



Richard Masters
Chief Executive and Director
The Premier League
Brunel Building
57 North Wharf Road
London W2 1HQ

8 August 2023

Dear Richard Masters,

Re: Concerns over increasing Gulf state ownership of English football clubs

We, the undersigned NGOs working on human rights in the Gulf region, are writing to express our deep concern over the growing trend of Gulf state ownership of English Premier League clubs. We have been closely documenting the worsening human rights situation across the Gulf region, and believe that according to the Premier League's "fit and proper person" test for owners and directors, financial bodies with intimate links to the governments and rulers of these states, such as Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG), should not be allowed to exert any form of ownership control over an English Premier League club.

We welcome the [strengthening](#), in March 2023, of the Premier League's owners test, as well as the February 2023 [UK Government White Paper](#) on reforming club governance. However, these proposed reforms still do not set sufficiently objective and robust ownership criteria, and it remains unclear as to whether they will prevent future state takeovers of Premier League clubs. We remain concerned that the political, social, and cultural power associated with ownership of top English football clubs grants foreign states undue influence, and provides cover for state authorities that continue to flagrantly commit grave human rights abuses. **It is imperative that the Premier League adopts and implements sufficiently objective and robust ownership criteria to prohibit the takeover of English football clubs by individuals or entities susceptible to the influence of state actors or associated with human rights violations.**

Newcastle United and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF)

As you will recall, 80% of Newcastle United was acquired in 2021 by a consortium led by the PIF, the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia, which is actively chaired by the country's Crown Prince and de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman. The PIF's purchase of Newcastle United is part of a broader strategy by the Saudi authorities to use sport to improve their image and gain further influence in the United Kingdom. Saudi Arabia has employed similar tactics in a variety of sports worldwide, as evidenced by its heavy investment in the Spanish Football Association, international

boxing events and Formula 1, in addition to its creation of the LIV-Golf project, which recently agreed to merge with PGA Tours. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's human rights record [continues to deteriorate](#). Regressive human rights trends in Saudi Arabia since the Newcastle purchase include a notable increase in the use of the death penalty – with 196 people [executed](#) in 2022 (the highest number in decades) and [nine young men currently at risk of execution](#) for crimes committed as minors; a wave of unprecedentedly long prison sentences for individuals exercising their right to free speech, including University of Leeds PhD student [Salma al-Shehab](#) being sentenced to 27 years in prison for tweets; and rights [violations linked to the Neom megacity project](#).

On 7 October 2021 the Premier League [issued a statement](#) in which it justified allowing the PIF's takeover of Newcastle United on the basis that it had "received legally binding assurances that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will not control Newcastle United Football Club". The PIF is in fact inseparable from the Saudi state, being chaired by the Crown Prince and energetically deployed in furtherance of his signature economic policies. In an [interview](#) recently unearthed by activists online, the PIF's Governor, Yasir al-Rumayyan, revealed that majority decisions of the PIF Board can be overruled by the King if its Chair, the Crown Prince, does not agree with them. Furthermore, during a recent legal dispute between PGA Tours and PIF-backed LIV-Golf, LIV-Golf's lawyers specifically [described](#) the PIF as "a sovereign instrumentality of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia". This surely casts serious doubt on the Premier League's assurances, and the contention that the PIF operates as a separate entity from the Saudi state.

Manchester City and the UAE's Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG)

Manchester City have achieved massive domestic and European success since being taken over by ADUG, an investment company for the Abu Dhabi royal family, in September 2008. ADUG's owner, Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, is Vice President and Deputy Prime Minister of the UAE, Minister of the Presidential Court and Chair of the UAE Central Bank. In the 15 years since ADUG's takeover of the club, Mansour's government has engaged in a sustained and vicious crackdown on dissent at home. Scores of peaceful government critics and reform advocates were [arrested](#) by the Emirati authorities for [petitioning](#) the leadership for free and democratic elections in 2011; the majority [remain in arbitrary detention](#) despite completing their sentences. Prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders have suffered constant abuse by the authorities, including widespread torture. Award-winning Emirati activist [Ahmed Mansoor](#) remains in solitary confinement, serving a 10-year sentence. British citizens have also found themselves targeted, such as academic Matthew Hedges, who was [detained and tortured](#) for six months on spurious charges in 2018. A new Cybercrime Law that came into effect in 2022 further [restricts](#) civic space and free speech within the UAE, and the authorities deploy pervasive surveillance to keep tabs on its citizens. Discrimination against women remains [prevalent](#) in law and practice.

In 2016, responding in a letter to objections from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, Manchester City Council leader Sir Richard Leese [reportedly described](#) the UAE investors as "exemplary partners". However, Manchester City were recently [charged](#) with more than 100 breaches of Premier League Rules in relation to the club's finances over a nine-year period, including non-compliance with UEFA's Financial Fair Play Regulations.

Wider implications of state-led investment in the Premier League

Investors with close ties to Gulf states already have significant links to other clubs in the Premier League. Sheffield United (who will be playing Premier League football this season) are owned by Prince Abdullah bin Musaid Al Saud of Saudi Arabia. Manchester United's present owners, the

Glazer family, are currently in talks to sell the club to Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, a member of the ruling family in Qatar, where the oppressive [male guardianship system](#) continues to discriminate against women; [migrant workers](#) suffer systemic abuse; and the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly are [repressed](#), with acts such as [criticising Qatar's emir](#), insulting Qatar's flag, defaming religion, and "incitement to overthrow the regime" being legally characterised as crimes.

Football clubs are meant to belong in close relationship with their local communities, and it is inappropriate for any state to own them. In practice, it is only the very wealthy and repressive states of the Gulf, as well as private investors from elsewhere, that have sought the prestige and influence of Premier League club ownership. However, unless the Premier League and UK government act to curb this trend it may embolden other states with dubious human rights records to attempt the same strategy of sportswashing. Furthermore, permitting English football clubs to be controlled by autocratic states renders them vulnerable to changes in the fortunes of those states' unaccountable rulers, as was illustrated when Chelsea was brought to the brink of bankruptcy after the UK government sanctioned then-owner Roman Abramovich, in March 2022, for his [connections to the Kremlin](#).

Conclusion

Allowing state actors, especially those with poor human rights records such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, to achieve a foothold in English football poses a serious risk to the integrity and very ethos of the beautiful game. Thus far, the UK government has not taken adequate steps to ensure that states cannot invest in football clubs in this country and that those responsible for human rights abuses are disqualified from becoming owners or directors. As such, we call on the Premier League to:

- **Take immediate steps to further reform its "fit and proper person" test for owners and directors, setting sufficiently objective and robust ownership criteria to prohibit the takeover of English football clubs by individuals or entities susceptible to the influence of state actors or associated with human rights violations.**
- **Identify and implement strategies to phase out state involvement in English football.**

Signed:

- ALQST for Human Rights
- Emirates Detainees Advocacy Centre (EDAC)
- European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR)
- Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
- International Campaign for Freedom in the United Arab Emirates (ICFUAE)