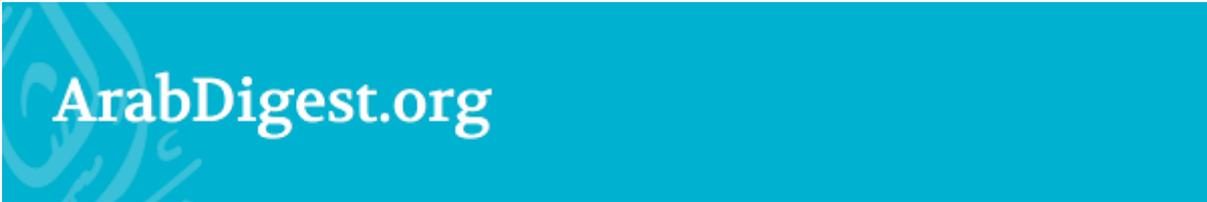


Cutting edge Middle East news analysis from ArabDigest.org.

The logo for ArabDigest.org is displayed on a blue background. It features a stylized white circular emblem on the left, containing Arabic calligraphy. To the right of the emblem, the text "ArabDigest.org" is written in a white, sans-serif font.

ArabDigest.org

Newcastle United and Saudi Arabia – Beyond ‘Sportswashing’

Summary: the Saudi takeover of a struggling premiership football club is proof of how a wealthy gulf state can use its purchase to gain a lasting economic and societal stake in one of the UK’s poorer regions.

We thank Christopher M. Davidson for today’s newsletter. He is an expert on the comparative politics of the Gulf states and was previously a reader at Durham University and an assistant professor at Zayed University, Dubai. His most recent book, published this year is *From Sheikhs to Sultanism: Statecraft and Authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE* (London: Hurst & Co., 2021.)

Explanations abound for the Saudi Public Investment Fund’s dramatic £300 million takeover of Newcastle United last month. Giving short shrift to Riyadh’s farcical (but administratively necessary) line that the PIF is somehow distinct from Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman’s patently personalistic regime, much attention has rightly focused on Saudi Arabia’s international relations objectives and, to some extent, its more rational economic goals.

'Sportswashing', for example, has been central to most commentary, with MbS portrayed as laundering his international image and trying to divert attention from a string of recent human rights violations, including: mass arrests of critics and activists; the 'shakedown' of allegedly corrupt businessmen; the forced repatriation of dissidents; and, of course, at least one fatally botched rendition.



[photo credit: @ProudandPalace]

In tandem, many have described the Newcastle deal as part of the kingdom's broader drive for 'soft power' — essentially following in the footsteps of wealthy neighbours such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. In this context, such Gulf states are trying to use sports investments — alongside other cultural and educational collaborations — as an effective, rather genteel way of cementing ties with perceived Western security guarantors. Indeed,

with Riyadh increasingly concerned over the viability of its longstanding defence partnership with the United States — especially in the wake of Washington's indifference to the [Iran-linked missile attacks in 2019](#) — MbS's current interest in Britain seems far from coincidental, and is already being [mirrored](#) by his counterpart in Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed.

Meanwhile, in terms of Saudi Arabia's post-oil economic diversification plans — which, *inter alia*, call for massive increases in foreign direct investment, the launching of a successful international tourism industry, and a range of global high-tech partnerships to promote its 'knowledge economy' — the PIF's Newcastle acquisition also makes a lot of sense. Even if Premier League club ownership rarely turns a profit, access to the brand and enormous advertising exposure seems priceless. Home games at St. James' Park, for example, will soon feature banners and billboards promoting all manner of Saudi entities and opportunities, while of course team shirts can potentially get a Saudi logo or two onto schoolboys' backs in almost every city in the world.

What is perhaps missing from these explanations, however, are some of the more ideational factors undoubtedly also at play. Very visibly, for example, Newcastle United has given Saudi Arabia a *de facto* foothold in the North East of England. With scenes of jubilant local fans dressed as princes (albeit incongruously wielding bottles of 'Newkie Broon' ale), and in many cases Saudi flags being waved and incorporated into DIY banners, MbS is not only expected to boost significantly Tyneside's economy, but has overnight become saviour of a team central to the lives of generations of Geordies. In this sense, as with Abu Dhabi's 2008 buyout of Manchester City — not coincidentally also at the heart of an indigent northern conurbation — the new Saudi-Newcastle alliance allows for a depth of emotional and cultural bonding that just wouldn't be possible in more prosperous, or dare one say less tribally oriented, parts of England.

Beyond burnishing his personal charisma, this in itself may not generate any hard political benefit for MbS back at home. But it perhaps does feed into a growing interest in some Saudi (and other Gulf) circles regarding the satisfying prospect of at least some degree of 'reverse colonialism'. Tying in with MbS's present emphasis on ['state nationalism'](#) (as opposed to the pan-Arab or pan-Islamic affinities of the past), this is a belief that despite decades of petrodollar recycling and a continuing reliance on external military protection and foreign consultants, Saudi Arabia can nonetheless show to the world that in some respects it holds the upper hand.

Though [reverse colonialism](#) lacks robust historical case studies and is usually confined to counterfactual literature (e.g. [the 'Aprican Empire' having invaded Europe](#), as per 'Noughts and Crosses') or science fiction fantasy (e.g. [southern England being invaded by aliens](#), as per 'War of the Worlds'), this line of thinking actually has a long history in the Gulf states, arguably dating back to the 1973-1974 oil embargo and its sizeable impact on Western economic and foreign policies. Since then, the US-led (but [mostly Gulf-financed](#)) liberation of Kuwait in 1991 was viewed at the time by some Saudi officials as a success in hiring Western mercenaries, with one infamously telling the [Wall Street Journal](#): "You think I want to send my teen-aged son to die for Kuwait? We have our white slaves from America to do that." Likewise, the role of Gulf sovereign wealth funds during the 2008-2009 global 'Credit Crunch' — notably their ['rescue' of Britain's Barclays Bank](#) — was seen by some through the same sort of lens.

These manoeuvres, however, were often later deemed to have backfired, or to have simply furnished further evidence of Gulf wealth being 'used' and exploited by the Western

powers. Indeed, the US's post-1991 Iraq policy soon laid to rest any notion that Gulf funding had bought any influence, while the recent spate of fraud investigations into British banks and Gulf sovereign wealth funds — including the [Qatar-Barclays case](#) — are seen to have badly undermined the vital role Gulf capital played during a perilous period of British financial history.

In this regard, seemingly free of the old restraints and parameters of Western-Gulf relations, arrangements such as the Newcastle takeover (and before it, the Manchester City deal) appear to offer a better, less risky, and ultimately more infiltratory means for wealthy Gulf states to gain a lasting stake in Western economies and societies. Much, of course, can still go wrong for MbS, or at least prove irritating, with frequent media flare ups likely to keep linking accusations of regime repression to his *de facto* British football club ownership. On balance, however, as with the deification of Abu Dhabi's ruling clique in East Manchester, he can probably count on becoming the biggest fish in a pretty useful pond.

Members can leave comments about this newsletter on the [Today's Newsletter](#) page of the Arab Digest website

follow us on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#) and [Google+](#)

Copyright © 2021 Arab Digest, All rights reserved.

You are receiving this email as you are subscribed to the Arab Digest.

Our mailing address is:

Arab Digest
3rd Floor
207 Regent Street
London, W1B 3HH
United Kingdom



To unsubscribe from this list log in to [ArabDigest.org](#).