



REPORT WORLD

# The Ultras Ahlawy

Football, Violence, and the Quest for Justice

APRIL 10, 2017 — KARIM MEDHAT ENNARAH

The “Ultra” fans of Egyptian football emerged from the world of football stands in 2011 to play an important role in street politics during the years of the revolution. Their impressive coordinated visual displays, organizing capacity, and reputed street-fighting skills inspired so many that any young person dressed in their style was identified as an Ultra. Then, in Port Said in February 2012, tragedy struck: seventy-two football fans were killed in fan violence and an ensuing stampede. The flawed quest for justice that followed resulted in a mass death sentence and more unrest. With a story that parallels the rising hopes and dashed dreams of the Egyptian revolution, this report traces the history of the Ultras from their creation until the present and their quest for justice in Port Said. It also considers how to achieve justice and healing after communal violence.

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*“For to lose a game of football is hardly a tragedy. Worse things happen in life, a lot worse.”* —Chris Oakley

In the 1980s, the football stands in Egypt—typically packed beyond their official capacity—were much less hostile than those in European stadiums. A style of over-the-top football fandom that had originated in Italy was starting to spread in Southern and Western Europe, and would eventually captivate Egypt, as well.<sup>1</sup> These so-called “Ultra” groups that had emerged in Torino and Sampdoria and other Italian cities in the 1960s and 1970s could not have imagined the influence they would have on the political life of Egypt more than three decades later. Nor could they have possibly imagined the tragedy that would occur in the stadium of Port Said in 2012, when rioting fans and inadequate policing left seventy-two football fans dead and hundreds injured.

Before the tragedy, there was revolution. What became known as the Port Said Massacre occurred on February 1, 2012, a little less than a year after President Hosni Mubarak resigned in the face of mass protests. The Port Said game was scheduled during a week of marches and demonstrations marking the first anniversary of the revolution. It was not a festive time, though the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the freshly elected, Islamist-dominated parliament struggled to emphasize the celebration. They talked about a “completed” revolution that no longer required street mobilization but, rather, strong and stable institutions. But protesters, angry at undelivered promises and the precariousness of the political transition, shut down the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, and other big cities between January 25 and January 28, 2012.

Among the Canal cities, Port Said always stood out for never having been swept up in revolutionary mobilization, unlike its sisters to the south, Ismailia and Suez—the latter being one of the first cities, one year before, where riots broke out on January 25, 2011, the first day of the revolution. (This dynamic would soon change in Port Said.)

Many Egyptian Ultras, including the Ahly SC Ultras who were to visit Port Said on that day in February 2012, had been

part of the revolution, and became known in street protests for their infectious chants and colorful coordinated displays. It might seem like a stretch to call them a social movement: the Ultras would always speak of their diverse political opinions and emphasize that taking part in the revolution was an individual decision. A social movement, however, does not have to be centered or created around a political objective.<sup>2</sup> Their relationship with the revolution was reciprocal—for the dominant discourse against police violence and brutality provided further validity to the Ultras' claims, which they had maintained since their inception many years before the revolution, that the police were the instigators of violence in the notorious clashes with football fans. The revolution thus gave the Ultras legitimacy.<sup>3</sup>

The Port Said match occurred at a time when tensions within the revolutionary movements were palpable. Revolutionary narratives and ideals were starting to diverge. The spreading sense of entropy had soured swaths of the populace on continued mass action. This was especially true for most of the political youth movements, which continued to engage in street politics, and for the youths organized in forms of association like the Ultras groups, or those who were not organized at all. Viewed in Egypt's specific context, where the mere act of gathering in public constituted a political act, the Ultras' energy has always been political. It is amorphous and possesses no more inherent objective than a river trundling downwards—it is even capable of turning back on itself—but it is political nonetheless. The 2011 revolution marked their birth as an overtly political subject.<sup>4</sup>

The confrontation between the Ultras and the state was one of many subtexts of the revolution.

## From Organized Fandom to Street Politics

When did these groups made up predominantly of teenagers develop any sense of shared identity, football-centered or otherwise? And how did something so organized and capable of mobilizing youths in the hundreds come to life in the Egypt of the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, when almost all forms of mass mobilization were easily reined in?

Before the revolution, during the years of Mubarak's rule, it was a commonly held opinion that football was the opiate of the masses in Egypt, an anti-mobilizer. (This is a popular view of football outside of Egypt, as well.) But if that were true—if this passion, this nearly religious devotion toward a football team, was harmless to the state, or a useful cathartic—then the government should have welcomed the phenomenon. Instead, it did quite the opposite. The state understood that the organizational capacities of any group—football fanatics or cookery fanatics, political or not—could not be allowed to grow to the extent that hundreds or more could be mobilized within a day.

The Ultras Ahlawy, or UA07, was the first of the Egyptian groups, founded in the eponymous year of 2007, and it seems

that most of the other Egyptian groups were officially founded around the same time. This includes splinter Al Ahly fan group Ultras Red Devils; the Ultras White Knights (UwK) of Zamalek SC; the Blue Dragons of Ismaily SC; and the Green Eagles of Port Said, among many others.

The Ultras arose from fan groups that date back a few years earlier. In his study of the radicalization of football fandom in Egypt, Shawki El-Zatmah writes about the transformation of Egyptian football fans from the “Terso” culture to the Ultra culture. The name Terso came from Italian “terzo,” or third, because for a long time they dominated the third-class ticketed stands.<sup>5</sup> Compared to the Hooligans and Ultras of Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, the Egyptian Tersos were definitely more spontaneous in their displays of support—and much less prone to physical violence. Terso fans predominantly belonged to the lower classes, but their presence in the third-class stands gradually gave way to domination by lower-middle class Ultras, who were a mostly younger (teenage) and more homogenous fan group.<sup>6</sup>

In a sense, what the Ultras became famous for—their “tifos” (an Italian word for choreographed fan displays), their street fights, and the taunting of the police—was in essence an extravagant display of youth. For them, football is no trivial matter. It is “the only viable religion of the third millennium,” as Manuel Vazquez Montalban, Barcelona fan, sports journalist, and political prisoner under Franco once said about football.<sup>7</sup> “The cause that binds together being no more than the success of a particular side, standing in the place of seemingly loftier concerns of a political or spiritual nature . . . [is] shallow but interestingly shallow, importantly shallow even.”<sup>8</sup> Football also forges a shared, cross-boundary community in which group solidarity is experienced.<sup>9</sup>

And in Italy and Spain, where the Ultra movement was born, there was already an implicit politics to the fans’ activities, if one looked for it. They seemingly pitted themselves against the neoliberalization of the political order. They spoke of being “anti-media,” “anti-police,” and “against modern football,”<sup>10</sup> hinting that fan groups were partly replacing traditional forms of political association.<sup>11</sup> With globalization came a sudden hike in the monetary and psychic costs of being loyal to one’s team: expensive tickets, star players who frequently changed teams, shareholders passing their debt onto clubs. In response, a culture of “love football, hate business” emerged across Europe.<sup>12</sup> But the phenomenon thrived on globalization even as it seemed to stand against it. Wherever new Ultra groups appeared, they did not just adopt a similar organizational model. Egyptian youths copied the aesthetics and even the Italian and English nomenclature and mottos.<sup>13</sup>

In Egypt, too, the sway of neoliberal economics and the erosion of social contracts had contributed to the emergence of politicized, liberal youth groups, as well as these new football identities.<sup>14</sup> All came to meet in the street movements that dominated the public sphere in Egypt from 2011 to 2013, and an interesting dialectic emerged between the different youth movements.<sup>15</sup> But until 2011, the Ultras had nothing to do with the politics of left and right, aside from occasional

expressions of nationalist fervor or solidarity with Palestine. Most of these youth movements developed a discourse that was still to a large extent, anti-political. While nationalist, it was almost hostile to any political ideology or political project.

Much of this energy went into gratuitous scuffles with rival Ultras. An example that stands out, and that is relevant for this story in particular, is when supporters of Al Ahly visited cities on the Suez Canal to support their side in away games with teams such as Al-Masry SC of Port Said, and Ismaily SC of Ismailia. Before such games, sports media reports constantly raised alarms about fan violence—though nothing in those days compared to what happened in 2011 and 2012. The roots of these rivalries went back decades before the emergence of the Ultras. The rivalries were stoked by the fact that the capital club had far more resources and visibility than the regional teams. The intensity of the rivalries may have been more easily felt in the home cities of regional teams than in the capital. In one famous example of how much more the bitterness was felt outside of the capital, in 1962 a star player moved from Ismaily to Al Ahly, and under immense pressure from the fan communities in the city of Ismailia (whose protests went as far as setting fire to the player's family house), shortly returned to the Canal city club—personally chauffeured by the president of Al Ahly as a sign of goodwill.<sup>16</sup>

Frequently, these watershed incidents were infused with the politics of the time. Popular Cairene perceptions of Port Said and Ismailia residents were strongly influenced by the displacement that occurred during the war of attrition with Israel in 1967–70,<sup>17</sup> which led to a mass exodus from the Canal to Cairo. Many people from the Canal cities lived transitory lives of impoverishment and unemployment in Cairo until 1975. A very popular myth that persists until today is that Al Ahly refused to host Ismaily trainings and home games after the forced displacement from Ismailia. While even some hardcore Ismaily fans acknowledge the legend is inaccurate, it is still able to fuel fan anger.<sup>18</sup>

The Ultras may have not been bothered with politics or with the State, but the police of Mubarak's Egypt eventually clashed with the fans. Before the revolution, there was hardly any notable violence, except for some scuffles between groups. But the police were wary of their organizational capacity, which even if apolitical was unmatched, at least until the advent of the April 6 Youth Movement of 2008 (which still could not match the numbers of the Ultras). Even if they thought of them as mere football hooligans who posed no threat to the regime, the police still had to keep the Ultras in check through measured violence. As one Ultra put it: "They tried to control the unions, they tried to control the student unions in the universities and they tried to control the political life. Suddenly they found in front of them a bunch of young people organizing themselves in football. . . . They just weren't happy with the fact that you have twenty, twenty-five guys who have gathered five hundred people in two hours."<sup>19</sup> Security forces intimidated the Ultras and arrested their leaders from their homes in the early hours of the morning, just as they did with political opposition viewed as a threat to the state.<sup>20</sup>

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Such confrontations at football matches became increasingly violent. This preemptive state violence may have backfired. Some observers claim that the clashes with the police were “boot camp” for the Ultras, providing them with useful practice for their subsequent role in larger demonstrations during the years of the revolution. Whatever the state’s disposition may have been, the politicization of the Ultras was an inevitable byproduct of the revolution.<sup>21</sup>

The first serious clash between the police and the UA07 in the stands took place in Kafr El Sheikh stadium, in 2010.<sup>22</sup> Before Kafr El Sheikh, incidents were mostly confined to the Ultras lighting flares and the police harassing them. After Kafr El Sheikh, direct confrontations became more common. Police violence against Ultras, whether they were thought of as a genuine threat or not, may be best described as performative violence, intended to bolster a self-constructed image of an all-powerful agency that is firmly in control of public space. It hardly ever served any peacekeeping or crowd-control purpose.<sup>23</sup>

A culture of pride in resistance to police grew among the Ultras. “Fans took pride in being able to beat up the police,” researcher Dalia Abdelhameed Ibraheem writes in her study on the Ultras. “Showing bravery in fights is central in the construction of Ultras’ masculinity.”<sup>24</sup> In my conversations with Hicham El Fekky, a founding member of UA07, he maintained that Ultras were not violent and that confrontations were usually provoked by the police, but conceded that “at certain junctures, the Ultras became a bit of a burden on the club when they fought back,” referring to sanctions that the club received.<sup>25</sup> He cited the Kafr El Sheikh incident as a turning point.

## Revolution

It is safe to say that most Egyptians encountered the Ultras for the first time during the revolution, in the mass demonstrations of January and February 2011. But they gained even more prominence in the year that followed. Following the ouster of Mubarak and his minister of the interior, Habib el-Adly—the Ultras’ arch-nemesis—Ultra graffiti

started proliferating, and became more revolutionary in its subject matter. It must have been in April 2011 when graffiti celebrating the fallen of the Ultras first appeared, to commemorate Hussein Taha, a member of the Ultra group UwK, who was killed in clashes with the police on January 28, 2011. The Ultras, who are well-embedded in their local communities, frequently organized marches to the homes of families of their fallen, where they paid tribute and waved flags commemorating the faces of their martyrs.<sup>26</sup> It was the Ultras who introduced in protest marches the concept of a silhouetted martyr's face that would become an important part of the revolutionary visual repertoire.<sup>27</sup>

With this new visibility, the Ultras suddenly became immensely popular. Enthusiasm surged for their newly energized displays in the football stadiums, now that they were unchallenged by the police. When the football league resumed after a brief lull during the first weeks of the revolt, the fans, abused by the police for so long, could finally vent, chanting against the infamous Central Security Forces (CSF). In the first such appearance, in a league game taking place on May 20, 2011, UA07 sang a song that became popular among revolutionaries, taunting the proverbial policemen who “bribed his way through education.” This song and others made for some extremely catchy, bold, and occasionally profane protest chants. The Ultras introduced the protest movement to carnivalesque resistance performances and techniques, including using trumpets, whistling in unison, and brandishing huge flags.<sup>28</sup>

Still, many aspects of the Ultras' participation in the events of the revolution are shrouded in myth: their finances, their true numbers, their organizational and fighting capabilities. Their numbers have always been difficult to estimate, and the Ultras clearly have an interest in maintaining some of this mystery—it can seem they are larger than they are. It helps that the number of active members, which can be in the hundreds or a few thousand in the case of the two biggest groups in Egypt (UA07 and UwK), if multiplied by the time and resources they invest in the organization of other fans, maximizes their potential beyond any other type of fandom. Thus, their impact on the revolution as part of a wider mobilization was very real, even if they did not numerically constitute a huge proportion of the protesters.

Financing of some of the Ultras' most impressive tifos, such as their pyrotechnic shows, has been a constant subject of debate. Self-financing is reported as their main mechanism for funding, but it has been contested by others who point to the impressive pyrotechnic shows they have mustered in some of the big games.

And then there is their fighting prowess. “The fighting techniques learned in hard-fought street battles” is a phrase that appeared again and again in writing and in conversations about the Ultras. Local and foreign press repeated the mantra that, because so few Egyptians had had any “fighting experience,” the Ultras had to shoulder the responsibility of being on the frontlines of protests.

The Ultras' style in both dress and protesting spread like wildfire among the younger groups involved in revolutionary mobilization, so that it was not always clear who was actually an Ultra and who was simply emulating them. Indeed, the

term “Ultra” began to be used for anyone who protested and dressed like football fans. After the biggest Ultras groups (UA07 and UwK) officially marched in a protest under the groups’ banners on September 9, 2011 (the event is commonly referred to as the Friday of Correcting the Paths, one of many cumbersome nicknames revolutionary activists used to mobilize for big protests), anyone who was between the age of fifteen and twenty-five, donned a hoodie, and carried a huge flag was casually referred to as an Ultra and hailed at protests with the often repeated welcome cry, “The Ultras have finally arrived!” However, in my memory, the September 9 protest was the last time the different Ultras groups marched under their banners for a protest. Crowds of Ultra-lookalikes stormed the streets and participated in the Mansour Street protests outside the Ministry of Interior that lasted for four days in February 2012. As the protest surged in numbers, it was assumed that the ones leading the demonstrations were the Ultras, because of their daring, their youth, and the banners they carried. But it is doubtful that the pole that carried both the flags of Zamalek and Ahly, an iconic image of the demonstrations was carried by a member of either team’s Ultras—they are bitter rivals and attach considerable significance to these symbols. UA07 themselves denied participating as a group in a Facebook statement.

The alluring notion of a population of highly motivated, fight-hardened youths who had transferred their passion from football to revolution was at that point more myth than fact. What happened next, after Port Said, would complicate the picture even further.

## Football Violence in the Wake of the Revolution

When it happened, the tragedy of Port Said seemed so sudden, so out of context. Nothing like it had occurred in the history of Egyptian football. But football during that time was not isolated from what was happening in the larger society. The relationship between the different fan groups, as well as between the police and fans, had radically changed. Higher levels of violence were becoming increasingly normalized—especially state violence, but also within society. There were precursors to the tragedy in the football stadium that went unnoticed by many.

The first visible event of such rowdiness in the stands was on April 2, 2011, a few weeks before the constitutional referendum. In an African Champions League qualifying-round game between Zamalek and their Tunisian rivals “Le Club Africain,” after the referee cancelled a goal for Zamalek, Zamalek fans stormed the pitch, firing flares. (It should be noted that the UwK, Zamalek’s Ultras, did not seem to be present.)<sup>29</sup> Le Africain’s players reported being physically assaulted by some of the pitch invaders.<sup>30</sup> The public reaction was one of great shock, and the lazy narrative that the instigators of the chaos were “felool”—remnants of the old regime trying to undermine the post-revolutionary order—again emerged to explain away the incident. That idea was so powerful and the social landscape was changing so much faster than anyone’s ability to comprehend it all that it was easy to believe that this must have been staged.



A July 2011 incident at a game in Port Said between Al Ahly and Al-Masry (the Port Said club) is frequently cited as the forerunner to the February 2012 stadium disaster. A video made by the UA07 shows that Al Ahly's Ultras were on the defensive, after clashes initiated by Al-Masry Ultras evolved into a melee with Egypt's riot police, the CSF.<sup>31</sup> The video is edited and is clearly biased, but it is still obvious that the tactics deployed by the CSF created violent tension and set the fans on the offensive: While the Ultras are doing nothing more than singing in unison, they are set upon by the CSF, who beat them with batons. Clashes and rock throwing ensue, along with some vandalism. In the video, UA07 members claim that "thugs" associated with Mubarak's National Democratic Party were responsible for instigating the violence and particularly for the vandalism. Al-Masry fans make the same claim in recorded testimonies.<sup>32</sup> It was a fantastical account that, again, had a lot of traction in the tumultuous days of 2011.

It is difficult to lay the blame for this violence on any party. And the rivalry between the fans of the capital and the Canal teams is an old tradition. Ahmed Magdy, a veteran stadium-goer, thinks that Port Said was the most violent, and the place where the hatred of Al Ahly was the most acute. "Once the buses are in the city, we would start singing and waving Ahly flags from the windows. Then things start flying into the bus—glass, rocks. Occasionally we'd have to squeeze into the middle of the bus and duck, and shortly the glass from the windows would be on the chairs."<sup>33</sup>

Similar incidents followed in the local league. The UA07 clashed with the CSF in a game against Kima Aswan SC on September 6, 2011, leaving many UA07 members injured and dozens arrested. The police seemed intent in that game on putting an end to the Ultras' playful, anti-police chants. UwK had their fair share of scuffles as well. The last of these events to take place before the Port Said Massacre was the match between Al Ahly and Ghazl El Mahallah SC in Mahalla on December 31, 2011, when an equalizing goal by Al Ahly elicited a riotous reaction from the Mahalla supporters, who invaded the pitch with flares. Videos of the event show the referees and stadium staff fleeing the pitch after calling off the game.<sup>34</sup> Al-Masry fans invaded the pitch several times in 2011—and assaulted the Alexandrian team's fans in their stadium in January 2012.

In at least some of these incidents, the police showed that they did have the capacity to effectively intervene, if they wanted to. In the Mahalla game, they simply lined up on the pitch and created a buffer between the two fan groups. A similar action in Port Said in February 2012 might have saved many lives. They probably could not have imagined the cost of their inaction.

## Port Said: The Eastern Stands

Tension had been high for weeks in Port Said in anticipation of the February 1, 2012 match between Al Ahly and Al-Masry, and violence was expected. Early signs were all over the place. Throughout the game, precursors of violence by some of the Al-Masry fans were visible. One displayed by the visiting fans during the game is constantly referred to as a trigger: it questioned “the virility of Port Said fans” and led to mid-game scuffles.<sup>35</sup> The banner referred to Port Said as the city of “El Balla”—a reference to its famous used goods market—which is considered derogatory by some people in Egypt. Prior to the game, the Al-Masry Ultras’ banners carried “death threats” for the Ahly fans who dared to come to Port Said. But all of this was not out of the ordinary for the Ultras and was commonplace in their social media battles, and such threats had never been literally executed.

The police were aware of the rising tensions—the whole country was—but no precautions were taken. In fact, most accounts stress the extremely lax security at the gates, where home fans went through defunct metal detectors visibly carrying sticks and flares. The assaults in the stands started in the first half. In a video that documents two different moments during the game, one during the halftime, an on-the-ground reporter is heard relaying the point of view that the fans of Al-Masry were acting responsibly and that hired thugs were responsible for some of the commotion. At the same moment a green-clad fan can be seen running down the pitch with a flare in hand. (Green is the color of Al-Masry’s kit, and of the Ultras Green Eagles, who support Al-Masry.) A police officer halfheartedly tries to stop him from running toward the stands by reaching out with one hand, and then gives up; the man is then stopped by a fellow fan from running toward the Al Ahly supporters’ stands.<sup>36</sup> The reluctance of the police force to act is plainly obvious. The video shows the end of the match, when almost everyone in the stands invades the pitch. It’s an incredible sight that looks like ants descending on some candy. It took a while for television viewers to realize that fans were actually getting killed—and the numbers, as we watched on TV, were making great sudden leaps, from ten to somewhere above thirty to more than seventy.

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Ahmed Sabry, a football writer and a former member of UA07 who survived Port Said, had a very clear view of the events. Sabry, until Port Said, was a perpetual stadium-goer. Through some connections, he and some friends managed to get executive box seats just underneath the home fans’ terrace, typically reserved for the club administration.<sup>37</sup> From his vantage point he could see several smaller incidents of violence break out during the game. “I’d never seen such lax

security and I'd seen football clashes before," he later recounted in a detailed story published in the Egyptian daily *El Watan*.<sup>38</sup> Sabry told me that he had left the stadium after Al-Masry scored its third goal (they won the match 3–1), but managed to make his way back.

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From the ground, he could see the home fans running amok around him, converging on the victims in the eastern stands. Some of his friends from UA07 died on that day, either from the human crush or the fall. "I had a couple of friends who were a bit heavy-set," he said. "I think they estimated that they could not outrun the Masry fans, so they went up to the higher levels of the eastern stands. They did not expect to be followed. They died from the blows dealt to them when they were cornered."<sup>39</sup> An account of the events by one of the capos (leaders) of UA07 in Ibraheem's ethnographic study describes police apathy and reluctance to stop the Al-Masry Ultras from climbing the eastern stands:

*A very important thing about us is that in the terrace we act as ONE person, the capos tell us when to move and when to stop and we act collectively. But, when the people of Port Said started to head towards us, we dispersed, we ran out of flares and we had nothing to defend ourselves with. People from our side went to the front seats to collect the banners of the group and the trumpets. Those who had something to defend themselves with remained standing in the front seats of the terrace. While they were on their way to us, the middle gate, the only one that was open, now was closed. We were surprised as they were passing through the security cordon without being stopped by the police and now they were in the running track just in front of our seats.<sup>40</sup>*

The questions on everyone's mind were why the police had not done more to stop the Al-Masry fans, and why the gates had been locked.<sup>41</sup> The media narrative in the first few days of the aftermath strongly favored the theory that the massacre was orchestrated rather than tolerated. This view was initially espoused by both the supporters of the UA07 and Al-Masry's Ultras, and their sympathizers in Port Said.<sup>42</sup> Commentators claimed that it was all part of an organized-chaos plan to undermine the political process, a theory echoed by politicians in the newly elected parliament, who were just beginning their term at the time of the disaster.<sup>43</sup> It was said that UA07 was targeted because of its participation in Tahrir. Little evidence ever emerged for the conspiracy theory. The police indeed used any lapse in security to expand

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their powers and justify encroaching upon political life, and they did not miss an opportunity to tell people that they were paying the price for challenging their mechanisms of control. But there is no convincing evidence to support the theory that police deliberately neglected their duties for several years, orchestrated incidents of mass violence, and only resumed their work once they felt their legitimacy had been reestablished.<sup>44</sup>

## Mobilizing for Justice

The justice process began with an investigation run by the prosecution and a parliamentary fact-finding commission that was on the ground in Port Said after a few days. Two weeks after the tragedy, several senior police officers were detained: Abdel Aziz Fahmy of the CSF; General Essam Samak, the chief of the Port Said Security Directorate; his two assistants; General Abu Hashem and General Kamal Gad El Rab; and Brigadier General Mohammed Saad, the head of the maritime police in Port Said who was put in charge of security in the eastern stands, where away fans are seated. The prosecution referred seventy-two defendants to criminal trial, more than forty of whom were thought to be members of the Green Eagles and the different Masry Ultras, and including the above-mentioned policemen, Al-Masry club officials, the club's security directors, and others thought to be "hired thugs" and petty criminals. Many of the accused were arrested weeks after the investigation, and not at the crime scene. On April 8, 2012, the minister of justice issued a decree relocating the trial to the police academy in Cairo.<sup>45</sup>



FOOTBALL FANS FROM "ULTRAS AHLAWY" MARK THE FOURTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PORT SAID MASSACRE THAT LEFT 72 DEAD ON FEBRUARY 1, 2012 - © FACEBOOK/ULTRAS AHLAWY - UA07

The police had to rush to find a perpetrator who was not the police, amid growing accusations of police complicity. It would be difficult to argue that the police had no responsibility for what happened, but now the common belief went further: the SCAF and the police orchestrated the event. Fans were killed with knives and machetes, not the stampede and the fall.<sup>46</sup> The image of people falling to their deaths from the higher stands was scary, all the more so if they had been deliberately thrown.

These new theories about what caused the violence were appealing because they made for a kind of facile explanation of a horrific and unprecedented incident. But football stadiums are complex environments, and the least spark of violence, from fans or from the police, can lead to stampedes and a very high number of casualties.<sup>47</sup> Some people claimed that Al-Masry fan violence was unlikely since the team had won. The escalation of violence, however, is often irrational, and seldom has a correlation with the outcome of the game itself. It may not have been a satisfying answer, but incompetence was probably a bigger contributing factor than sinister plotting.

“As clashes broke out towards the end of the match, the police did not intervene,” one account claimed. “Instead, they withdrew from the stadium, welded the doors, and turned off the stadium lights.”<sup>48</sup> There really were doors that were welded shut, which confused people in the stadium. But according to multiple accounts, corroborated by the inquiry of the fact-finding committee, the gates had been welded weeks before this game, after a clash between Al-Masry and Al Ittihad fans when suspended Al-Masry fans stormed the stadium.<sup>49</sup> But the eastern stands, typically reserved for visiting fans, had three exits, and only two of them had been welded. The third, known as the Social Club entrance, was locked by Saad, the security officer in charge, before the game’s end. The tunnel leading to this last gate is where most of the deaths occurred.<sup>50</sup> One UA07 member who had briefly left the stadium and tried to walk back in found that the gate he used was now locked. He forced it open with a brick and the human crush that was forming behind the gate crushed and killed him.

The parliamentary fact-finding committee was hastily formed. It had very little expertise, since it was composed mostly of members of parliament who had little experience in politics or law to begin with. It also had a weak mandate. In light of the poor quality of the work of most quasi-official fact-finding committees in Egypt after the revolution, no one expected anything very substantial. The committee published its preliminary report about ten days after the event.<sup>51</sup> It was not exhaustive, but it was important nonetheless. It notes, for instance, that security measures outlined by FIFA for local football governing bodies and stadium management, such as ease of access/exit, were not followed.<sup>52</sup> The main gate where the crush happened opened to the inside, which violates rules of ease of access and safety guidelines issued by FIFA. The police’s welding of two other gates as a “security precaution” clearly backfired.

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Truth is elusive, and even desperate families and friends changed their opinions of what the facts were, shifting between conspiracy theories involving SCAF and police saboteurs, to an admission of football rowdiness by the boys that was not intended to kill, to wilder fantasies involving professional murderers wearing balaclavas.

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A criminal investigation officer from Port Said, Khaled Nemnem, was put in charge of the investigation. Nemnem proved to be an extremely controversial character. Many insisted that he should have been one of the accused—since he was part of the security force responsible for the eastern stands. During the trial, Saad’s legal defense called on the court to charge Nemnem, since he was just as much responsible for the security at the eastern gate as Saad was.<sup>53</sup> This was echoed by the colorful lawyer Ashraf El Ezzabi, who headed the criminal defense team of several other defendants.<sup>54</sup> Another defense lawyer in the case, Niazzi Youssef, repeated the claim in 2013, referring to the questionable position of Nemnem as a witness and aide to the investigation instead of a defendant, and spoke of his long enmity with Al-Masry fan groups, which may or may not have been accurate.<sup>55</sup> But the truth is elusive, and even desperate families and friends changed their opinions of what the facts were, shifting between conspiracy theories involving SCAF and police saboteurs, to an admission of football rowdiness by the boys that was not intended to kill, to wilder fantasies involving professional murderers wearing balaclavas. One absurd hypothesis that emerged later, peddled by one of the defense lawyers in the courtroom, was that the Ahlawy Ultras killed themselves.<sup>56</sup> There was an abiding sense that whoever the real culprit or culprits were, they would not be easily convictable, but that charging General Mohammed Saad while putting Khaled Nemnem in charge of the investigation was inexplicable.

The first trial began in April 2012 and lasted less than a year. During that time, the Ultras mobilized their members and staged huge protests in many cities, around trial sessions and especially in the lead-up to the verdict announcement. The days between January 26, 2013 and March 9, 2013 saw the highest escalation in protest and counter-protest in Cairo and the cities of the Delta and the Canal.<sup>57</sup> When twenty-one provisional death sentences were announced on January 26, 2013, families of the defendants protesting outside the Port Said prison clashed with prison guards. In the ensuing violence, two prison guards were shot and more than fifty residents of Port Said were killed by the police.<sup>58</sup> The verdict did not stop the UA07 from protesting, and they organized during the wait for the actual sentencing day. The most confrontational of these protests was outside the Giza Security Directorate in Cairo, with thousands of protesters chanting insults directed at the minister of interior. Protesters set a police car on fire, making it clear that they still

thought the police were culpable.<sup>59</sup> On March 4, 2013, the UA07 staged a major street blockade on Cairo's main highway, Salah Salem, causing massive congestion. At that point the UA07 were the only movement in Egypt that was still capable of staging protests in such numbers with such consistency. In some of the protests the UA07 clashed with political activists who joined them in solidarity, over political differences: some Ultras, it was reported, wanted to suppress the activists' chants against the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi, the president at the time, and focus it on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.<sup>60</sup>



MURAL IN DOWNTOWN CAIRO DEPICTING FOOTBALL FANS FROM "ULTRAS AHLAWY" WHO WERE KILLED IN THE FAN VIOLENCE AND STAMPEDE THAT ENSUED AFTER A FOOTBALL GAME IN PORT SAID IN FEBRUARY 2012 - © FLICKR/GIGI IBRAHIM

On March 9, 2013, when the twenty-one death sentences were confirmed, the Ultras and their sympathizers gathered to cheer them.<sup>61</sup> It was a bizarre sight: a group that some considered to be a vanguard force of the revolution cheering what was then the biggest number of death sentences issued in Egypt's recent history. (That number would be surpassed when the first-instance courts started issuing deaths sentences at unprecedented rates in 2014.)

The decision issued by the criminal court in March 2013 describes in overwrought language the murderous intentions of three different Al-Masry Ultras groups, and sketches a plan that involved three successive assaults, at the train station, outside the stadium, and in the eastern stands after the game's end. The court's verdict was that the killings amounted to murder. The most important question was how the deaths of seventy-two people happened. Was it in the stampede, or in violence that created the stampede? Or was it from more lethal, malicious use of force, involving machetes and knives, choking victims, and throwing them off the stands? Some of the victims fell from the higher levels; that much is supported by the evidence. One fall survivor testified that he was carried and thrown off by the assaulting fans.<sup>62</sup> On the

other hand, forty or so forensic examinations referenced in the verdict suggest that most deaths happened because of asphyxiation, often caused by compression. Some other deaths were the result of blunt force trauma caused by either being struck by a firm object (sticks and bars), or falling from heights. The forensic report thus left open the question of how the falling from the eastern stands happened. I also found nothing in the forensic authority's statement on death caused from penetrative or sharp force injuries, or caused by strangulation.<sup>63</sup> But the strangulation scenario was very popular in the media in 2012, and the court still confirmed it in the verdict, as one of many other means by which the murders occurred. Most of these reports were based on preliminary forensic examinations—only four full-body autopsies were performed—another major flaw in the investigative process.

On February 7, 2014, the Egyptian Court of Cassation ordered the retrial of every one of the defendants in the case and annulled all the sentences.<sup>64</sup> Another criminal court circuit presided over the retrial, and on June 9, 2015 the Port Said Criminal Court sentenced eleven defendants to death.<sup>65</sup> The court's narrative did not change significantly, but ten people were spared the gallows and the policemen's sentences were reduced from fifteen to five years. In October 2016, the Court of Cassation's prosecutorial office recommended a retrial, again, and found procedural flaws in the previous court's decision. A new decision had not been released at the time of writing.

## Conclusion

“Qasas,” the Arabic word usually translated simply as “punishment,” or “retribution,” incorporates the seemingly irreconcilable concepts of retaliation in kind, revenge, and restorative justice.<sup>66</sup> It does not receive any mention in the Egyptian criminal code, but it is definitely known in Egyptian jurisprudence and scholarly legal work. It also became part of the revolutionary repertoire right after Mubarak stepped down. It was this concept, somewhere in between justice and revenge, that was frequently referred to in UA07's statements and tifos after the Port Said tragedy. Did the UA07 achieve qasas, or any other form of justice?

By some measures, things worked as they were supposed to. The Ultras, who so often are perceived to show an affinity for street justice, decidedly pursued qasas through formal channels. Suspects were tried and convicted.<sup>67</sup> But the investigation was deeply flawed, and the sentencing might present a miscarriage of justice. (This could be partially explained by a rising trend in which criminal courts in Egypt are becoming increasingly politicized and more vengeful.) The verdict has led to more tension between the Port Said community and the fans of the capital club (who enjoy greater nation-wide support).

In March 2013, while the ramifications of the court decision were still unfolding, James Dorsey wrote in his blog *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, reminding us of one accountability measure that was overlooked: The sanctions



of the Egyptian Football Association (EFA) against the two teams were woefully inadequate. They banned Al-Masry from Egypt's premier league for two seasons, and closed the Port Said stadium for three. Fans were barred from four of Al-Ahly's games, while the team's Portuguese coach Manuel Jose and a midfielder, Hossam Ghaly, were suspended. "The decision was made in close coordination with Egypt's military rulers, failed to address the underlying causes of the soccer violence, and satisfied no one," Dorsey wrote.<sup>68</sup>

As superficial as it seems, a strict punishment by the national and regional football federations against Al-Masry could have gone a long way toward establishing accountability and introducing a sense of justice. Indeed, harsher bans would be justified considering the magnitude of loss of life, and the facts that the violence unfolded over a period of more than an hour and the stadium management failed to intervene.



FOOTBALL FANS FROM "ULTRAS AHLAWY" MARK THE FOURTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PORT SAID MASSACRE ON FEBRUARY 1, 2012 - © FACEBOOK/ULTRAS AHLAWY - UA07

Recognition of wrongdoing by the club would have also helped toward reconciliation. But the Port Said youth staged protests in the city against the relatively mild EFA decision, clashing with the military police while the protests were ongoing in Cairo. At least one protester died in these these clashes when the military police attempted to disperse them. These were the days of Egyptian radicalism. Even policemen protested on a semiregular basis, and an EFA decision that was probably meant to appease Al-Masry ended up angering the team's fans.

Ashraf El Sherif, a political scientist, football fanatic, and one of the most hardcore Ahly fans I know—as well as an author of one of the first articles celebrating the Ultras’ “politics of fun”—explained to me that the EFA has a complex and time-honored clientelist relationship with the football clubs, which ensures that the provincial representatives have guaranteed places in top-tier football. This relationship prevented it from imposing more serious sanctions on the clubs.

I asked him, as we waited for the latest court decision on the eleven death sentences, if he saw a way out of the mess. “Justice, if it’s going to be fair to everyone, requires fundamental reform, huge political concessions, prices that no one is going to pay,” he said. “The Port Said case is not going to be resolved independently of the general political context. Signs of conciliation in the near future are grim. Hate legacies between communities have multiplied. The [Ahlawy] Ultras are increasingly more apocalyptic in their discourse. Their sense of injustice is not waning. On the other hand, Al-Masry fans refuse to take responsibility and their animosity toward the capital and the centrality of conspiracy theories to their narrative is exacerbating tensions.”<sup>69</sup>

The trends that El Sherif described are happening against a backdrop of increasing balkanization of the political space in Egypt—different institutions, communities, and identity-groups are looking ever more inward. The prospects of near-future resolution, through criminal accountability or otherwise, are grim indeed.

On December 6, 2014, Al Ahly fans were allowed to fill a stadium for the first time in around a year, to watch their team play Séwé Sport, an Ivorian club, in the final of the African Confederation Cup. Since this was a championship game and a trophy would help release some tension, the authorities allowed the whole stadium (albeit a small one) to be filled. UA07 were present in big numbers, but the message they displayed was less aggressive than in the past: “Football for Fans,” written in seven different languages.<sup>70</sup>



UNIVERSITY STUDENTS STOPPED TO PRAY FOR THE PORT SAID MARTYRS AND OTHERS IN A PROTEST IN CAIRO ON FEBRUARY 21, 2012 - © FLICKR/JONATHAN RASHAD

The Ultras' mobilization today has shifted to the battle to return to normality in the football stadium—although justice for their fallen is still a mainstay of their tifos and chants. This is a good place to start the process of healing. Football, after all, is a public activity that can only thrive in a society where public, collective activity is tolerated to some level, where fans in the tens of thousands are allowed to assemble.

The Ultras are as plausible a candidate as any for playing a role in returning Egypt's society and politics back to some sort of balance—or at least in mobilizing against the State's attempt to turn football into a strictly televised event that only takes place behind closed doors. They face obstacles that are bigger than simply burying the hatchet between Cairo and Port Said. The Egyptian state is uninterested in allowing any kind of public assembly, peaceful or not, political or not. It in fact seems allergic to the very idea of returning to normality, for it thrives on a false state of exception. The memory of Port Said's violence is still fresh, and the inadequacy of the justice process means that many wounds are yet unhealed. It's just conceivable, though, that organized passion for football could be a path around some of these restrictions.

George Orwell famously wrote that sport was “war minus the shooting.”<sup>71</sup> Three years after the tragedy at Port Said and all the other violence and failures and crackdowns that followed the Egyptian revolution, that does not necessarily seem to be a bad thing.

BANNER IMAGE: MURAL IN DOWNTOWN CAIRO DEPICTING FOOTBALL FANS FROM “ULTRAS AHLAWY” WHO WERE KILLED IN THE FAN VIOLENCE AND STAMPEDE THAT ENSUED AFTER A FOOTBALL GAME IN PORT SAID IN FEBRUARY 2012 – © FLICKR/GIGI IBRAHIM

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## About This Project

This policy report is part of “Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism,” a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

## Notes

1. Rocco De Biasi, “The Policing of Hooliganism in Italy,” in *Policing Protest*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Herbert Reiter (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota, 1998), 188–213.
2. The Ultras, even when they forayed into the politics of the revolution, seemed to be a movement centered around “collective being”— collective presence rather than protest—in the words of Asef Bayat. See Bayat, *Life as Politics* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013).
3. It was an opportunity, in Dalia Abdelhameed Ibraheem’s words, for “immortal intensity as opposed to insignificant survival,” in which political, national and football identities mixed. See Ibraheem, “The Ultras Ahlawy and the Spectacle” (PhD diss., American University of Cairo, 2015), 73.
4. Davide Tarizzo, “What Is a Political Subject?” *Política Común* 1 (2012).
5. The term was also used in the totally different context of cheaper Egyptian cinema houses. In these theaters, hackneyed action movies glorifying “lower-class virility” and machismo often played back-to-back. Poorer cinemagoers acted like football fans, cheering protagonists and shouting abuse at villains. See Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 333.
6. El-Zatmah suggests that this shift happened in the 1990s, though I personally do not remember younger, lower-middle class fans dominating the stands at the time. El-Zatmah, “From Terso into Ultras: The 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the Radicalization of the Soccer’s Ultra-Fans,” *Soccer & Society* 13, no. 5–6 (2012): 801–13.
7. Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, cited in Chris Oakley, *Football Delirium* (London: Karnac Books, 2007).
8. Oakley, *Football Delirium*, 153.
9. Oakley, *Football Delirium*.
10. El-Zatmah, “From Terso into Ultras.”

11. Ibid.
12. David Kennedy, "A Contextual Analysis of Europe's Ultra Football Supporters Movement," *Soccer & Society* 14, no. 2 (2013): 132-53.
13. Ibid. In Egypt and the rest of North Africa one frequently sees Ultras' banners in the stands announcing their stance "against modern football." Ultras in Egypt, for instance, always talk about the "Ultras' mentality," and they slip that exact English phrase into their Arabic conversations.
14. El-Zatmah, "From Terso into Ultras."
15. Some of the historians of the nationalist movement in early twentieth-century Egypt make the link between the origins of Al Ahly and the Ultras' involvement in politics today. Al Ahly is the "national" club (the literal meaning of its name) whose core supporters included members of nationalist student unions active in the anticolonial struggle; it was created to counter the rival expatriate club that was later to become known as Zamalek. See Dag Tūastad, "From Football Riot to Revolution: The Political Role of Football in the Arab World," *Soccer & Society* 15, no. 3 (2013): 376-88.
16. Mohamed Mostafa, "The Relationship of Ismaily and Ahly... the Facts and the Lies"(Arabic), Kooora.Com Forums, May 24, 2007.
17. Karen A. Rasler, William R. Thompson, and Sumit Ganguly, *How Rivalries End* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 48.
18. "Facts about Hosting during the Displacement Years," Ismaily SC, September 25, 2009.
19. James M. Dorsey, "Egyptian Soccer Riots Set to Spread from Port Said to Cairo," *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, March 25, 2012.
20. James Montague, "Egypt's Revolutionary Soccer Ultras: How Football Fans Toppled Mubarak," CNN, June 29, 2011.
21. Ibraheem, "The Ultras Ahlawy and the Spectacle," 37.
22. "Al 'Ashira Masa'an," Dream TV, July 14, 2010.
23. Indeed, a lot of police action that falls short of actual violence may be considered posturing. Such performative acts are central to policing in the modern state.
24. Ibraheem, "The Ultras Ahlawy and the Spectacle," 39.
25. Hicham El-Fekky, interview with author, September 5, 2016. I would be remiss not to mention that Ultras did have many interactions with rival fans that, if not actually violent, made use of aggressive language and shows of force.
26. See video of UwK march on the anniversary of the death of Hussein Taha in Alexandria YouTube, January 29, 2013.
27. Ibraheem, "The Ultras Ahlawy and the Spectacle."
28. Ibid., 75.
29. Korabia.com, "Zamalek Fans Storm Cairo Stadium Pitch After the End of Game with Le Club Africain," YouTube, April 2, 2011.
30. "Zamalek Fans Invade Pitch and Assault Tunisian L'Africain's Players," *DP News*, April 3, 2011.
31. "UA07 Video Documenting Clashes Before Ahly-AI Masry Game in July 2011," YouTube, July 20, 2011.
32. Ibid.
33. Ahmed Magdy, interview with author, October 4, 2016.

34. EgyptianAhly1, "Violence Ensues after Al Ahly Scored a Second in Ghazl Al Mahallah" (Arabic), YouTube, January 28, 2012.
35. David K. Kirkpatrick, "Egyptian Soccer Riot Kills More Than 70," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2012.
36. AlMasry AlYoum, "Al-Masry Fans Storm Pitch in Game Against Al Ahly" (Arabic), February 1, 2012.
37. Ahmed Sabry, interview with author, September 6, 2016.
38. Ahmed El-Laithy, "Stories from the Night of Death on the Green Carpet," *El Watan*, February 1, 2013.
39. Ahmed Sabry, interview with author, September 6, 2016.
40. Ibraheem, "The Ultras Ahlawy and the Spectacle," 80.
41. James Montague, "How Egypt's Revolution Descended into Tragedy on Night of Violence in Port Said," *The Daily Telegraph*, February 3, 2012.
42. Jamie Doward, "Egyptian Police Incited Massacre at Stadium, Say Angry Footballers," *The Observer*, February 5, 2012.
43. Kirkpatrick, "Egyptian Soccer Riot Kills More Than 70."
44. Karim Medhat Ennarah, "The End of Reciprocity: The Muslim Brotherhood and The Security Sector," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 2 (2014): 407-18.
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46. Tuastad, "From Football Riot to Revolution."
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50. Ibid.
51. The report was officially posted online in 2012 but no longer seems to be available. Text of the report is available here.
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55. Niazzi Youssef, interview with the author, March 7, 2013.
56. Tarek Abbas, "Police Officer's Counsel."
57. "Five Killed and More than Four Hundred Injured in Port Said Clashes," *AlHurra*, March 4, 2013.
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