

Interview: Nicholas McGeehan of Human Rights Watch on links between the UK and undemocratic regimes in the Gulf

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Democratic Audit features short audio interviews with leading experts on the state of democracy and human rights. For our first interview, **Richard Berry** spoke to **Nicholas McGeehan**, Middle East researcher at [Human Rights Watch](#), on the way rulers of Gulf states have been cracking down on dissent at home while simultaneously deepening their relationships within the UK. [Listen to the interview here.](#)*



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The wave of protest beginning in Tunisia in late 2010 and spreading across much of North Africa and the Middle East, known as the Arab Spring, has brought about political reform and the downfall of a number of the region's former rulers. To date, however, the process has left the regimes of the oil-rich Gulf states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) largely unreformed. There are popular movements in these countries, but international observers claim these have been suppressed, often brutally and with little regard for human rights – [Bahrain](#) in particular has seen violent clashes between protesters and state security forces.

Alongside this upheaval, in recent years we have also seen the ruling elites of Gulf states making high-profile investments in the UK, often through state-backed investment funds. For instance, the new cable car crossing of the River Thames in east London is [sponsored by Emirates](#), the airline owned by the Dubai government (part of the UAE). The UK government has actively encouraged trade with the Gulf – [David Cameron](#) visited Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi (also part of the UAE) for this reason last year.

The most prominent investments from the Gulf have been in English football clubs. [Manchester City](#) are owned by Sheik Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a member of the Abu Dhabi ruling family and Deputy Prime Minister of the UAE. [Arsenal](#) have a long-standing sponsorship arrangement with Emirates, after which their stadium is named. [Leeds United](#) were bought last year by a Dubai-based bank, which is in turned owned by a Bahraini bank. [Sheffield United](#) are co-owned by Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, a member of the Saudi Arabian ruling family. [Nottingham Forest](#) were bought last year by the wealthy Al-Hasawi family of Kuwait, who are linked to the Kuwaiti ruling family.

The phenomenon presents two related challenge for the UK. The first concerns our commitment to democracy and human rights overseas, which appears questionable if we encourage repressive regimes to secure financial or reputational benefit from UK-based investment. The second is about our own democratic culture, which surely can only be weakened if those associated with such regimes can achieve prominent positions in the UK, without being confronted robustly by our elected authorities or by the general public.

Democratic Audit discussed these and other issues in depth with Nicholas McGeehan, who specialises in Qatar, Bahrain and the UAE for Human Rights Watch. In our interview, he gives an overview of the current state of human rights in the region, discusses why Gulf regimes may seek to make these high-profile investments in the UK, and

sets out how the UK needs to alter the terms of its relationship with their ruling elites.

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Podcast produced by Cheryl Brumley.

Note: This post represents the views of the author and/or interviewee, and not those of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before commenting.