stringer and Rebecca Long-Bailey.

The council, led by Leese, not only failed to sign the letter, or even express private support for the individuals affected, but instead offered its backing to its partners in Abu Dhabi. Leese responded by saying the Abu Dhabi government were “[exemplary business partners](#)” and that the “alleged” abuses detailed in the letter were beyond the council’s sphere of influence. Former labour councillor Ben Clay told FairSquare that he had been part of a group of council backbenchers who wanted the council to write to the government of Abu Dhabi and raise the issue of imprisoned human rights lawyers. “Lots of people agreed it was something we should be doing about but again most of these people didn’t want to stick their heads above the parapet or publicly challenge the leadership line on it”, Clay said.

In 2016 Leese was asked about his [views](#) on Abu Dhabi’s human rights record and “seemed to enter a slightly strange relativist dimension” according to local journalist Danny Moran:

*“As for human rights: “Well, Abu Dhabi isn’t Qatar. I don’t think it’s a comparable regime. I’ve only been to Abu Dhabi once but actually I have read a history of Abu Dhabi which is very interesting. You wonder why they are so disposed to the UK given what we’ve done to them over the years. From what I can see they don’t have the same way of treating migrant workers as you have in Qatar. Abu Dhabi is a relatively conservative Muslim regime but I suppose if you get into the issue of covered heads for women, actually they expect men to cover their heads as well.””*



In the run-up to Manchester City's appearance in the Champions League final of 2021, Leese again defended the city's links with Abu Dhabi in commercial and development terms, [telling the Manchester Evening News](#) that "following the move of the club to the Etihad, the City Football Group have fulfilled all the investment promises they have made to the city, becoming a significant contributor to the Manchester economy and driving key regeneration."

As described above, the Manchester Life joint venture has since been the subject of significant controversy in relation to the benefits to the city and the council, and in August 2019 Manchester Life was also the subject of critical local media coverage after it issued tenants with Section 21 (also known as 'no fault') [eviction notices](#), which allow landlords to evict tenants without giving a reason, even if they have paid their rent on time and kept the property in perfect condition. Manchester Life said it was always their intention to send a second letter to tenants inviting them to sign up to a new tenancy with a rent increase, but acknowledged that those unwilling or unable to pay the increased rent would be evicted. "I raised the matter within Manchester Labour. I sent an email and asked some angry questions on Twitter - which was not appreciated," former Labour councillor Ben Clay told FairSquare, adding that a disciplinary hearing was initiated against him by the local Labour Party as a result. Although that was ultimately dropped, Clay attributed the response to "a lot of sensitivity over the relationship [with Abu Dhabi] when Leese was in charge, and particularly around not wishing to poke and prod too hard. They did not like negativity and criticism of that relationship, as we can see with the Peterloo anniversary cultural outputs and the fuss made around that."

Clay was referring to the city council's suppression of criticism of its links to Abu Dhabi during the commemorations to mark the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo massacre. In May 2019, councillor Luthfar Rahman, who now serves as deputy leader of Manchester City Council, spoke at an event where preparations for the Peterloo commemoration were being discussed. "The council often starts its external presentations by saying how 'in Manchester we do things differently'", one local activist told us, and this event followed that pattern, with councillor Rahman telling the audience that Manchester was "[a city that encouraged protest](#)." As part of the commemorations, the council commissioned Common Wealth Theatre to compose a piece of political theatre, titled 'From The Crowd', inspired by the spirit of Peterloo. Local activists who had been campaigning on behalf of some of the UAE's most notable human rights activists approached Common Wealth's director to ask if the script might include some reference to Manchester's links to the UAE. "Numerous council officers saw the script in the weeks leading up to the event and nobody raised any objections", a local activist involved in the UAE section of the script told us, but on the Sunday before the event, a message was relayed to the scriptwriters via a council official that the UAE reference should be removed from the script. Ironically, the message came from councillor Rahman, sources close to the process told us. It was edited as follows.

#### Original

This city has been bought by the UAE  
Ancoats, Man City, Etihad Campus, Emirates Old Trafford  
Our housing, our streets, our silence on human rights  
You can't keep selling  
If you're already selling out

#### Edited

Has this city been bought?  
Our housing, our streets, our silence on human rights  
You can't keep selling  
If you're already selling out

"Rahman was part of the inner circle of councillors close to the leadership", a local activist told us when asked for their view on why the script was changed to remove criticism of the UAE. Another source close to the process offered the view that the decision came from the council leadership via Rahman. A few months after the event, Manchester City Council wrote [an internal report](#) about its Peterloo commemorations. "The Peterloo 2019 programme was underpinned by three central themes: Protest, Democracy, Freedom of Speech" says the report. "It explored issues of contemporary relevance linked to the events 200 years ago, including democracy, political participation and citizenship. ...[I]t also challenged people to assess the health of democratic processes today, connected to contemporary protests such as climate change and social justice campaigns across the world."

The report made no reference to the fact that the council had censored the script of 'From the Crowd' to remove a critical reference to its partnership with a deeply authoritarian and abusive state. "They [local politicians] will stand up and support free speech and protest when it suits them", said a local activist.

#### "Suggest you google this guy"

According to Ben Clay, the former Labour councillor, Richard Leese was defensive whenever pressed on the council's links to Abu Dhabi. "When I spoke to Richard about using his influence to call for the release of political prisoners Ahmed Mansoor and Dr Mohammed al-Roken, he said, 'well, yes there's links to the Abu Dhabi government but the company is owned by a private citizen.' ... Leese's line was: 'We don't have a direct relationship with the government of Abu Dhabi or with individuals who hold political power.'"

On the contrary, the council appears to have had a very close relationship with the most senior figures within the Abu Dhabi Executive Affairs Authority (EAA), which describes itself as "a specialised government agency mandated to provide strategic policy advice to His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates." In 2014, for example, Leese was [one of three speakers](#) who helped launch Manchester City's 'City Football Academy.' The other two speakers were then UK chancellor George Osborne and Khaldoon Al Mubarak, chairman of Manchester City and the EAA. In his speech, Leese repeatedly referred to Al Mubarak as Khaldoon.

In 2013, Human Rights Watch's then researcher for the United Arab Emirates (and a co-author of this report) filed a Freedom of Information request for a copy of the commercial agreement between Manchester City council and Manchester City FC. The council notified Vicky Kloss, then Chief Communications Officer at the club. "Vicky, suggest you google this guy," said one email to Kloss from a member of the Chief Executive's Department at the council. "Thanks. We know this guy well," replied Kloss before adding "can we wait until the end of the statutory deadline to deliver this?"

Emails from within Manchester City FC, obtained by the hacker [Rui Pinto](#) and published by [Der Spiegel](#), show that Kloss was acting under the instructions of Simon Pearce, who was the director of strategic communications at the Executive Affairs Authority and is also a chairman of Manchester City FC. According to [Der Spiegel](#), "Pearce wrote to other team executives that he had taken a close look at the document in question and saw little risk that it would provide the human rights organization with cause for criticism. There was no way to prevent the document from being released, he continued, but there was no hurry either. "He should get it on the morning of the final day Sept. 1st," he wrote, a date that was still two weeks away at the time of his email. "I want to disrupt any momentum.'"

Thus, not only did the city council have close links with the most senior members of the Abu Dhabi government, but such was their

Chief Executives Department  
Manchester City Council

Vicky Kloss <[redacted]>

Vicky Kloss

13/08/2013 07:34

To Rachel Downey <[redacted]>  
cc "[redacted]"  
Subject Re: Request for Information - Reference No CEX/9ABFLZ agreement for regeneration of Eastlands

Thanks. We know this guy well.  
Can we wait until the end of the statutory deadline period to deliver this?  
Thks  
Vicky

On 12 Aug 2013, at 15:50, "Rachel Downey" <[redacted]> wrote:

> It was "document 2.2" in Marty's proof of evidence - I assume this means it was in public domain and Celia will have a copy on file.  
>  
> Vicky - suggest you google this guy.  
>  
> R





Men in traditional Arabic dress hold aloft a Saudi flag ahead of the Premier League match at St. James' Park, Newcastle, October 17, 2021 © PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

influence that they felt able to dictate terms to the council on how it should respond to members of the public. In this regard, their operations in Manchester bear a striking similarity to their operations with the UAE's team in the United States, New York City FC. In 2017, the email account of the UAE ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al-Otaiba, was hacked and some of its contents uploaded to the internet. A series of emails between Manchester City directors Simon Pearce, Marty Edelman and Otaiba show Pearce describing the pros and cons of pushing through a deal for a new stadium in the city. Pearce was concerned that there would be resistance and that since the ownership group had been identified as Abu Dhabi rather than City Football Group, the resistance might focus on what he called "AD/UAE" vulnerabilities, which he listed as "gay, wealth, women, Israel". Pearce noted that "we would be 'tooling-up' for a very public fight" and that the pursuit of the stadium "requires MLS [Major League Soccer] and City Hall to be strong and proactive partners in the public forum". In one email, Marty Edelman suggests that Ambassador Otaiba go to visit then Mayor Bill de Blasio, who Edelman appeared to indicate had "attitude issues about Sh[ei]kh Mansour and the football stadium" and "make sure he is aware of the full range of UAE relationships and investments in NYC." The emails provide an illuminating snapshot into how the UAE uses its investments in the cities where it owns football clubs to exert political influence over elected representatives.

In the case of Manchester, the most senior council officials appeared to need little convincing. In February 2017, Howard Bernstein announced he would be stepping down as chief executive of the city council and said that he did not think it would be "appropriate" to make plans for what to do next, while he was still in public office. In April 2017, Manchester City named a [footway and a bridge in his honour](#), issuing a press release about the designation:

*"Sir Howard Bernstein Way, signified with an accompanying mosaic, has been designed to permanently and visually represent the significant contribution that Sir Howard has made to the Club, East Manchester and its people."*

In November 2017, Howard Bernstein left his role as chief executive of Manchester City Council and immediately took up a position as a [strategic development advisor with City Football Group](#). In April 2018, Manchester City council refused a request from Manchester residents to name a street in the city after the imprisoned Emirati poet and rights activist [Ahmed Mansoor](#). "Street naming is not my department, but long-standing policy is to not name streets after anybody still living or with no connection to the city", said Sir Richard Leese. When pressed on how it was possible for a street to be named after Sir Howard Bernstein, the council's response was that this was not under their remit since the footway is within the football club grounds and is therefore private property.

Howard Bernstein and Richard Leese have also both been appointed as honorary presidents of Manchester City Football Club. Bernstein was appointed while he was still serving in his role as chief executive of the city council, and Leese was appointed [honorary president](#) in May 2023.

#### **"Only a tiny majority of fans feel any sort of ethical dynamic"**

The response of Manchester City fans to Abu Dhabi's ownership of the club has been the subject of scrutiny and [criticism](#), and has provoked an angry response from some supporters. There has never been organised protest from the fanbase, nor significant expressions of concern such as those seen in Newcastle after the Saudi takeover. A significant factor in this is probably that the role of the UAE state in the club was cleverly obscured, and the ownership had already brought success to City before journalists [connected the dots](#) between MBZ's autocratic leadership and the club. A small group of online supporters

have since been vociferous in their defence of the club's owners and have aggressively challenged, and in some cases abused, football journalists who have criticised the Abu Dhabi ownership.

In one notable case, some online supporters defended the UAE's detention of the British academic Matthew Hedges, prompting a [bewildered response](#) from [football writers](#) including Jonathan Wilson. "This is so bizarre it's worth reiterating. A proportion of supporters of a football club in the north-west of England decided to back the flawed legal apparatus of an oppressive regime 4,500 miles away against a British man who, whether he had been spying or not, had been treated appallingly for six months." Wilson called it "sportswashing in action." One fan we spoke to offered a different perspective:

*"The overwhelming majority of football fans have got one concern about their ownership: whether it produces results on the pitch and keeping the company afloat. Only a tiny majority of football fans feel any sort of ethical dynamic. It's not that they don't care, it's that if they do care it doesn't matter. They [the owners] don't mind if we care. We have been entirely disenfranchised. There's no point in us expressing an opinion about the ownership because we have no say in it."*

## **2021: SAUDI ARABIA AND NEWCASTLE UNITED**

### **"Legally binding assurances"**

Unlike Abu Dhabi's stealthy approach to its purchase of Manchester City, Saudi Arabia's takeover of Newcastle United was lengthy and controversial. In March 2020, after months of speculation, [papers were filed](#) with the UK's Companies House indicating a deal was in place between a Saudi-led consortium and the former owner of Newcastle United, Mike Ashley, to buy the club. The major partner in the consortium was Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), and the two minority partners were PCP Capital Partners, run by British businesswoman Amanda Staveley, and a vehicle run by British investors, [Reuben Brothers](#). In July 2020, however, it appeared that the [deal had collapsed](#), amid fears that the consortium would fail the Premier League's owners and directors test. The issue was not that the head of Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, Mohamed bin Salman, had been [implicated in murder and extortion](#), but rather links between the Saudi government and a Saudi-based pirate TV and streaming service which was offering [illegal access to sporting events](#) - including English football - for which rights had been sold to the Qatari broadcaster BeIN Sports. The pirate service was called "beoutQ" and its launch in 2017 was one part of a wider [political rift](#) between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Separately, Mike Ashley announced [arbitration proceedings](#) against the Premier League and then took them to an anti-competition tribunal in which he accused them of abusing its position to "prevent or hinder" the transaction from being concluded.

On 6 October 2021, as the political crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar wound down, Qatari broadcaster Al-Jazeera [announced](#) that Saudi Arabia would "soon lift a four-year ban on the Qatar-based broadcaster beIN Sports broadcaster and has promised to close pirate websites." The next day, the Premier League [issued a statement](#) confirming the takeover by a consortium of PIF, PCP Capital Partners and RB Sports & Media, stating that it had "received legally binding assurances that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will not control Newcastle United Football Club." The statement gave no detail on the content of those assurances nor who gave them. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund was founded by Royal Decree in 1971. It has in its own words "[national strategic responsibilities](#)" and it is chaired by the most powerful member of the Al Saud family, which has governed the country since its creation. In February 2023, lawyers representing the PIF in a



court case involving Saudi Arabia's LIV Golf competition in the US described the PIF as "a sovereign instrumentality" in an effort to secure diplomatic immunity for the PIF governor Yasir Al-Rumayyan, who also serves as the chairman of Newcastle United.

A tremendous amount of pressure was brought to bear on the Premier League to approve the takeover of Newcastle United by a consortium led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a spectacularly controversial choice for club ownership at any time, but particularly under the leadership of Mohamed bin Salman. Even more remarkably, that pressure came mainly from politicians in the north-east of England and, it later transpired, the British government.

#### "It's up to the fans now"

When the deal initially collapsed in July 2020, British businesswoman Amanda Staveley orchestrated a very public fightback. Staveley, who had assiduously cultivated a relationship with key figures in the media, was given ample room to establish her credentials as a potential saviour of the club. "There are moments when she is weeping and there are moments when she is pulsing with energy and anger," wrote the Athletic's George Caulkin in one notable piece. "It's up to the fans now," Staveley told Caulkin. "Because if the fans want this back on then they're going to have to go to the Premier League and say this isn't fair."

Less than a week after Staveley's interview, the Newcastle United Supporters Trust (NUST) released a statement [demanding](#) "transparency" and "answers" about the collapse of the club's purchase and provided a template letter for fans to use to send their local MP to support them in their calls for transparency. MPs received [1,143 letters](#) within 90 minutes. A subsequent template letter, [publicised in the local media](#) which instructed readers on how to contact their MPs and get the letter to them, spelled out what fans expected of their elected officials and the consequences if they failed to do so:

*"As one of your constituents, I'm asked to attend a polling booth and vote for you ... I want to know if you are going to support our concerns or not. If you don't, this will leave me time to be able to pursue someone within our constituency to take this up on my behalf."*

Alex Niven told FairSquare that it "would probably be political suicide for [a local MP] to oppose the takeover given the absolute fervour with which the support base had embraced it." This fervour did not just neuter political opposition to the takeover, it led to many Newcastle politicians lobbying and advocating in effective support of the takeover, with some more active than others.

There was support from prominent local officials, notably the then Newcastle council Chief Executive Pat Ritchie, who [offered](#) to meet the Premier League to work on a "compromise" to get the deal approved on the basis that it would be "transformational" for the region. She said that "members of the consortium spear-heading this deal had made a clear long-term commitment to the city to help drive growth and regeneration" in the city.

In September 2020, Newcastle Central MP Chi Onwurah presented to the UK parliament what she called "a [petition](#) calling for Premier League transparency and accountability on behalf of my constituents." The petition criticised the Premier League's for failing to "provide updates to supporters about the progress of takeover bids" and expressed "concerns that Premier League inactivity led to the collapse of the recent Newcastle United takeover" before calling on the UK government to "take action to review the way in which the Premier League assessed the recent Newcastle United takeover bid."

In December 2020 and January 2021, Ian Mearns, the MP for Gateshead, [wrote a series of written questions](#) about the takeover to the then UK Middle East Minister, James Cleverly. On 3 December 2020, Mearns [asked](#) whether Cleverly or anyone from the FCDO had met with or exchanged correspondence with the Premier League to

discuss the takeover. After Cleverly replied that "FCDO officials exchanged correspondence and held meetings with the Premier League following a request by the latter", Mearns asked three further questions on 11 January asking for details of the meeting. On 12 January he asked Cleverly in parliament "what assessment his Department has made of whether Prince Mohamed Bin Salman and the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia are separate entities for the purposes of investment in the UK."

The exchanges between Mearns and Cleverly seemed to suggest that the British government was maintaining a neutral stance on the issue of whether or not the takeover should go ahead, but in fact the first indication that this might not be the case had arrived in a remarkable intervention only a week after Amanda Staveley's "it's up to the fans now" plea.

On 7 August 2020, the Newcastle United Supporters Trust announced [via its Twitter account](#) that they had received an email from then Prime Minister Boris Johnson. According to the NUST, Johnson had written to say that he "supported calls by the [Independent Football Ombudsman](#) asking the Premier League to make a statement regarding the takeover of Newcastle United." A few days previously, the Independent Football Ombudsman, who had been bombarded with messages from Newcastle fans, had issued a statement saying that the takeover did not fall within its remit, but said that it would advise the Premier League to "make a statement to fans explaining how the case was handled." The Prime Minister's statement was far more strident. "I appreciate that many Newcastle fans were hoping this takeover bid would go ahead and can understand their sense of disappointment," said Johnson. "There must be clarity on why there was a significant delay in a decision being made, and on the reasons why the consortium decided to withdraw their bid."

It was not until two years later that evidence emerged to show how and why Johnson's government became a key player in the takeover.

#### "Brilliant!"

Simon Walters, writing in The Daily Mail, broke the news that Saudi crown prince Mohamed bin Salman had [directly lobbied Boris Johnson](#) over the deal in June 2020. "We expect the English Premier League to reconsider and correct its wrong conclusion" bin Salman apparently wrote to the British Prime Minister, pointedly noting that if the Premier League did not approve the takeover, there would be consequences for relations between the two countries:

*"The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has opened its doors for the UK's investments in various sectors and initiated a mutually beneficial investment program with large amounts of funding. The EPL's wrong conclusion will unfortunately have a negative impact on both our countries economic and commercial relations."*

In a follow-up story Walters quoted a 'well-placed source' as saying that Johnson responded "[brilliant!](#)" when subsequently told by a senior civil servant that the Newcastle deal might be back on. When the takeover was finally confirmed in October 2021, the UK ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Neil Crompton, expressed his [delight](#) via his Twitter account. "Excellent news about the PIF investment in Newcastle United. Good for the PIF, good for Newcastle and good for investment in NE of England. Howay." In May 2022, David Conn, writing in The Guardian, [revealed](#) that Boris Johnson's minister for investment, Lord Gerry Grimstone, worked for months to encourage the Premier League to approve the takeover, going so far as trying to broker a solution to Saudi Arabia's piracy of the Premier League sport rights.

Adam Crafton, a reporter for The Athletic, broke the detailed story on the British government's role in April 2023. Crafton told FairSquare that his interest had been stoked by the inconsistency between the British government's stated position of neutrality and the apparent



Prime Minister Boris Johnson meets Mohamed bin Salman Al Saud, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia at the Royal Court in Riyadh during a visit to the Gulf Region. Picture by Andrew Parsons / No 10 Downing Street. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>





This page: (top) placards at an anti-war protest, London, 2018 © Alisdare Hickson, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>, (middle) Large Poster of Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed Bin Salaman MBS on Saudi Flag Background Displayed on The Facade of a Building on Tahlia Street In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, © Hansmusa | Dreamstime.com (bottom) Shia protesters held a candle light vigil in Srinagar against the mass execution of 37 individuals in Saudi Arabia, April 2019 © SOPA Images Limited / Alamy Stock Photo

Opposite page: Redacted UK government email, credit Adam Crafton / The Athletic

enthusiasm of Johnson and Crompton, and he filed a series of Right to Information requests asking for information on how the government had handled the takeover bid. The government gave a host of reasons to refuse Crafton's requests. "Initially the timeframe was too broad, then it was Covid delays, then it was too expensive, then it might harm international relations", he told FairSquare. Fifteen months later, they relented and sent Crafton 59 pages of internal emails, some heavily redacted, which revealed that officials at the highest levels of the British government had applied considerable pressure behind the scenes in support of the deal.

Crafton's investigation confirmed the earlier reporting of Simon Walters and showed how the Newcastle deal became intertwined with British foreign policy. One email from Crompton read: "There are a number of ways in which HMG can seek to facilitate dialogue with both the PIF and Saudi authorities on this to come up with the assurances the Premier League seek." An email sent by the UK's deputy ambassador to Saudi Arabia noted that, "HMG [Her Majesty's Government] is not neutral about UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia. It is a crucial and valuable relationship with an important partner, regionally and globally. The purchase of Newcastle United by KSA's (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) sovereign wealth fund would be a valuable boost to the relationship and signal of intent for further Saudi investment in the north east [of England]."

The British government's concerns went far beyond investment in the north-east, with one email noting that the UK and Saudi Arabia had committed to a long term partnership to "diversify the Saudi economy to become less reliant on oil and gas" and that as part of this "PIF aims to target direct investments amounting to \$30billion over a 10-year period into the UK."

Crafton also revealed that the British government was aware that the fiancée of the murdered Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Hatice Cengiz, was critical of the takeover. An email from a redacted Foreign Office email address on April 29, 2020, to Stephanie Al-Qaq, then head of the Middle East and North Africa division at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) points out that Cengiz "has also spoken out", saying that "it was on the BBC this morning".

Directly below this bullet-point, the email notes that "we'll do some quick work with DIT [the Department of International Trade] to ensure their PR offer is being shared." The email does not make clear exactly whose "PR offer" the FCO was seeking to promote, and was redacted to omit at least one of the groups or individuals with whom the FCO says it would share the PR offer. The FCO declined to explain the contents when pressed by Crafton.

As Crafton notes, "the British government kept writing about the importance of Premier League independence while constantly appearing to push the boundaries". The impression created is that

officials were seeking to reduce the threat to the takeover caused by the fall-out from a gruesome murder sanctioned, in the view of the US government, by Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman – the chairman of the organisation leading the takeover and the man who threatened the the British Prime Minister with economic consequences if it did not go ahead.

In response to Simon Walters' article, a Government spokesman said the following: "While we welcome overseas investment, this was a commercial matter for the parties concerned and the Government was not involved at any point in the takeover talks on Newcastle United." Crafton's reporting revealed this to be untrue.

**"You don't know me and you don't know Newcastle"**

On the day the takeover was approved in October 2021, Newcastle MP Chi Onwurah said in a tweet that "if you think the #nufctakeover will stop me criticising the Saudi Regime you don't know me and you don't know #Newcastle." However, there has been little criticism of the club and the city's links to Saudi Arabia from local politicians since, despite a series of egregious human rights violations.

In March 2022 alone - less than six months after the takeover – Saudi authorities executed 104 prisoners, including 81 on a single day, approximately half of whom were from areas of eastern Saudi Arabia that had seen widespread demonstrations calling for reform during the previous decade. Despite government assurances in 2020 that no one in Saudi Arabia would be executed for a crime committed as a child, Abdullah al-Huwaiti, aged 14 when his alleged offence took place and subjected to a grossly unfair trial, was sentenced to death on 2 March 2022. On 9 August 2022, Saudi Arabia's Specialised Court of Appeal sentenced women's rights campaigner Salma al-Shehab to 34 years in prison, on charges based solely on her peaceful criticism of the Saudi Arabian authorities on social media. Authorities detained al-Shehab in January 2021 while she was visiting Saudi Arabia and a few days prior to her planned return to the United Kingdom, where she was a PhD candidate in her final year at the School of Medicine at the University of Leeds. Al-Shehab has two children, ages six and four. On the same day, the Specialised Criminal Court of Appeal also sentenced Nourah Saeed al-Qahtani to 45 years in jail and a 45-year travel ban. Al-Qahtani is a 49-year old mother of five children. The original trial court's verdict, which sentenced her to 13 years in jail, said she had been "calling for the release of detainees", "seeking to disrupt public order and undermine the security of society and the stability of the state" and "belonging to a group on Twitter seeking" the same end." In June 2023 the Saudi state warned social media users that it was a criminal offence to "insult" authorities using platforms such as Snapchat.

Reprieve is one of many NGOs that has campaigned against the use of the death penalty for children in Saudi Arabia, including the

From: [REDACTED]  
 Sent: 29 April 2020 09:30  
 To: Stephanie Al-Qaq \* [REDACTED]@fco.gov.uk>  
 Cc: [REDACTED]@fco.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@fco.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@fco.gov.uk>; [REDACTED]@fco.gov.uk>  
 Subject: FW: Saudi Arabia - Newcastle United

Hi Stephanie,

On top of Neil's email:

- Khashoggi's finance has also spoken out. It was on the BBC this morning.
- We'll do some quick work with DIT to ensure that their PR offer is being shared [REDACTED], DCMS and the PL.
- Separately [REDACTED]are reaching out to DCMS/PL for an update.



case of Abdullah Al-Huwaiti, and in August 2022 they wrote letters to Nick Brown (Newcastle East MP), Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle North MP), Chi Onwurah (Newcastle Central MP), Cllr Nick Kemp, Cllr Alex Hay, Cllr Paul Frew, and Cllr Lesley Storey asking for their assistance in setting up a meeting with Newcastle Chairman Yasir al-Rumayyan to discuss how to save Abdullah al-Huwaiti's life. None of the MPs or councillors responded to their request.

In November 2022, the Saudi human rights group Al Qst and FairSquare wrote joint letters to Nick Brown (Newcastle North MP), Chi Onwurah (Newcastle Central), Kate Osborne (Jarrow MP), Ian Mearns (Gateshead MP) and Ian Lavery (Wansbeck MP) to ask that they "use your position of influence within the city to call on the owner of Newcastle United, Mohamed bin Salman, to immediately release all those who have been imprisoned for their peaceful activism, and to repeal the death sentences of Shadli, Ibrahim and Ataullah al-Huwaiti, as well as the death sentence of Abdullah al-Huwaiti." Only Ian Lavery and Chi Onwurah replied.

Lavery's letter noted that he had raised his concerns over human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia "in an encounter with Mehrdad Ghedoussi" [Amanda Staveley's husband and business partner] and said that he would seek to do so again. Chi Onwurah replied that "since the takeover of Newcastle United, I have spoken about the human rights record of Saudi Arabia and I will continue to do so." Onwurah drew particular attention to [comments](#) she made in the UK parliament after Saudi Arabia's execution of 81 people in March 2022, which are worth repeating in full here.

*"I am wearing the colours of my football team, Newcastle United, and it is important to say that in utterly condemning this atrocious, horrific massacre, I speak for many, many of my constituents and Newcastle United fans. Does the Minister agree that whereas football fans have no control over or influence in the ownership of their beloved clubs — especially in a premier league awash with dirty money — the UK Government have both control over and influence in who they trade with and engage with?... What is she going to do with that control and influence? Is she going to make it absolutely clear that sportswashing is not an option?"*

Thus, Onwurah castigated Saudi Arabia's brutality while pushing back against any suggestion that anyone other than the UK government has either the control or the influence to hold them to account, least of all anyone in Newcastle. Onwurah said that "sportswashing is not an option" while glossing over the fact that in response to the demands of a highly-mobilised element of their constituents, politicians in Newcastle, most notably Onwurah, were instrumental in enabling the takeover to go ahead. The importance of her role had not been lost on two members of the Saudi-led consortium, who, on the day of the takeover in October 2021 as Onwurah tweeted that she would continue to criticise Saudi Arabia's human rights record, singled her out for thanks. "[A big thank you to @ChiOnwurah](#)" tweeted Mehrdad Ghodoussi. Jamie Reuben also took to Twitter and described Onwurah as one of the people "[who made this day possible](#)."

**"They're pushing this hopelessness"**

Whereas there has been scant public opposition from Manchester City supporters to Abu Dhabi's ownership of Manchester City, some Newcastle United supporters have organised in protest against the Saudi Arabian takeover of their club and those involved have expressed dismay at the silence, or worse, of local politicians. "There is not much I can do about the government's arms deals, but there is no way I am going to spend my spare time actively assisting one of the most despicable regimes on the planet with its propaganda campaign," [wrote one](#) season ticket-holder. "It should be a glorious day but I've dreaded this takeover since it was first moot-

ed. The club is well shot of Ashley, but it's now in the hands of some of the worst people possible," said [John Paul Quinn](#), who has been an active opponent of the Saudi ownership.

It should be noted that opponents of the takeover appear to be in the minority. Two separate polls, one carried out by the Newcastle Supporters Trust, and another by the MAG fanzine, showed that 96.7% and 97.7%, respectively, of respondents supportive of the Saudi-led takeover, although in reporting the poll results the MAG noted that in both cases they received numerous comments of concern from supporters about Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses.

A campaign, 'NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing' was set up in October 2021, the same month of the takeover and has organised opposition to the takeover, [including protests outside St James's Park](#), via its website, a fanzine, and a [Twitter account](#) that has more than 4,000 followers.

Those behind the campaign have expressed disappointment with the response from local MPs and have been scornful of the notion, [expressed](#) by some [prominent figures](#) in the city, that the Newcastle takeover would shine a light on human rights issues in Saudi Arabia. "That is the tail wagging the dog," John Hird, who set up NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing, said in an interview with FairSquare. "It's not that Newcastle will change the Saudis, the Saudis are going to infect politics in Newcastle." Hird drew particular attention to the silence of MPs. "Why would ordinary people do anything if their political representatives are just sitting on their hands? They're pushing this hopelessness which we don't agree with – fans do have power."

Another supporter who has opposed the takeover, John Paul Quinn, told FairSquare that he sent an email to all of the councillors in Newcastle to invite them to a public meeting to discuss the issues associated with Saudi ownership. "I got one response from a councillor who said she couldn't attend but was interested in what we were doing. I haven't heard from any of them since."

Quinn and Hird both said that Chi Onwurah was the one MP who had proactively contacted them to discuss their work.

John Hird attributed the lack of political support for their campaign to politicians being fearful of going against the wishes of their constituents. "I think they're just scared of so-called manufactured public opinion. Some of the Tyneside Labour MPs still claim to be on the left yet they have said nothing publicly about specific human rights cases we have raised with them. The truth is, they would actually get more respect and support from people on Tyneside if they kept to their pre-takeover commitments to hold the Saudi owners to account regarding human rights."

A supporter we spoke to, who does not support the takeover, offered the following perspective.

*"People do care about injustice, people do care about gay rights, women's rights, about children being beheaded. Their voices are lost, silenced by an angry online mob in the main and also they've had the shit kicked out of them for decades. Be it socially, economically. There are many people who just don't care either, their lives aren't amazing, football is their joy, and they don't have the time, knowledge, information or simply energy... They just want some hope, and anyone who can deliver it is warmly welcomed, but not without criticism or question in the minds of everyone."*

## RESPONSE OF LOCAL MEDIA

In January 2023, the UK Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee released a report on the [sustainability of local journalism](#). The committee received more than sixty pieces of written evidence, and held four oral evidence sessions, taking into account







the views of, among others, local journalists and others working in local TV and radio. “Evidence we received for this inquiry was consistent in emphasising the importance of local journalism to democracy”, the report begins. It notes that a key aspect of this is “the oversight and scrutiny provided by its reporting of local government”.

If mainstream local media in Manchester and Newcastle have failed to effectively scrutinise UAE and Saudi Arabian investments in their cities – and in that regard Manchester’s fifteen year relationship with the UAE provides a much larger evidence base than Newcastle’s much shorter relationship with Saudi Arabia - the DCMS report identifies the primary factor. Declining print revenues have decimated the UK’s local media, leading to 320 local newspaper closures between 2009 and 2019, and diminishing the resources of those who have survived.

#### “You could cause damage you could never undo”

In 2008, when Abu Dhabi’s ruling family took control of Manchester City, they sought to present the purchase as a private business venture and the UAE’s human rights record, while bad, had not yet declined to the point where it was attracting international attention. David Conn, writing in *The Guardian* in [June 2013](#), was the first UK journalist to draw a link between Manchester City and human rights abuses in the UAE. Conn’s article was based on Amnesty and Human Rights Watch research on the UAE’s aggressive post-Arab Spring crackdown on Emirati political Islamists and the use of torture and unfair trials. When Amnesty and Human Rights Watch lobbied Manchester politicians and civil society to speak out against the UAE’s worsening record in 2015, and numerous MPs and others, including prominent Manchester-based lawyers Pete Weatherby and Mark George, [signed a letter](#) criticising the UAE’s abuses, their interventions received no coverage in local press, radio or television, despite Human Rights Watch having contacted all local media in advance of the publication of the letter. When the city council censored protest against the UAE’s links with the city in its Peterloo anniversary commemorations, it was [The Sunday Times](#) that published the allegations in a broader examination of how the city council had put in place “sweetheart deals” with Abu Dhabi. With the exception of an article by Steve Robson [published in May 2021](#), Manchester’s most prominent local publication, it is difficult to find any critical coverage of Abu Dhabi’s links to Manchester in the Manchester Evening News (MEN), and there has been scant coverage from the BBC’s regional radio and television outlets. The only local media outlet to have regularly published critical news or investigative pieces is the independent publication, [The Meteor](#).

The Meteor’s former editor and author of many critical articles on Abu Dhabi and Manchester, Conrad Bower described the mainstream media’s approach as “feeble” and in the case of the Manchester Evening News, a desire not to jeopardise relationships with Manchester City Council. “Simply mentioning that some people complain about human rights is not covering the huge human abuses taking place in that country”, he said. Kate Feld, a lecturer in Digital Journalism at the University of Salford and someone who has been highly critical of Manchester’s links to Abu Dhabi, was more circumspect and addressed the capacity of local media to effectively take on such complex issues. “This is investigative journalism we’re talking about. ... It takes time and resources, particularly when you’re dealing with very rich and powerful people who are good at covering their tracks.”

The MEN, like many local newspapers, has been stripped of resources. It [lost](#) 78 editorial jobs in 2009 and its owner, Reach plc, announced in 2023 that it would be making [200 journalists redundant](#) across its titles, citing a 20.2% drop in print advertising and a 5.9% drop in digital ads. “I love the MEN, but Reach is a disaster. They’re not treating institutions like MEN with the respect they need” one local journalist told FairSquare.

Joshi Herrmann, who started the independent digital newspaper [The Manchester Mill](#), which started as a newsletter in 2020, described the [impact of cuts](#) on the resources available to local newspapers like the MEN.

*“Sometimes it is columnists and cartoonists and photographers who lose their jobs. Sometimes it is experienced reporters and editors - the people who held all the institutional memory in the newsroom but who are now considered too expensive. Arts desks have more or less disappeared, and investigations teams are mostly gone too. And lots and lots of regular beat reporters have been laid off. The newspapers still have the same names and logos, but in terms of their staff and their content they are unrecognisable.”*

Herrmann praised the MEN for “some great reporting on important social issues” but noted that some of its journalists have to write more than 10 stories a day, and recalls seeing an MEN journalist publish 29 separate stories over two days. “It’s the result of media companies trying to make a living from the meagre earnings of online ads, an approach which just doesn’t fit with local journalism.”

In marked contrast to the cuts to the MEN’s resources and funding, the billions of pounds that Abu Dhabi has poured into Manchester City since 2008 led to a significant upgrade to its communications operations. City’s press officers now work under the direction of Manchester City director Simon Pearce, who for more than a decade has provided communications advice to the most senior levels of the Abu Dhabi government. “The dynamic changed after the takeover,” a local journalist told FairSquare. “The Manchester City press officers went from being in poorly paid local press jobs to having their salaries tripled overnight. Nowadays they can be very difficult to deal with. They play their favourites, give them exclusive interviews with, say, Pep Guardiola.”

A national sportswriter offered the following perspective on Manchester City’s communications operations:

*“With City, you find a tiered communications system. There is day-to-day football, a level above that dealing with various issues at the club, and then a corporate level above that. The club can be very helpful on a superficial basis, and was previously very good at giving interviews and access, although this has diminished a bit with all the tension regarding coverage of issues like the [Premier League] charges [that it violated the PL’s funding rules]. Thereafter it goes to extremes of carrot and stick. Club PR workers have been quick to go from amicable approaches to hostility and the threat of legal action. Many national journalists do not have that much of a relationship with them, in part due to not wanting to be beholden to them or not wanting to take the line. The club’s view in the past has been that local journalists covering them should be more willing to present their side in national discussion.”*

A local journalist commented that the MEN had “really good relationships with councillors, Howard Bernstein and City press officers”, a view repeated by former councillor Ben Clay, who told FairSquare some of Manchester municipal leaders had a “symbiotic relationship with the MEN”. This was compounded, a local journalist told us, by editorial perceptions at the MEN that the vast majority of readers didn’t care about the UAE’s human rights record when set against the perceived benefits of Abu Dhabi’s activity in the city.

*“Everyone was just so pleased at the prospect of the investment. Like Newcastle, Manchester had been deprived of private and public investment for years. In a way, you don’t blame the fans for not caring too much. They got Kevin De Bruyne and big shiny buildings. A local paper would never bash their main football club without some pretty good evidence. You could cause damage which you would never undo.”*

Or as Jon Silver put it, “if you’re the MEN editor, would you want to alienate half of your readership by running critical stories about Abu Dhabi United Group and Sheikh Mansour?” Manchester Offshored



co-author Professor Adam Leaver said that Abu Dhabi's communications operations in Manchester did not need to put significant effort into ensuring their activities were viewed favourably: "I think that they [ADUG] recognised something more mundane and depressing about the world, which is that people are remarkably forgiving if you give them success in the things that kind of matter to them on a day to day basis."

Even in cases where there has been strong evidence of obviously problematic aspects of the relationship between Manchester City's owners and the city council, local media has largely left serious criticism to the national press. The most obvious example of this was in the aftermath of the publication of the Manchester Offshored report in and its central and newsworthy accusation, backed up by meticulous forensic accounting techniques, that Manchester City Council had "sold the family silver too cheap". Despite the report documenting how Manchester City's owners were, via a property deal with the council, actually taking money out of Manchester and beyond the reach of UK tax authorities, it got scant local coverage. Jon Silver, one of its authors, told FairSquare. "We got great media attention. [The Guardian](#), [The New York Times](#), [BBC North West](#) and BBC radio all covered it. It makes a convincing case for being featured as a local public interest story. We just didn't get anything from the MEN." The MEN did ultimately give the report coverage, but they did so in the context of a [largely positive article](#) on the regeneration of east Manchester which they published four weeks after the release of Manchester Offshored with the findings referenced towards the end of the article.

#### "People will talk about sportswashing in pubs"

The Saudi-led takeover of Newcastle United took place in 2021, thirteen years after the UAE's purchase of Manchester City. During that time, the human rights record of Manchester City's owners and FIFA's decision to award the 2022 Men's World Cup to Qatar in 2010 had led to extensive coverage in the UK media about the ethics and consequences of authoritarian regimes' money in football, enabling the term 'sportswashing' to enter the sportswriters' lexicon. The 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate had heightened public awareness of Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses and the Saudi consortium made no effort to distance MBS - credibly accused of [approving](#) the operation that murdered Khashoggi - from the Newcastle United deal. As a result, the takeover of the club, in stark contrast to Manchester City and the UAE, was highly controversial long before it concluded, and attracted significant amounts of critical [local](#), [national](#) and [international](#) press coverage. "We're in a different era than we were ten or fifteen years ago," said Jon Silver. "Sportswashing is becoming much more salient as an issue. People will talk about sportswashing in pubs. There's a level of public recognition [of the concept]." Throughout the long takeover process, local press, including The Chronicle newspaper, reported on the various developments, including the criticism of [human rights groups](#) and [individuals](#) affected by Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses.

Like the MEN in Manchester, The Chronicle is run by Reach and like the MEN its print circulation has dwindled in recent years, from [26,811](#) in 2016 to [8,954](#) in the second half of 2022. After the takeover, The Chronicle ran a [special edition](#) featuring 30 pages of coverage, as well as a leader by editor Mark Douglas. Douglas was [unequivocally positive](#) about the takeover, referring to the new owners as "a breath of fresh air" and praising the "perseverance" of Amanda Staveley. "Finance, thought and ideas will pour into the club - and a wider investment has been promised in the city in what could be a transformative moment for Newcastle" Douglas wrote. He also referred to Saudi Arabia's human rights record noting that the city would not "shy away

from challenging anything that diverges from our proud record of tolerance and diversity." John Hird characterised Staveley's prominence in the media and the close links she forged with local journalists as part of a "clever" strategy on the part of the Saudi-led coalition. "The PIF possesses an 80% stake of the club but they've pushed Staveley and her husband to the fore".

Writing in [The Athletic](#), George Caulkin and Chris Waugh's article reflecting on the first day of the takeover took a similar [tone](#), welcoming the takeover while noting that Saudi Arabia was involved in "the repression of so many groups in incredibly violent ways". Amanda Staveley was quoted at length: "Human rights we take very seriously," she told Caulkin and Waugh, adding "our partner is PIF, not the Saudi state." There was nothing in the article to suggest that either journalist challenged her on these points.

Since the takeover was completed, Saudi Arabia's human rights record has continued to be referenced in the media, thanks in large part to the efforts of a small but vocal and well-organised pressure group [NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing](#), which has continued to provide regional media with the local angle that allows them to highlight criticism via news coverage as opposed to editorial criticism or pro-active investigation, both of which might alienate their readership. (In Manchester, there is no equivalent group of City fans mobilising publicly against Abu Dhabi's ownership.) Hird has described The Chronicle's coverage of the Newcastle takeover as "fawning", and drew attention to job cuts and broader structural problems with local journalism in the UK. "Local sports journalism isn't massively analytical," John-Paul Quinn told FairSquare, "and it's swaying towards clickbait-y, basic stuff. They don't have the resources or appetite for it. I think that's part of that. But then you have to ask, is that wilful ignorance?"

In its [2023 report on the sustainability of local journalism](#) the UK Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee also highlighted local journalism's importance in "building community cohesion and pride of place by signposting local initiatives, businesses, charities, and events." This also hints at a less immediately obvious reason why mainstream local media might not have taken on the task of scrutinising the background of the states that control Manchester City and Newcastle United and their political and economic interests in the two cities. There can be few, if any, local institutions that provide more pride of place and community cohesion than football clubs. One impact of these ownership models is that they arguably place local media's critical role in upholding democracy in tension with its role in sustaining community cohesion and local pride. If that is the case, and with time and resources scarce when set against the communications operations of the football clubs they are covering, is it any wonder that local media takes the path of least resistance?



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