



Latest

NEW LINES
MAGAZINE

Subscribe

Reportage

Argument

Anchored in History

First Person

Review



/Reportage United Kingdom | 11 MIN READ

The Saudi Billionaire Who Sought to Join Britain's Aristocracy

Mahfouz Marei Mubarak bin Mahfouz spent a fortune trying to acquire a British knighthood – and triggered an influence-peddling scandal that has now embroiled the heir to the throne

**Brian Whitaker***Brian Whitaker is a contributing editor at New Lines and a former Middle East editor of The Guardian*

December 2, 2021



Illustration by Joanna Andreasson for New Lines

Britain is often seen by outsiders as a land of pomp, pageantry and centuries-old traditions, a place where royalty ride in horse-drawn carriages and aristocrats live in castles or stately mansions. It's an image that captivates many foreigners, and while most will never experience the high-society lifestyle for themselves, a few have the means to buy their way into it.

There are also some well-connected people in Britain who – for a suitable fee – can help wealthy clients, especially those identified as UHNWIs (Ultra High Net Worth Individuals), rub shoulders with the nobility.

One of these UHNWIs was a Saudi billionaire named Mahfouz Marei Mubarak bin Mahfouz. At least, that's how he was known before he moved to Britain and began collecting a series of awards and titles that turned him into His Excellency Dr. Mahfouz Marei Mubarak bin Mahfouz, CBE, GCMLJ, FRSA, Baron of Abernethy.

Mahfouz was both extremely rich and extremely generous, but his largesse wasn't particularly directed toward the poor or disadvantaged. The causes he favored were the sort where his gifts would be noticed (and appreciated) by the British establishment. He donated handsomely to the most prestigious universities – Oxford and Cambridge – to military charities and those concerned with preserving Britain's heritage. In turn, he was rewarded with displays of gratitude from the recipients: a plaque here, a bronze bust there, or a building that carried his name.

Setting his sights high, he became a major donor to a charity called The Prince's Foundation, thus bringing himself to the attention of its founder and figurehead – Prince Charles, heir to the British throne. Mahfouz is said to have given the foundation a total of 1.5 million pounds (\$2 million), including substantial support

for two "heritage" properties that it owns in Scotland: the Castle of Mey and Dumfries House (both of which members of the public can visit). At Dumfries House his contribution was recognized with a "Mahfouz Fountain" in the garden. At the Castle of Mey – where he is said to have paid for renovation of the windows – an area of woodland was named "Mahfouz Wood."

Further recognition came in 2016 when Mahfouz was officially honored with a CBE ("Commander of the British Empire") medal – presented by Charles at a private ceremony in London. Inevitably, this raised suspicions that he had not got it through merit but because of his support for the prince's charity.

The CBE is a medium-grade honor and Mahfouz had apparently been hoping for something better. Shortly afterward, there were moves behind the scenes to upgrade him from CBE to KBE ("Knight Commander of the British Empire") – an award that would normally entitle its holder to be known as "Sir."

Among those lobbying on his behalf was Michael Fawcett, the prince's closest aide and a key fundraiser for the foundation, who wrote a letter offering to help secure a knighthood for Mahfouz, along with British citizenship. Under the abstruse rules of the honors system, the question of his citizenship had suddenly become important. Although foreigners can qualify for a KBE, the "Sir" title is available only to citizens of Britain [or](#) Commonwealth countries that recognize Queen Elizabeth as head of state. In other words, if Mahfouz were to become a "Sir," he would first have to become a British citizen.

Fawcett's letter also mentioned that the proposed knighthood was "in light of the ongoing and most recent generosity" Mahfouz had shown, thus explicitly linking it to his donations to the prince's charity. When the letter's contents were published earlier this month, Charles was said to be "deeply shocked" and he abruptly severed relations with Fawcett, thus ending 40 years of royal service. After starting out as a junior footman to the queen, Fawcett had served as Charles' valet – at one point being tasked with applying toothpaste to the prince's toothbrush – before eventually rising to become chief executive of The Prince's Foundation.

Mahfouz is not especially well known in Saudi Arabia, but his family's company, Marei Bin Mahfouz Group, is ranked 18th among the kingdom's private sector firms. Established in Mecca in 1965, it has diverse interests in manufacturing, services, real estate and international trade. Mahfouz, his father and three other relatives form its board of directors.

His climb up the British social ladder began a decade ago with the purchase of a centuries-old Scottish feudal title that meant he could be legally known as the Baron of Abernethy. The title itself had no real significance, but it may explain why he is referred to as "Lord" Mahfouz on his family company's website. How much he paid is unknown, though the Scottish Barony Titles website is currently advertising two others for sale – one at \$114,000 and the other at \$128,000.

Becoming a baron meant Mahfouz was also entitled to his own coat of arms – a unique heraldic motif that in earlier times was displayed in battle on the owner's shield or tabard. The design he chose featured a lion, a pair of scales and a sword, and he had it officially registered in his name.



Mahfouz Marei Binmahfouz, Baron of Abernethy, coat of arms / International Register of Arms - Binmahfouz, M.M. / The Armorial Register

Another of Mahfouz's titles came via the Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem, an "order of chivalry" whose members dress up in regalia for their ceremonies and do charitable work. In its original incarnation, at the time of the Crusades, the order had a military and religious role supporting Christianity in the Holy Land – which made Mahfouz's interest in it as an Arab Muslim rather surprising. One of the attractions, though, was that its members can refer to one another as knights. The order has various ranks, some of which are relatively inexpensive. A "Knight Commander" title, for example, costs \$730, plus an annual renewal fee of \$200. Mahfouz, however, acquired one of the highest ranks – "Knight Grand Cross of Merit" – which doesn't have a fixed price tag and is described as being granted only for "service of special merit."

Mahfouz's first known royal connection came in 2012 when he established a charity called The Mahfouz Foundation and somehow managed to recruit the queen's cousin, Prince Michael of Kent, as its patron. Michael was joined by the hereditary Marquess of Reading as a trustee, and His Royal Highness Francisco de Borbón y Escasany, Duke of Seville – who is also one of the most senior figures in the Order of Saint Lazarus – later became president.

The Mahfouz Foundation's stated aim is to "promote and advance the education of the public in the UK in the history, literature, language, institutions and culture of the Middle East," but anyone seeking more information from its website is greeted by a photo of Mahfouz – and nothing else. Several deleted pages can be found in the Wayback archive, mostly chronicling Mahfouz's activities. Among

other things, they show that from March 2014 to June 2015 he had three meetings with Charles – in London, Scotland and Saudi Arabia – and one meeting with the queen.

His meeting with the queen came on the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta. To mark the occasion, a 13-foot bronze statue of the queen was unveiled at Runnymede, where the document had been signed. Heading the list of donors who contributed to the statue's \$470,000 cost was the name of Mahfouz's father, Marei bin Mahfouz.

Manipulation of Britain's honors system has a long and grubby history, so in that respect the Mahfouz affair isn't exceptional. But it comes at a time of growing concern about sleaze in public life. Since the Conservatives came to power in 2010, several people who donated 3 million pounds to the party have been given peerages, leading to claims that this is now the going price for a seat in the unelected upper house of Parliament. Under Boris Johnson's premiership, cronyism, rule-breaking and influence-peddling are seen as rife. The government has also spent billions on COVID-related contracts issued without competitive tendering (on the grounds that it was an emergency) to firms that have chums in politics. Numerous members of Parliament – almost all of them Conservatives – have been earning money on the side as "consultants" for companies that seek favors from the government. Meanwhile the prime minister himself, far from setting a good example, has made a habit of taking foreign holidays at well-wishers' expense.

The other important element in the Mahfouz story relates to Prince Charles and the people he entrusts with assisting him. It reveals questionable behavior by aides and hangers-on, which he apparently failed to notice until newspapers began reporting it. Meanwhile, Charles himself is increasingly under the spotlight as the queen, who is 95 and had a recent health scare, cuts back on official engagements. Nowadays he often deputizes for her and his ascent to the throne cannot be far away.

Charles – now 73 – had sometimes struggled to find a role for himself in his mother's shadow, but he became a champion of the environment, nature and Britain's heritage. The royals are not supposed to get involved in politics, but these were seen as safe and relatively uncontroversial issues. He founded a wholefoods company, Duchy Originals, whose produce is sold in supermarkets, but some of his ideas were seen as weird. He once suggested that plants grow better if you talk to them, and his low opinion of modern architecture – he famously described a proposed extension to the National Gallery as a "monstrous carbuncle" – infuriated many architects who saw his views as ludicrously out of date.

Charles' restoration projects at Dumfries House and the Castle of Mey were in some ways admirable, however – not least because they now attract tourists and provide local jobs. The problem, though, was the cost of restoration and turning them into financially viable showpieces of British heritage. Wealthy as the royal family might be, they don't have money to splash around in the way that the nouveau riche often do.

Saving Dumfries House, an 18-century Palladian-style building with fine period furniture and a 2,000-acre estate, proved especially expensive. In 2007 its owner, the Marquess of Bute, put it up for sale because he could no longer afford the upkeep. Two prominent heritage organizations, the National Trust for Scotland and Historic Scotland, had already turned it down (the latter having concluded that it could not be made viable). A consortium of charities eventually raised 20 million pounds, and the Scottish government pledged 5 million pounds, but this was still well short of the 45-million-pound asking price. The rescue plan would probably have fallen through without Charles' last-minute intervention and a 20-million-pound loan raised by The Prince's Foundation.

Critics thought Charles was taking an enormous risk, and the Times newspaper accused him of gambling the foundation's future. The loan was originally guaranteed by allocating 69 acres of the Dumfries estate for a 600-home "sustainable" housing project – a model "eco-village" called Knockroon. Charles had previously overseen a similar project at Poundbury in England.

In line with the prince's objection to modern "carbuncles," the design of the houses was said to be inspired by Scottish domestic architecture in the "great era of town building from the late 17th to the mid-19th century." But it has been widely ridiculed. The architectural magazine *Urban Realm* described it as "fake heritage of the most superficial kind" and "a mash-up of neo-Georgian and pastiche vernacular." Sales of the new-but-old-looking houses were dismal, however, and earlier this year Scottish media reported that only 38 had been built. Part of the Knockroon land has since been reassigned, not for housing but for a 24-million-pound green energy research center.

Despite the problems of the Knockroon scheme, the foundation's loan was eventually paid off through further fundraising, and the Dumfries mansion opened to the public in 2008 after an additional 15 million pounds had been raised for refurbishment and running costs.

Other parts of the estate continue to be developed as a "heritage-led regeneration project" that includes the teaching of "traditional" skills in an area of high unemployment. Some of the money comes from corporate sources. The Morrisons supermarket chain, for example, funded a "sustainable" and "educational" farm on some of the land, but the prince's charity still needed large donations from wealthy individuals, and it offered access to Charles as an incentive.

In August the Daily Mail published a leaked email showing that for 100,000 pounds, donors could have dinner and a chat with the prince followed by an overnight stay at Dumfries House. The email also outlined financial arrangements where a hefty share of the donation would be paid to intermediaries. Donors were not expected to pay the 100,000 pounds direct to Dumfries House but to William

Bortrick, a high-society fixer who publishes Burke's Peerage (a guide to the aristocracy and landed gentry). According to the email, Bortrick was then supposed to pay 20% to someone whose name was redacted and 5% to another fixer named Michael Wynne-Parker. Bortrick denies any impropriety.

Interestingly, both Bortrick and Wynne-Parker had connections with Mahfouz. Bortrick had acted as one of his advisers, and Mark Ayre, his co-director at Burke's Peerage, was listed on the Mahfouz Foundation's website as a "special adviser." Wynne-Parker, meanwhile, was listed as a trustee, and like Mahfouz, he was also a member of the Order of Saint Lazarus, holding the rank of Knight Grand Cross.

Granting royal access in exchange for donations is clearly a lucrative way of raising money, but there are hazards too. Dmitry Leus was a Russian banker who had moved to Britain and begun establishing himself as a philanthropist: He gave money to the Conservative Party and various charities. Bortrick encouraged him to support The Prince's Foundation with promises that it would lead to a meeting with Charles. Perhaps more important, Leus formed the impression that it would also help him get a British passport.

His donations reportedly totaled several hundred thousand pounds, and he had already received a gushing thank-you letter from the prince when someone found that Leus had been convicted of money laundering in Russia. Although the conviction had subsequently been quashed, the discovery rang alarm bells with the foundation's ethics committee. The foundation says all the money has since been returned to "its source." Leus, however, says he hasn't received it.

Part of the problem, according to a Sunday Times investigation, is that Leus' donations hadn't gone directly to The Prince's Foundation. For reasons that are not yet clear, money was channeled through the Mahfouz Foundation – apparently without the Saudi's knowledge – and some of it was used to pay fixers.

In light of that, the official regulator of charities has now launched an inquiry into whether the Mahfouz Foundation has been properly managed and, more specifically, whether "certain donations" it received were "used in accordance with the donors' intentions." Separately, The Prince's Foundation has announced an investigation of its affairs by independent auditors.

The results are awaited with interest and, in some quarters, with apprehension.

Latest

[SEE ALL](#)

In Karachi, Street Food Tells a Story of Division and Unity

[August 16, 2022](#)

Iran Fatwa: the Meaning of the Attack on Salman Rushdie

[August 15, 2022](#)

Qcema Confidential

[August 15, 2022](#)

Read More

[SEE ALL](#)

1 In Karachi, Street Food Tells a Story of Division and Unity

2 Palm Oil and Blood In Honduras' Ongoing Conflict

3 Israel and Gaza Keep Up Their Precarious Dance

Sign up to our newsletter

Enter your email address

Sign Up

Will be used in accordance with our [Privacy Policy](#)

NEW/LINES

[About & Staff](#)

[Submission and Guidelines](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Podcast](#)

[Subscribe](#)



[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms](#)