



Arab Media Watch
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

Monitoring Study:

The British Media & Abu Dhabi's Takeover of Manchester City

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Table of contents:

Introduction	3
First impressions	3
Who are the new owners?	4-5
Abu Dhabi United Group	4
Dr Sulaiman al-Fahim	4
Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan	5
Wealth	5
Where do the owners come from?	6-9
Increasing profile	6
Local rivalry: Abu Dhabi and Dubai	7
Less than complimentary	8-9
Tal Ben Haim	9
Motives behind the purchase	10-12
Business in the Premier League	10
Business returns	10
Not business, but promotion	11-12
The English game	13-18
Debate	13-14
Welcome boost	14-15
Opposition	15-16
If not Abu Dhabi, then another	17
The future	17-18

Introduction

On 2 September 2008, it was reported that a deal was struck that would see Manchester City football club taken over - pending due diligence - by owners from Abu Dhabi. This generated much interest, and was reported in every British national daily newspaper over the following week.

Arab Media Watch monitored coverage in the British national daily and Sunday press¹ for two weeks (2-15 September 2008) immediately following the breaking of the story. During the monitoring period, Abu Dhabi was mentioned 401 times. The week preceding the takeover (26 August - 1 September), the emirate was mentioned nine times, a figure that increased by a factor of almost 30 (269 mentions during 2-7 September) after news of the takeover.

The story garnered six editorials during the monitoring period - four in the broadsheets and two in the tabloids.² Few other stories get such attention. The news was considered huge by most journalists, both for English football and for Manchester City fans.

First impressions

There was no disagreement among journalists that news of the takeover was big - a fact reflected in the sheer increase in media coverage of Abu Dhabi. A few selected descriptions:

"The most seismic 72 hours in the 16-year story of the Premier League" (Paul Hayward, Daily Mail, 3 September)

"The established order and landscape of world club football had been transformed" (Jeremy Wilson, Daily Telegraph, 3 September)

"The tumultuous last 48 hours that have buffeted English football like a force 10 gale" (Oliver Holt, Daily Mirror, 4 September)

Several journalists reported the happiness of Manchester City fans:

"For Manchester City's fans the glee is unrestrained" (David Parsley and Abul Taher, Sunday Times, 7 September)

"Manchester City fans are on cloud nine" (Mirror, 3 September)

"Manchester City fans have been doing cartwheels" (Daily Star, 9 September)

The news was received in Manchester "with a desperate glee that was almost painful to behold" (Des Kelly, Mail, 2 September).

1 Media outlets monitored were: Daily Express, Sunday Express, Guardian, Observer, Independent, Independent on Sunday, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, People, Daily Star, Daily Star Sunday, Sun, News of the World, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Times and Sunday Times. Financial Times was excluded.

2 Guardian (3 September), Times (3 September) Independent (2 and 4 September), Daily Mirror (3 September) and Daily Star (9 September).

Who are the new owners?

The media was quick to try and establish who was behind the takeover, although no journalist reported that Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak, CEO of Mubadala, an Abu Dhabi investment vehicle, would be the new chairman of Manchester City. Wealth was an omnipresent aspect of the reporting.

Abu Dhabi United Group

The ADUG was presented initially as embodied by Dr Sulaiman al-Fahim, then later by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan and his family. The ADUG is "essentially an investment vehicle, formed within the past few days to facilitate the takeover and fronted by Al Fahim," wrote David McDonnell in the Daily Mirror (2 September).

Dr Sulaiman al-Fahim

Background information on Dr al-Fahim was frequently reported. The following, by Daniel Taylor in the Guardian (2 September), is broadly representative:

"31-year-old businessman Sulaiman al-Fahim, property mogul and reality-television show host who is ranked 16th in Arabian Business Magazine's list of 100 most powerful Arabs, with a personal wealth said to be 10 times that of Abramovich."

"Fahim is chief executive of Hydra Properties, a company set up only two years ago but which has already signed more than £1bn worth of contracts in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Mexico and around the world. Fahim, a flamboyant character, is regularly seen in Hollywood and was recently pictured with Leonardo di Caprio."

Dr al-Fahim is an "example of the new generation of entrepreneurs who are adding a touch of Dubai-style bling to [Abu Dhabi's] huge financial resources," wrote Frank Kane in the Observer (7 September).

He "is typical of the smart, often American-educated, business people who act as executives for the royal family," wrote David Parsley and Abul Taher in the Sunday Times (7 September).

When it comes to his intentions in English football, Dr al-Fahim "has vowed to bulldoze through England and Europe to glory," wrote Neil Custis in the Sun, adding that he is a "colourful character with a brilliant business brain," who "knows what he wants and knows how to get it and with the Abu Dhabi royal family worth £100bn, nothing will stop the Middle Eastern consortium" (2 September).

This "Arabian Mr Deep Pockets...will be a colourful addition to the Premier League," wrote Oliver Harvey in the Sun (2 September).

Ian Herbert in the Independent (2 September) wrote about the attractiveness of wealth:

"Al-Fahim is certainly the man several Premier League clubs, with knowledge of the state's wealth in mind, would dearly have liked to have had on board."

Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan

However, it later emerged that Dr al-Fahim, the "outspoken frontman," was "to become a more peripheral figure," wrote Jeremy Wilson in the Daily Telegraph, who reported that Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan, "the real power behind City's new owners," is "planning to take an increasingly high-profile role once Ramadan finishes later this month" (9 September),

The wealth of Dr al-Fahim "barely registers next to that of the consortium's principal backer, Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan," who comes from "one of the richest families in the world," wrote Times business correspondent David Robertson (4 September).

He described the distinction between the family's assets and those of Abu Dhabi itself as "fuzzy," writing that "as absolute rulers of the state, the family effectively owns its oil revenues and its two sovereign wealth funds." This makes them "likely" to have "more than \$1trillion at their disposal."

Sheikh Mansour is so rich, "his £50 notes in a line would easily stretch from the UK to Australia," wrote David Harrison in the News of the World (7 September).

Wealth

Regardless of who exactly was behind the takeover, there was greater interest in the wealth behind it, and the resources that facilitated what Paul Hayward in the Daily Mail called "Gulf State ostentation" (3 September) was routinely mentioned.

Daniel King in the Mail on Sunday described Manchester City football club as "the soon-to-be-acquired plaything of Abu Dhabi's trillionaire oil barons," which for its supporters created a "mood of bottomless coffers and boundless optimism" (14 September).

The Daily Mirror published longhand the "astonishing" wealth of the Abu Dhabi United Group: "€1,000,000,000,000." Graham Hiscott (3 September) wrote in the newspaper:

"The Abu Dhabi United Group is among of a new breed of investors known as sovereign wealth funds. These off-shoots of governments, mainly from the Middle East, have grown massively wealthy on the back of soaring oil prices."

Louise Armitstead in the Daily Telegraph (2 September), and a few other journalists, reported: "It is estimated that every time the price of oil goes up by a \$1, Abu Dhabi gains as much as \$500 million a day."

The football club had been "fortified by apparently unlimited sacks of dosh from the ruling family of Abu Dhabi," wrote Richard Morrison of the Times (10 September).

Kaveh Solhekol in the Times wrote that "it appears that everything that Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan...touches turns to - or is already - gold...he can buy or build anything he wants" (13 September).

Where do the owners come from?

Several newspapers used the story to write features about Abu Dhabi, or at least include a few descriptive paragraphs about it. Some were much less complimentary than others. Many pieces made a good attempt at conveying accurate information about Abu Dhabi, though historical information was kept to a minimum. Robert Booth in the Guardian (3 September) provided a few background details:

"Until the 1960s the tiny kingdom did not have a metalled road and was sustained mainly by camel herding, farming, fishing and pearl diving in the Gulf."

David Parsley and Abul Taher in the Sunday Times added "growing dates and vegetables" to this list, and noted that "poverty was widespread" (7 September).

Frank Kane in the Observer dug a little deeper, writing that commercial life in the United Arab Emirates "has been dominated by a string of business dynasties, many of them descendants of immigrants from the Arabian parts of southern Iran in the 1920s" (7 September). He added:

"Al-Futtaim, al-Ansari, al-Tayer and al-Sayegh - names as prominent in the UAE as Marks & Spencer or WH Smith in Britain - were allowed to dominate commercial life in the UAE, in exchange for profit-sharing arrangements with the ruling Emirati elite."

As Booth in the Guardian put it: "Then came the oil wealth" (3 September).

Louise Armistead in the Daily Telegraph (2 September) agreed:

"The family's wealth is derived from oil which, when it was discovered in Abu Dhabi in 1958, started the transformation of a nation of fishermen into a powerful state."

Increasing profile

Many journalists identified the increasingly prominent profile that is apparently being sought in the United Arab Emirates, funded by natural resource wealth. As an editorial in the Times suggested, "buoyed by the strength of oil prices," the country "is a rapidly advancing actor on the world stage" (3 September). It continued:

"The UAE's domestic attractions too are being rapidly developed, and marketed to international business travellers."

The Daily Mirror (2 September) marveled at the pace of development:

"Its skyscraper-dotted skyline is all the more incredible given that it only had its first paved street in 1961."

Local rivalry: Abu Dhabi and Dubai

Much of the relevant coverage of the rapid development in "the bling-obsessed" UAE (Frank Kane, Observer, 7 September) detected a large element of rivalry between Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Abu Dhabi was "an emirate that preferred to do things in a quieter, more Islamic way than its brash young brother Dubai," wrote Kane. "All of a sudden, the shy, conservative Islamic capital seems to have caught 'Dubai syndrome' - the urge to be bigger, higher, faster and just downright wealthier than the rest of the world."

The ruling families of each emirate compete "furiously behind each others' dishdashas," wrote John Arlidge in the Daily Telegraph (6 September). Thus far, Dubai is better known as a destination, he added, but "thanks to oil, Abu Dhabi is not in a rush." However, in the next paragraph, he said that "they are running fast to catch up."

While Abu Dhabi grows in stature, Dubai is beginning to decline, Arlidge wrote, arguing that the latter is trying to save itself "with a mixture of tourism and commercialism, hookahs and hookers," described by the author as "crassness (think prostitution, drunkenness and financial scandal)."

Culture is being used as a tool to help Abu Dhabi avoid the "crassness" of Dubai, wrote Robert Booth in the Guardian (3 September). The takeover of Manchester City is "the latest in a string of multibillion-dollar acquisitions designed to rebrand the nation as a oasis of western culture in the Gulf," he added.

Several newspapers reported that outposts of the Louvre and Guggenheim are expected to open there in four years, at a combined cost of £670 million. These cultural ambitions of Abu Dhabi were portrayed by David Parsley and Abul Taher in the Sunday Times as a reflection of its rivalry with Dubai, whose rapid expansion is looked at by its neighbour "with slight disdain" (7 September). They continued:

"The more religious Nahyans are understood to regard their cousins' development of Dubai as slightly vulgar and are determined to establish Abu Dhabi's cultural credentials."

In terms of gaining attention, the authors suggested that Abu Dhabi has won the battle:

"The Manchester City deal operates on a different plane. Such is the global popularity of the Premier League that at a stroke the Abu Dhabi royal family have garnered more publicity for their country than any of the Maktoums' horseracing exploits."

A couple of journalists went to Abu Dhabi to see what impact the takeover has had on the local population. Kaveh Solhekol in the Times (15 September) wrote:

"Men in the UAE take their football very seriously and thousands are glued to their plasma television screens every weekend to watch live Premier League matches."

Despite this, he and Jonathan Baker in the Guardian concluded, in the latter's words, that "it will take a lot longer for City to capture the heart and mind of Abu Dhabi" (15 September). However, both journalists went to expat sports bars to conduct their research, not venues where "men in the UAE" would be expected to watch football.

Less than complimentary

A number of articles wrote about Abu Dhabi with some condescension and suspicion. Kaveh Solhekol of the Times (13 September) described the history of Abu Dhabi - a "sweltering paradise" - thus:

"Fifty years ago, this T-shaped island that juts into the Persian Gulf was home to camel herders and pearl divers who dreamt about being able to afford to live in a mud hut."

Now, "the descendants of those camel herders race through the city in their giant 4x4s while immigrant workers make sure that everything looks spick and span," he wrote.

John Arlidge wrote in the Telegraph (6 September) that a £500 million deal with Warner Bros studios, Hollywood, was struck at the same time, leaving "fans and financiers asking one thing: what is Abu Dhabi up to?" He answered his own question:

"The emirate wants to use its wealth to establish itself as the business and cultural capital of the Middle East, to diversify its economy and safeguard its long-term economic future."

This will "transform the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from a one-camel town into a modern metropolis," Arlidge added. He described the metropolis as being connected by "fresh six-lane highways that carve oily black streaks across the desert between the half-built, hollow-eyed skyscrapers," examples of infrastructure which have been built by "an army of sun-dried Asian construction workers."

Arlidge, like other writers, described initiatives to enhance the cultural attractiveness of the UAE, which "the sheikhs" hope will attract "upscale visitors...to their cultural desert."

Special mention must go to Michael Savage and Toby Green in the Independent (6 September), who wrote a particularly fearful analysis of the commercial intentions in the "oil emirates of the Middle East," under the headline "The New Gulf War":

"Now, they want a piece of your business, your holiday, the films you watch and even the football team you support. And the only people wealthy enough to stop them are each other."

Michael Calvin in the Sunday Mirror (7 September) likewise had a particular fear of the Gulf:

"The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are now riding camels, representing greed, fear, vanity, and deceit. It doesn't take much to imagine Dubai owning Liverpool and Bahrain buying Arsenal. Qatar could even do a deal with the chavs who control Newcastle."

Savage and Green were contemptuous of such wealth, writing that the authorities "have increasingly turned to extreme displays of wealth for its own sake," which have at times "moved from the shamelessly luxurious to the openly gratuitous."

Very few writers mentioned any political features of Abu Dhabi, although David Conn in the Guardian sounded a note of caution about alleged human rights abuses in the UAE, "a country a long way from democracy" (3 September).

Sam Wallace in the Independent (2 September) felt wary of authority in the UAE:

"City are now in the ownership of an Arab royal family who rule by hereditary dictatorship in a country where strict Sharia law is observed. If, in a street, you were to re-enact the average emotionally wrought City goal celebration...you might well get arrested. Possibly deported."

Tal Ben Haim

A few newspapers referred to "speculation" about Tal Ben Haim, Manchester City's Israeli defender whose future was said to be in doubt following the takeover. However, there was no solid source for this "speculation"; the only journalist to mention a source did so uncertainly.

The Israeli media "started to speculate that an Arab-owned club...would have little room for the Israeli international," wrote Daniel Taylor in the Guardian (13 September). The day before, he wrote that "there has been speculation in the Middle East over the Israeli defender's future."

The foundations for this "speculation" are the lack of diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and - as four reports mentioned - the Zayed Centre for Coordination and Follow-Up, which was set up by a half-brother of Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan and apparently sanctioned anti-Semitic material and speakers. The reports - excepting Taylor (Guardian, 13 September) mentioned that the centre had been closed down some years ago.

Rod Liddle in the Sunday Times (14 September) focused on the lack of diplomatic relations between the UAE - "some Third World anti-Semitic desert boghole" - and Israel:

"I wonder if there will soon be a separate entrance for Jewish supporters at Manchester City, or if they will be allowed in at all?"

Liddle noted other occasions when Israeli players of teams that have played or trained in the UAE were left behind:

"What a filthy, despicable act, and what an astonishing lack of loyalty to the players, any pretence at principle evaporating at the sight of humungous bags of Arab money...And let's not have any of that disingenuous rubbish about the Arab states being antiIsraeli, rather than antiJewish...Check out the now-defunct Zayed Centre for Coordination and Follow Up to see what the Abu Dhabi royal family thinks about Jewish people, if your delusion persists."

However, Times sports columnist Martin Samuel noted that the speculation "seems wide of the mark," pointing out that the group buying City "wishes to obtain favourable publicity and promotion for the state of Abu Dhabi. This would hardly be helped by a decision that would have them branded as Arab extremists and anti-Semites."

Motives behind the purchase

Many journalists questioned the motives behind the takeover of the football club by Abu Dhabi United Group. On the whole, most decided that promotion was the main driver, not profit.

Business in the Premier League

As David Wighton suggested in the Times (2 September), "our banks may be going for a song these days, but our Premier League clubs are worth a fortune."

The takeover is the "latest demonstration of the region's financial muscle," wrote Nick Clark in the Independent (2 September). He identified a current need for foreign investment in Britain, arguing that "the credit crunch has wreaked havoc across Western economies causing many to look for outside investment."

Business returns

A lot was paid by Abu Dhabi's royal family for the club, but "it expects to get a lot back in return, mostly in ways that cannot be measured in mere cash," wrote Julian Borger in the Guardian (6 September).

Somewhat fancifully, he suggested that the takeover "could also buy a seat at the top table in the new world of diplomacy - where, pound for pound, the soft power of football can outpunch gunboats or armies." He noted that "ten times more people watch Premier League football on television in China than in Britain":

"The new emissaries, the players, can achieve things diplomats can only dream of - flying the flag and winning recognition, even adoration, from millions of foreigners. Nothing could be more conducive to clinching trade and investment deals."

Other journalists adopted a similar theme, noting a long-term goal. A few reported that the aim behind the takeover involved a long-term business strategy: creating a globally recognised brand.

Giles Smith in the Times (13 September) labeled the takeover a "brave, new, Abu Dhabi-financed dawn" in which, according to Times sports columnist Oliver Kay, the emirate's royal family "are keen to make the club a household name, with Richard Branson's Virgin empire an inspiration" (8 September).

For Paul Hayward in the Daily Mail, Manchester City had become part of the long-term business plan, having been "co-opted into Abu Dhabi's post-oil survival strategy" (10 September).

Rowena Mason in the Daily Telegraph agreed, arguing that the takeover is part of the "growing evidence that the region is starting to look beyond its traditional source of wealth" (3 September).

David Parsley and Abul Taher in the Sunday Times (7 September) also agreed, writing that "for all the talk of unrestricted and unrestrained spending, the oil money is being carefully targeted. There is a long-term strategy at work." They added:

"Abu Dhabi's rulers realise that it will take more than one-off projects to secure their future. They know that it must be based on trade, financial services and tourism."

Not business, but promotion

Most journalists writing about the takeover did not agree that there is easy profit to be had. Mark Keinman in the Sunday Telegraph (7 September) wrote:

"If the new owners feel confident of making money from their new plaything, they are in for a rude awakening. The deal feels like an attempt to buy a trophy asset, only without the presence of the trophy."

He warned "do not be surprised when the football bubble bursts in spectacular fashion," although he did not elaborate.

Times sports columnist Simon Barnes (5 September) agreed:

"Football consistently makes some of the most powerful and effective men in the world look silly."

Ian Herbert in the Independent (2 September) offered further corroboration:

"The recent history of foreign investment in the British game is littered with hollow promises."

For these reasons, most agreed that straight commerce was not the motive behind the takeover. The Abu Dhabi United Group "is too rich to have commercial inhibitions," wrote Kevin McCarra in the Guardian (4 September).

Many journalists instead thought that promotion was the key. Matt Dickinson in the Times (3 September) noted:

"There are all sorts of ways of making a name for yourself, but, within the bounds of the law, few are more effective than buying an English football club."

"Who had heard of Roman Abramovich before he bought Chelsea, the Glazers before they snapped up Manchester United?"

"English football clubs are a prized part of the business portfolio for Russians, Americans, Arabs and, no doubt before long, the Chinese."

Martin Samuel in the Times (3 September) agreed:

"Sheikh Mansour is not in it for profit. He loves sport, yes, but perhaps also sees City as the way to promote the emirate of Abu Dhabi, with Premier League ownership as a prestigious accessory."

The future of the club now holds "responding to the whims of Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan." However, "at a time of political uncertainty, maybe this is also seen as an opportunity to present the Arab nations in a positive light around the world," Samuel added.

Alan Nixon in the People (14 September) saw a different result of the takeover, writing (without producing evidence) that "the Abu Dhabi investment in Manchester City has sent ripples round

the Middle East and it could have a knock-on effect as Arab rivalries spill over into the English game."

However, Robert Booth in the Guardian quoted "senior courtiers," keen to downplay the impression that "the emirate is playing a grotesque game of fantasy football," who suggest that the aim is "to use Manchester City as a springboard to improve football in the Gulf and enhance the international reputation of the United Arab Emirates" (6 September).

"Al Fahim was perhaps being more honest than most buyers" in that he "did not speak too sweetly about the club itself, its heritage and identity, or the sentiments of its supporters," wrote David Conn in the Guardian (3 September). The reason for "this extraordinary acquisition, the first by Arab potentates," was clear to Conn:

"It was for the greater glory of Abu Dhabi."

What it signified, however, was "yet another" new financial era "in which more top clubs are likely to be bought as "trophy brands" - owned for the glory they reflect - by billionaire sheikhs." Here, Conn detected precedence:

"In its essence, this motive is not so different from the social climbing of the old-style chairmen."

This was supported by Jim White in the Daily Telegraph (3 September):

"They are not buying City to make money from it - which is just as well. They are buying it as a giant calling card, a globally recognised hoarding on which to project commercials. In a sense it was ever thus in football."

Implications for the English game

A debate about ownership in English football has long been running in England, into which this story tapped. The opposition arguments that resurfaced following the takeover essentially warmed up those that had been used in the past. Only a few writers suggested that this particular takeover added a new complexion to English football.

Debate

Some argued that foreign investment is good for English football by raising standards and increasing competition. Oliver Holt in the Daily Mirror (3 September) noted:

"If City's new owners are everything they appear to be... then that gives the Premier League a real fillip."

However, not all agreed, including - it would appear - Holt, who the next day wrote that "the great wealth brought by the new invaders of our national game has not been accompanied by any trace of respect for the managers who used to run clubs."

Many other journalists questioned the need for these takeovers for a number of reasons. Nick Townsend in the Independent on Sunday (7 September) wrote of the takeover:

"Whether this is desirable for the game or not is debatable. City's new money will inflate prices, make the link between the players and supporters ever more tenuous, and almost certainly create a greater abyss between the haves and have-nots."

Another central opposing argument is the loss of local ownership. Jim White of the Daily Telegraph (3 September) lamented:

"The game may have originated here, but, even as it grows ever richer, it has become a pursuit in which its inventors are increasingly marginalised. We don't own the clubs and we don't play for them. We are merely spectators."

Rod Liddle in the Sunday Times (14 September) agreed:

"There is not the remotest connection to the local area and scarcely an English flavour. It is like being a fan of Starbucks, or Halliburton."

The knock-on effect of the huge influx of money into the English game is summed up by Henry Winter in the Telegraph (4 September):

"The buy big, buy foreign philosophy of Al Fahim, seeking to promote the club "brand" worldwide through recruiting global icons, means the long-term interests of the national side are marginalised. Sulaiman the Magnificent? Not for England."

Many were resigned to these facts. The Independent (4 September) noted:

"The bonds between England's top clubs and the communities from which they originally grew has (sic) long since been broken."

The editorial added that "there seems little point in railing against this trend," a point backed by James Lawton, the newspaper's chief sports writer (2 September):

"There is nothing to be done about it, of course."

Martin Samuel concluded in the Times (13 September):

"If the Premier League is a serial, it is Dynasty or Dallas, a world of private jets, glamour and duplicity; even oil, now that Abu Dhabi has joined the party."

The takeover "seemed to rank alongside" other "showy Arab purchases," wrote David Parsley and Abul Taher in the Sunday Times (7 September).

Welcome boost

Some writers were happy to see Abu Dhabi take the club over because it has the financial clout to upset the status quo, which exists due to the financial means of others. Paul Hayward in the Daily Mail (3 September) wrote:

"Here comes the oil money, the petrodollars, gushing across the game to wash away American speculators and Russian oligarchs."

Piers Morgan in the Mail on Sunday (7 September) could not conceal his delight:

"What it can do is bring endless entertainment for every football fan in the country who has grown sick and tired of Chelsea and Manchester United's financial dominance of the sport, and the nasty, bullying, arrogant way they go about their business."

Morgan described Dr al-Fahim as "a very smart, very engaging, and super-confident man who personified the dynamic business acumen pouring out of that part of the Middle East at the moment," adding:

"This smiling Arabic assassin is intent on stealing all the treasures they've nicked off everyone else, and pulverising them into commercial and footballing oblivion."

James Lawton, chief sports writer at the Independent (2 September), saw the takeover as a leveler:

"Now, though, City can point across the city and say they are at last on a level playing field: their Middle Eastern money is surely as good as the American dollars and borrowed euros of United."

Further support came from Jeff Powell in the Daily Mail (8 September), who asked:

"Unless their wealth comes from corruption, terrorism, money-laundering or hidden Nazi vaults, then what exactly is wrong with Arab, Russian or American money?"

He continued:

"Nor does it matter if the sheiks and the oligarchs are building their bunkers in Britain ready for the day when their oil-wells run dry or they fall out of favour with that nice Mr Putin."

One thing going for Dr al-Fahim, according to Ian Ridley in the Mail on Sunday (14 September), is that he appeared "a more acceptable alternative to Thaksin Shinawatra," the previous owner, who was described by Lawton as being "pursued by a pack of human rights organizations" (2 September).

James Ducker agreed in the Times (4 September):

"Privately, the involvement of the al-Nahyan family at City is thought to have come as some relief to the Premier League, which risked being embarrassed if Thaksin Shinawatra, the former Prime Minister of Thailand, were found guilty of corruption charges in his homeland and fails the league's fit and proper person test."

Opposition

A few writers were noticeably upset at what Steve Stammers in the Daily Mirror called "the Middle East invasion of the Premier League" (7 September).

Michael Calvin in the Sunday Mirror (7 September) wrote:

"So this is how it all ends, with Comical Ali playing Fantasy Football with real people and trillions of petro-dollars. Sulaiman Al Fahim, the Abu Dhabi royal family's representative on earth, is the face of our fatally flawed national game."

For Calvin, a new player bought at a record fee was "wearing the supine smile of a brainwashed hostage," while those fans who had come to the ground to celebrate "were dancing on the freshly dug grave of English football as we know it."

Will Hutton in the Observer (7 September) warned:

"Britain is in the middle of a fire sale of its assets for which future generations will reproach us."

His reasoning was that "the pressure is on for instant success, bedding in short-termism in every aspect of strategy - R&D, product innovation, skills development - to avoid takeover." Hutton is not against foreign investment in Britain, he said, but "the question is degree." Evidently believing the current degree to be too great, he concluded that "absolutely nothing will change. The fire sale will continue."

Eugene Henderson in the Sunday Express (7 September) was particularly scathing:

"Football's heart may have been lost to the lure of money many years ago but this week its very soul was for sale."

He complained:

"While Britain slides into recession, there seems nothing to stop mega-rich foreigners from shopping for a Premiership team and then buying top players."

Jim Holden in the Sunday Express (7 September) opined:

"Yes, if you want to be dazzled by ever more ostentatious displays of wealth, the Premier League is the place to be. If you are looking for style and class, you'd best buy a blindfold."

However, Holden added that Abu Dhabi's motives behind the takeover are "certainly more admirable than the motives of some raiders for buying English football clubs. Their goal at Eastlands is glory not profit."

Steven Howard, chief sports writer at the Sun, made his feelings clear (5 September):

"Aladdin rubbed his magic lamp and a genie appeared. Manchester City rub theirs and we get Dr Death...If there's one man destined to kill off the England team once and for all it's Dr Sulaiman Al Fahim of Abu Dhabi."

Simon Edge wrote in the Daily Express (3 September):

"How depressing to think that in the 21st century Britain must rely on foreign money to compete with the rest of the world. The obscenely rich Arab states have once again come to the 'rescue' of an ailing British name - but at what cost?"

Like Edge, Sarah Arnott in the Independent (2 September) saw a broader trend outside football:

"From the former Thai prime minister to a Middle Eastern property tycoon, Manchester City's changing ownership is emblematic of the shifting balance of power of the global economy."

She asked, "should these investors be a cause of concern?"

The Guardian thought so, labelling the takeover "a classic live-now-pay-later Faustian pact" (3 September). Its editorial added:

"In the end it is all another example of the headlong sacrifice of our way of life and our planet to oil profiteers who respect neither laws nor traditions."

If not Abu Dhabi, then another

Several writers were resigned to increasing foreign ownership in English football. Although they agreed that there is cause for concern, they saw it as inevitable. However, the particular origin of foreign owners is of no concern. Rather, the effect on the English game is the area of concern. According to a sports editorial in the Daily Star (5 September):

"Just another step along the way to virtually every Premier League club being owned by foreign billionaires."

The Guardian wrote that the "audacious Gulf state takeover" is "simply the latest stage in English club football's rapid modern rite of passage from community to commodity" (3 September). The editorial added:

"Last time it was Chelsea. Now it is Manchester City. Soon it will be another club."

This thought was echoed by the Independent (2 September):

"England's most famous football clubs have become the playthings of a class of international, super rich, investors."

The future

A few writers considered the future, and left a word of warning. Ian Ridley in the Mail on Sunday (14 September) saw trouble ahead for the English game:

"It is not being overly dramatic, indeed, to say that allowed to go unpoliced, the current fiscal farce could even lead to meltdown in the English game."

The problem for Ridley is accountability:

"In the past, owners were mostly local and accountable and had to suffer the consequences of their club's fortunes...Now owners can simply sidle back whence they came without any shame should it all go the shape of a pear."

In this case, the author noted:

"Dr Sulaiman Al Fahim did the City deal virtually untroubled by questions."

The Independent wrote that "one cannot help wonder how long the somewhat surreal merry-go-round can continue turning" (2 September). Two days later, it stated that "if the bubble does burst, there could well be many fans who live to regret the day they threw open their arms in such a wide welcome to the Premier League revolution."

Paul Hayward in the Daily Mail suggested that "the boom is closer to being over than this swoop suggests" (3 September).

Graham Hiscott in the Daily Mirror disagreed, writing that "with the credit crunch leaving many in the West strapped for cash and oil prices still high, the trend is only set to continue" (3 September).

Oliver Holt in the Mirror (4 September) suggested that rapid results were expected: "these people don't just expect money to talk. They expect it to shout out loud."

David Lacey in the Guardian (6 September) gave some advice for the new owners:

"Having made the most dramatic desert entrance since Omar Sharif shimmered into view in Lawrence of Arabia, Al Fahim needs to learn that success in football amounts to rather more than throwing camel-loads of cash around."