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## Hire seen as attempt to normalize ties with Israel Saudi owner of Portsmouth hires Israeli coach



Emirati business man Suleiman al-Fahim was the owner of the British football club Portsmouth till October 2009 (File)

### DUBAI (Al Arabiya)

The hiring of an Israeli soccer director at a Saudi-owned British football team was met with indignation as it was seen as an attempt at normalizing ties with the Hebrew state while the team's previous owner and current minority shareholder absolved himself of the controversial deal, according to media reports Wednesday.

Emirati business man Suleiman al-Fahim was the owner of the British football club Portsmouth till October 2009 when he sold a 90% stake to Saudi property tycoon and owner of al-Faraj Brothers; Ali al-Faraj.

In the same month, former Chelsea manager Israeli national Avram Grant was appointed soccer director at Portsmouth, a decision that stirred controversy.

The decision to hire Grant, 54, and his compatriot ex-Manchester City defender Tal Ben-Haim, 27, was taken by Faraj and his advisors in order to promote peace in the field of sports, Fahim told Al Arabiya TV sports show Fil Marma (In the Goal) Wednesday.

"Professionalism dictates separating sports and politics," said Fahim, who was made the non-executive chairman of Portsmouth after sealing the deal with Faraj. "Plus, football players do not necessarily represent the ideologies of their countries."

Fahim said he generally prefers hiring Arab players, yet knows he will be criticized if he gives them priority over Christian and Jewish players.

"Portsmouth already has excellent Arab players like winger Nazir Belhaj and midfielder Hassan Yebda who are Algerian and the French-Moroccan defender and midfielder Younes Kaboul."

Fahim received several phone calls criticizing the decision to hire Israelis in an Arab-owned club and explained that he had almost no say in the deal.

“I used to be the owner of Portsmouth. Now, I only own 10% and I only have one vote out of 10 in the board of directors.”

When asked why Arab and Western media is unable to reach Faraj till now, he replied that he is concerned about the pressure he will face from British media.

“But I am sure he will appear as soon as the British football fields come back to life and preparations for the Premier League starts.”

Fahim praised the purchase of Portsmouth and the involvement of Arab businessmen in Premier League clubs.

“It is a very prolific and promising investment,” he concluded.

(Translated from Arabic by Sonia Farid).