

Why Does Football Matter to Us?



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Cover Photo: The Moroccan national team celebrates its victory in the quarter-finals of the 2022 World Cup, raising the Palestinian flag

Why Does Football Matter to Us?

Nahla Chahal

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Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

Because football stands as one of the scarce sources of joy for the peoples of the region, and because the sport has always acted as an effective and genuine connector between them - as proven at the Qatar World Cup 2022, where feelings of brotherhood transcended all entrenched sectarian and political divides - football truly matters. Indeed, the game seems to hold a secret charm that stirs up deep feelings of belonging and oneness among the masses.

Shedding light on sports has not been part of the customary “mission” of *Assafir Al-Arabi*, although several of our writers are avid football supporters who “know” the sport well and are passionate “fans” of their teams. It is these writers who have, with joy and enthusiasm, produced the eight beautiful texts that appear in this folder.

In our region, as in the whole world, football doubtlessly arouses popular interest that far exceeds any other. The sport’s ability to convey overlapping symbolisms that relate to all kinds of fields, as well as its historical presence as a politically charged ground since its early days, have contributed to the emergence of devoted brigades of football enthusiasts known as “the Ultras”. These individuals are not your typical fans, nor are they the infamous rioting “hooligans”; instead, they are organized ultra-fan groups with robust internal rules and codes. They adhere to a strict set of practices, deliver coherent, grand performances, and possess the ability to mobilize public opinion. In this sense, they resemble social movements, with the distinction that they do not represent particular professional or factional sectors, but the football teams they support.

This completely new form of fandom is remarkable in its scope and characteristics, and its significance has been made more observable than ever since the Ultras began to express candid political opinions through their slogans and chants. Whether in the stadiums of Morocco, Algeria, or Egypt, their voices have tirelessly reflected the profound pains of their societies, objecting to neglect, poverty, and oppression, while standing in solidarity with the cause and people of Palestine at every match and in

every way. The ultras have consequently faced repression, persecution, bans from attending at stadiums, and various restrictive measures on multiple occasions.

Repression sometimes reached horrifying extents, as seen on two occasions in Egypt where massacres were committed in the Port Said and the Air Defense Stadiums. The culmination of the ultras' interest in public affairs - which is essentially the definition of "politics" - was their active participation in demonstrations and sit-ins in the squares and streets during the 2011 uprising in Egypt and the 2019 uprisings in Iraq and Algeria...

In this folder entitled "*Why Does Football Matter to Us?*", our writers have attempted to cover these topics, delving into the Ultras' "origin stories" and the inner workings of the phenomenon, which has roots that precede its current forms in today's political ambiances. These stories include the Ultras' role in the struggle against French colonization in Algeria, their assertion of national identity in the face of patronizing British colonialism in Iraq and Sudan, and their historical transcendence of class polarizations and ideological and political affiliations in Egypt under British rule.

One of our folder's texts is dedicated to women's football in our region and aims to explore possible shifts on this front, considering the sport and its ultra-groups have always been male-dominated realms. Our writers have also taken a close look at the effects of professionalizing football clubs and how that might have stripped the sport of some of the conditions that give it its unique character. The texts additionally question the "business" that football has become, which is often linked to sprawling corruption and personal interests and conflicts.

Our researchers, both men and women, have underpinned their texts with photos and videos, creating a comprehensive compilation of the chants and performances of various Ultras, sometimes transcribing lyrics to provide further evidence for the analyses they offer. These visuals, sounds, and words, born out of the Ultras' stands, profoundly and emotionally resonate with people everywhere, making the picture complete.





Iraqis in the streets of Baghdad celebrating the national team's victory in the 2007 Asian Cup. (*Iraq's public archives*)

Football in Iraq: A Game of People and Politics

Mizar Kemal

Writer and journalist from Iraq

Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

During 2007, amidst the raging sectarian conflicts that plagued Baghdad and other Iraqi regions, Iraq's national football team won the Asian Cup. A popular song echoed among football fans, encapsulating the sentiment of the moment: "Do you see the footballer playing with his hand on his wound? This is our Iraqi player who, amidst tragedies, brings us joy." The song reflected the power of football in Iraq and its impact on the people. The team, comprised of players such as Younis Mahmoud (a Sunni), Hawar Mulla Mohammed (a Kurd), and Nasha'at Akram (a Shiite), symbolized Iraq; a nation wearied by wars and sieges.

Football did not rise from the graves in Iraq nor was it invented by the undertakers as the Najaf Club Ultras claim when they chant with every match: *“Najaf, our beloved, you’ve taught them what football is”*. The chant particularly reverberated when Najaf competed with some of the most revered classic clubs of the Iraqi football association: Al-Zawraa, Al-Shorta, Al-Talaba, Al-Quwa al-Jawiyya. Commonly referred to as “Al-Touba,” which simply means “the ball”, football in Iraq was a game of vast influence.

Football crossed the seas to arrive in Iraq. At the shores of Basra, English sailors kicked the ball for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century, when ships docked and departed, carrying goods and mail from Europe, through the Gulf, then Iraq, before they headed to India and other parts of south-east Asia. The people of Basra learned the game from the sailors and played it in the city where its popularity boomed in the schools and alleyways among the youth. In 1931, Al-Minaa (The Port) Club was the first football club founded in Basra.

When the British army invaded Iraq in 1914, they carried footballs next to the rifles, and football was invading the country, too. The game reached Baghdad, Habbaniyah, and Kirkuk, where Iraqis imitated the game that the British soldiers used to play in their camps for recreation. Football historian, journalist, and Coach Ismail Muhammad Ismail said that football spread from the old alleys and squares of Baghdad where boys used to make the Touba from old scraps of cloth which they folded and scrunched into a ball-like form and kicked around in the streets. Ismail notes that this DIY football was a staple of all games played in the poor neighborhoods until the time of the siege, as children could certainly not afford to buy any footballs (neither the nylon, elastic, or leather ones), so they stole their mothers’ stockings instead and stuffed them with rags and scraps to make themselves a free “touba”.

Football spread in Iraq not only as a game, but as something of greater significance with the establishment of the new kingdom. Tasked with outlining and structuring the state and its institutions, the monarchy was interested in creating connections between its novel institutions and society, and football provided one of those links. To this end, the state founded several football teams affiliated to its ministries and administrative departments in Baghdad and other districts of the country; a tradition which has persisted to this day.

The teams that were affiliated with the new state institutions were: the teams of the Ministry of Endowments, the Ministry of Finance, The Ministry of Works, the High

School, the Teachers' College, the Vocational School, the Military School (Aviation), the Public Printing Press, and the Education Forum team, among other institutions. During that time, the British largely remained "masters of the game" in Iraq; they managed it, put rules in place, and organized local tournaments. However, Iraqi archive documents reveal an early moment of the transformation in which football was approached as an act of "protest and resistance" by Iraqis who tried to manage football institutions in "more independent" ways, autonomously and separate from the temperament of the British occupation and its patronizing attitudes. Football stadiums have since been luring politics into their booths.

Football, the sir, and the little prince

In the beginning of March 1923, the English Casuals Football Club asserted its dominance in Iraq with a three-to-none win over the team of the Baghdad Football Association. Hence, it was decided that the first football championship in Iraq would bear the name of the English club, and 1923-1924 marked the first season of the "Casuals' Cup". A piece was published by writer Samir al-Shukraji in Al-Mada Newspaper at the time, celebrating the first ever "Iraqi management" of a local football tournament - despite the tournament's British name.

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The name was but the tip of the iceberg of the intricate administrative conflicts unfolding behind the scenes of Iraqi football. The Baghdad Football Association dubbed the tournament the "Baghdad Football Association Championship", resulting in the tournament having two distinct names. The cup was of paramount importance to the leaders of the state at the time, so much that the Prime Minister Jaafar Pasha Al-Askari personally presented the cup to the High School Team in the final match in which it beat the Ministry of Works Team.

After the first tournament proved successful and reaped wide satisfaction among football fans, the Iraqi State and the British began to seek dominance in the world

of football. The British have, in fact, realized the deeper meanings of the game since medieval times, when crossing with a football over into another village was a sign of defeating the latter. Conflicts which took the form of games led to violent incidents and murders, to the point where football was banned and criminalized by royal decree during the reign of King Edward III of England. The French Church at the time also forbade the game, branding it “malicious and dangerous”.

Perhaps one way in which football is “dangerous” is the way it cultivates an extreme sense of belonging, therefore creating an environment rife with intolerance and hate (in old and new fan bases), and nurturing steadfast rivalries with an opponent that must be defeated in order for the fan base to express joy in victory: an expression accompanied by gloating, teasing, and communicating pleasure at the failure of the other team - the sentiment perhaps expresses a tendency for violence.

In the second season of the Casuals Cup or the Baghdad Football Association Championship, the Baghdad Football Association - which co-organizes the tournament with the British authorities - issued several decisions, including the following: British players were not eligible for participation, the Military Academy Team was admitted to the tournament, stadiums were distributed to different teams, and four English referees were appointed to referee the matches.

Before the commencement of the season, the football association was dissolved, and its president, Youssef Izz al-Din Beik al-Nasseri, announced his resignation citing his desire to “devote his time to his own business.” The administrative board of the British Casuals Club swiftly regained control, taking charge of organizing the following tournament. However, the most politically significant incident that unfolded that season was the alteration of the coronation ceremony. After Iraqi Prime Minister Jaafar Basha al-Askari handed the cup to the winning team, the British authorities decided to introduce a new protocol by which Colonel Jobs, an advisor to the Ministry of Defense, handed the cup to the victorious High School Team that secured a single-goal victory over the Ministry of Works Team in the final match, in the presence of Nuri al-Saeed, then serving as Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (and who would later assume the role of Prime Minister in 14 different governments during the monarchy era).

In the early 1930s, then crown prince Ghazi was eager to solidify his image as the “most beloved figure among the Iraqi people”. His growing popularity was fueled by

his Arab and nationalist tendencies, setting him apart from the British court, which had its own loyal following within the new Kingdom. Hence, the Prince Ghazi Cup was introduced, held in conjunction with the Casuals Cup, which the British had organized every season since the early 1920.



Iraq's first national football team. *(from the Internet)*

The Iraqi press documented the events of the Prince's Cup final between the Wireless Communication Team and the Aviation Team, ultimately won by Aviation. The cup was presented to the victor by "His Highness the Prince" himself, seated in the VIP box alongside Iraqi politician Ja'far Abu al-Timman, who was a prominent figure in the resistance against British occupation during the Iraqi Revolt of 1920, leading several groups of the liberation movement in Iraq throughout the monarchy era.

As football gained increasing popularity among the youth in working-class neighborhoods and throughout Iraq's cities, its institutional development within the state remained slow, even though the government acknowledged the game as a potential powerful connector between the State and the people. By the time the monarchy came to an end, all the ministries' teams had turned into clubs, such as the Police and the Air Force Clubs. The Iraq Football Association was founded in 1948, and it joined the International Federation of Football Association (FIFA) soon afterwards. The Iraqi national football team was formed in 1951 and played its first friendly match against

Basra, before its first international match in Turkey against Izmir.

Football, the dictator, and his son

In the aftermath of the monarchy's violent demise and the birth of the Iraqi republic in 1958, and up until Saddam Hussein's rise to power, football's significance was very little within the volatile political landscapes and shifting republican regimes. On the other hand, the game's popularity boomed on the streets and in working-class neighborhoods, as it continued to receive the sponsorship and support of the state, with government-funded clubs participating in local tournaments as part of government programs.

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However, politics once again found its way into the box, this time through Saddam Hussein and his son Uday, who became known as "Ustad Uday" (Master Uday) after he assumed the role of Chairman of the Olympic Committee. But it was the president himself who had set the stage for taking over the game when he appointed his long-standing bodyguard Sabah Mirza as the head of the Iraqi Football Association. Uday, like father like son, had his own ideas about taking over the game. He proposed the idea of establishing a football club that brought together all the best players of the other clubs in one. What are all these different clubs for, anyway? All of Iraq's champions were to swear allegiance to the leader, represented by the head of the Iraqi Football Association, and to his son. Uday's Al-Rasheed Club summoned national team players from prominent popular clubs such as Al-Zawraa, Al-Shorta, Al-Quwa al-Jawiyya, and Al-Talaba.

When Iraq made it to the 1986 World Cup qualifiers in Mexico, the Iraqi regime saw it as an opportunity to showcase their "achievement." State television aired a special meeting between the national team and Uday Saddam Hussein, where the players dedicated their success to "the leader-president and Ustad Uday". The meeting was moderated by Mo'ayyad al-Badri, a veteran commentator and the host of the popular TV show Sports in a Week, and viewers had the chance to make phone calls and pose

questions to both the national team players and Uday. One caller asked Khalil Allawi, the player who scored the crucial third goal against Syria's team, how he felt after his goal, to which he answered: "It is the feeling of any fighter who achieves victory for his country."



Uday Saddam Hussein in military uniform with the Iraqi national football team in 1985. (*Iraq's public archive*)

Following the war with Iran, the Iraqi army invaded Kuwait but eventually retreated after a battle that left it in shambles. The blockade was imposed on Iraq and the country was banned from hosting international matches on its soil. This marked the beginning of a new era characterized by the chant "This is how the besieged play... With determination, they have their way," as football became a tool for the regime to whitewash its image in international and regional tournaments. This situation persisted until the US invasion of Iraq, during which the occupying forces and administration used Iraqi football to propagate the narrative that the US had liberated Iraq from Saddam Hussein, showcasing Iraq's triumphs in championships and in competing globally in football.

Adnan Hamad, who served as the coach of the Olympic team during that time, shared an account of the then US President, George W. Bush, attempting to capitalize on the team's qualification for the 2004 Athens finals by trying to visit Iraq's national

team camp after their remarkable 4-0 victory over Portugal. At that time, Bush was seeking reelection for a second term, which he ultimately got. According to Hamad, Bush wasn't the only one using Iraqi football to improve their image; the Iraqi National Democratic Party had asked him to write an article for their newspapers criticizing the occupation and Bush, which Hamad declined. While the Olympic team competed in the Golden Square in Athens, Iraq's Al-Shaab stadium, which could accommodate 40,000 spectators, was turning into a US military base, after US aircrafts bombed its stands and pitch.

Football for a new Iraq

The shrapnel of the 2003 explosion of violence in Iraq had reached the world of football. The Ultras were no longer intimidated by the authorities, and new political, sectarian, and even racist chants emerged during matches. Notably, during the derby matches between Al-Quwa al-Jawiyya and Al-Zawraa clubs, the former's ultras provocatively chanted "Baathists! Baathists!" towards Al-Zawraa and its supporters, as the latter had been considered the Baath Party's favourite football club. Such incidents escalated; in a Premier League match between Erbil and the Electrical Industries clubs in 2020, and despite bans on spectators at the matches due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the losing Erbil club's ultras stormed the Franso Hariri stadium and physically attacked the players and referees. A similar occurrence took place during a match between the Najaf and Karbala clubs, where guns were fired within the stands. These disturbances proved to be more than a few isolated incidents and have turned into an unfortunate recurring phenomenon.

The Iraqi press documented the Prince's Cup final between the Wireless Communication and the Aviation Teams, ultimately won by Aviation. The cup was presented by "His Highness the Prince" himself, seated in the VIP box alongside Ja'far Abu al-Timman, who was a prominent figure in the resistance against British occupation during the 1920 Revolt.

But there is another aspect to the football scene in Iraq. In the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup, everyone shared their unique experiences of witnessing Basra as it hosted the tournament after Iraq's 43-year hiatus from hosting such events. Despite the challenging circumstances and the inevitable political exploitation of the occasion, Iraqi officials were in a frenzy, from the prime minister, the speaker of parliament, the ministers, all the way to the governor of Basra, and even Muqtada al-Sadr, who had previously

forbidden football but now gave lessons on the importance of “obeying the coach”. However, amidst all of this, the crowd of football fans proved to be the most significant highlights of the entire tournament. Tragically, during the final match between Iraq and Oman, a fan lost his life in a stampede while entering the stadium, which was packed with over 60,000 spectators. Nevertheless, Iraq succeeded in snatching the Gulf Cup for the fourth time in its history, and the joy that sprawled the streets of Basra and all of Iraq on that evening was unparalleled.

The Iraqi Football Association was founded in 1948 and it joined the FIFA soon afterwards. The Iraq national football team was formed in 1951 and played its first friendly match against Basra, before its first international match in Turkey against Izmir.

The profound influence of football in Iraq became evident in 2007 when the Iraqi national team won the Asian Cup. Victory unfolded amidst the backdrop of a sectarian war in Baghdad and escalating violence in other regions, but Iraq’s national football team comprising players like Yunis Mahmoud (a Sunni), Hawar Mulla Muhammad (a Kurd), Nash’at Akram (a Shiite), and others, reflected an image of Iraq, a nation weary of wars and sieges. Hawar Mulla Muhammad’s memorable gesture of raising the phrase “I am an Iraqi” remains etched in Iraqis’ collective memory. That championship was able to transform the atmosphere of violent sectarianism into a moment of overwhelming joy. Instead of dedicating the cup to the President and his son, the players dedicated their victory to the Iraqi martyrs who were killed by the US occupation. During that time, a popular song emerged, sung by several Iraqi artists, with the lyrics: *“Do you see the footballer playing with his hand on his wound? This is our Iraqi player who brings us joy amidst tragedies.”*

In the year 2007, violence ravaged Iraqi society, with sectarian conflicts erupting in Baghdad and several other cities. Guerilla fights unfolded involving Al-Qaeda, the US army, Sunni resistance groups, and what are now known as the Shiite militias. Amidst the turmoil, walls of cities were covered with all kinds of ideological and political slogans and images, but Iraq’s national football team stole the spotlight. Pictures of the team’s stars were printed on shirts, plastered on walls and poles, and their uniform was popular among the small neighborhood teams. Iraqis discovered that united, they, too, could create joy in the face of adversity. Two Italian journalists, Max Civili and Diego Mariottini, captured these exceptional moments of joy in their book, *A Goal against Bush*. The book delves into the biography of Jorvan Vieira, the coach of the triumphant

Iraqi team. According to Vieira, winning the 2007 Asian Cup arrived at an exceptional time when the Iraqi people desperately needed a respite from wounds and sorrows.

Politics found its way back into the pitch, this time through Saddam Hussein and his son Uday, who became known as “Ustad Uday” after he assumed the role of Chairman of the Olympic Committee. The president himself had set the stage for taking over the game when he appointed his long-standing bodyguard Sabah Mirza as the head of the Iraqi Football Association.

Sectarianism may have been defeated on the field, but it continued to prevail in politics. Hussein Saeed, a legend of Iraqi football, resigned as the president of the Iraqi Football Association due to smear campaigns led by the Dawa Party. A similar fate befell Adnan Hamad, who was removed from his coaching position by the Minister of Youth and Sports, Jassim Muhammad Jaafar (a member of the State of Law Coalition led by Nouri al-Maliki). When Jaafar was asked in a TV interview about his removal of Adnan Hamad from the Association, he answered that Hamad had always been a Baathist who stood against the “new Iraq”.

In July 2006, a pivotal event unfolded in the “new Iraq” that shaped Iraqi sports, particularly football. Armed militias, disguised in Ministry of Interior commando attire, brazenly abducted Ahmad Al-Hajjiya, the first president of the Olympic Committee since Uday Saddam Hussein, in the bustling Karrada area of central Baghdad. Alongside him, 35 administrative staffers attending a conference at the Cultural Center of the Ministry of Oil also vanished. Their fate remains unknown, but their abduction marked a turning point for Iraqi football, as sectarian forces seized control of the game, changing it forever.

Now what?

In 2019, Tahrir Square was teeming with the masses that had been taking part in the sit-ins for months to reform the political and social system in Iraq. Thousands of young people held their breath in overtime, as they watched the screen, waiting for the goal that would win them the match over the Iran at the Amman International Stadium.

In the 91st minute, Alaa Abbas delivered the match’s defining moment with a decisive goal. The match was more than a game of football; it felt like a battle, and it was

already unfolding in Tahrir Square. Amjad Atwan’s supplication as he skillfully executed the corner kick that found Abbas and led to the goal became a prayer amidst the fervor of Tahrir Square. The crowd’s joy resonated deeply in the generations burdened by the violence inflicted by the Iranian regime in present-day Iraq.



The Iraqi national team in 2019.

To Iraqis, football has been an outlet for their open joys and sorrows, but today, as the game becomes an international arena for business and power-plays, “Iraqi chivalry” is no longer enough to locally support the game. The individual hero, a single striker dubbed the “Lion of Mesopotamia” or the “team’s soldier” no longer suffices in the modern team-based styles of play. This is where Iraqi football lags. The Iraqi Premier League suffers from poor infrastructure, lacking stadiums and training pitches. Funding remains inadequate, particularly when compared to the lucrative market of football clubs in the Gulf. Meanwhile, Iraqi clubs receive support from ministry budgets and affiliated institutions, relying on government allocations. To illustrate the situation, the highest market value of an Iraqi football club, Al-Shorta, amounts to \$3 million USD, funded by the Ministry of the Interior, whereas the rest of the League’s clubs, comprising 20 teams, struggle with an annual budget ceiling of not more than \$30 million USD.



Tunisia



Ultras calling for justice for Omar Laabidi, a football fan who died at the hands of the police. *(from the Internet)*

In Tunisia: Power and the Public Contend over the Football Field

Mohamed Rami Abdelmoula

Writer and researcher from Tunisia; member of Assafir Al-Arabi team

Translated by **Yasmine Haj**

The “game” exposes the political power’s endeavours to control, survey, subjugate, and whitewash. In a way, football is a mirror that reflects the country’s illnesses (dictatorship, classism, regionalism, and corruption) as well as its prettier face: its passionate and, sometimes, fiercely angry fans, with their resistance and creativity. Today, Tunisian authorities face one of the most confrontational generations of football fans in the history of the country. What the Ultras demand is exactly what the majority of Tunisians have been demanding: their right to dignity and joy.

During the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, Tunisian crowds caught the world's attention with their clamour - both inside and outside the playing field - through the different ways they showed support for their national team, in addition to their repeated gestures in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Through folk songs, banners, flags, and even by barging into the field to raise the Palestinian flag, Tunisian football fans proved their longstanding passion for the sport. To them, football is more than just a game. They "breathe" football.

The sport was introduced to Tunisia in the late 19th century by the French colonizers. It quickly became one of the "spoils of war" that the locals appropriated. Over the course of a century, a football love story unfolded. It started with political activists, intellectual elites, and "dignitaries", and was later embraced by younger generations, various popular factions, and the working class. The story reached its peak at the beginning of the third millennium, as the Ultras entered the scene, with a passion that has always existed at the touchline with power and politics.

A brief political and economic background

Until the end of World War I, football remained exclusive to French and European colonizers. When Tunisians tried to form their own teams, colonial authorities stood in the way of their efforts, and when they finally licensed the first Tunisian team, Espérance Sportive de Tunis (Sporting Hope of Tunis), in 1919, the colonial authorities were keen on imposing a French manager. However, they later backed down, and allowed Tunisians to form and run their own sports teams. Notably, the teams that emerged in the period between the two world wars emphasized their national identity through their names, like the Sportive Hope of Tunis, the Islamic Club (now the Club Africain), the Tunisian Club (now Sfax Club). The first generation of Tunisian team founders belonged to the relatively educated and well-off classes. These are the same circles that played an important role in establishing the Constitutional Liberal Party in 1920, which later became a leading force of the national liberation struggle against French colonialism. Since the 1930s, the Constitutional Liberal Party has attempted to engage in every social facet and address the various aspects of Tunisians' daily life, not excluding the importance of football in the country.

The interplay between politics and sports continued into Tunisia's independence and the Constitutional Liberal Party's governance, headed by Habib Bourguiba. In 1961, a pivotal year in Tunisian history, where the authorities imposed a one-party system and state-controlled media, the president of the republic issued a decree to dissolve the

Etoile du Sahel team after its fans clashed with the police on the football field. This was followed by angry protests in the streets objecting the referee's bias to the rival team, the Espérance Sportive, considered by the majority of the football public in Tunisia to be the "regime's team". That was the initial warning the authorities made to sports teams and to those who joined the ranks of the opposition. In 1971, other protests broke out, led by the Espérance Sportive fans, to challenge the decisions of the football league. In response, the Ministry of Interior decided to suspend the team's activities. The decision was unrevoked until the president of the republic allowed it. It was clear that the regime recognized the potential influence of football fans in mobilizing the population, and so it deployed "fan infiltrators" whose mission was to "curtail" fans, while ensuring that club managers were affiliated with the ruling regime or even the government.

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During Ben Ali's rule, the regime's control over football sprawled, and football began to be used as tool for propaganda. Despite some "achievements", Ben Ali's era was harmful to football in Tunisia as corruption and regime bias towards certain teams grew rampant. It became especially so when the president's son-in-law, Salim Chiboub, became president of the largest Tunisian club, Espérance Sportive, from 1989 to 2004, enjoying absolute power to intervene in every aspect of sports in the country.

Even when it comes to economics, Tunisian football reflects major injustices and failed economic decisions in the country, whereby wealth, economic vitality, and official concern remained channeled towards the same regions. Since the country's independence in 1956, Tunisia has had 67 sports seasons, during which the "Big Four", aka the teams of the four biggest and richest Tunisian cities, have garnered 60 titles: 32 for Espérance Sportive (Tunis, northeast), 11 for the Club Africain (Tunis, northeast), 9 for the Etoile du Sahel (Sousse, central east), and 8 for the Sfax club (Sfax, central east).

While some clubs are active in cities with a relatively developed and diverse sports infrastructure, most teams train and play in shameful conditions. The big city clubs,

mainly the “Big Four”, enjoy great popularity and extensive fan bases that provide financial support. The clubs also profit from participating and winning in local and continental competitions and from revenues garnered from advertisements, television contracts, and match tickets. The smaller clubs, on the other hand, mainly active in impoverished inland regions, live off of bursaries and aid from regional and central authorities and the financial support from well-off relations. Adopting the “non-amateur” system in 1995, then the “professional” system¹ in 2005 was what debilitated most medium and small organizations, as the “Big Four” grew in dominance. Even the teams affiliated with the public sector that used to play in the Champions League until the 1990s, adding their unique touch to it, couldn’t survive capital’s control over football.

Authoritarian practices and economic injustices stirred up regional sensibilities across the country and intensified rivalries between teams in the stadium. Since the late 1990s, violence has been on the rise in playing fields, as slogans and chants became more politicized, especially with a new player in the picture: the Ultras.

The Ultras are bigger than stadiums

As the mid-1990s set in, emergent features of the Ultras’ culture began to show in Tunisian stadiums. However, the official and organized appearance of the Ultras in the country would only arrive with the beginning of the third millennium, rendering Tunisia a pioneer in ultras culture, both across the Arab World and Africa. The groups multiplied as the years went by, but their numbers remained relatively limited during the Ben Ali rule. The 2011 uprising set off a new phase in the Ultras’ history in Tunisia, not only in terms of the multiplying number of Ultras groups, but also in terms of their culture’s reach. More than 60 Tunisian Ultras groups have appeared since 2002. The biggest four teams, especially Espérance Sportive and the Club Africain, control almost half of these groups, and the rest are distributed over more than 20 teams. Some have been active for two decades, while others have only been there for a few months. Likewise, these groups differ in size and popularity, depending on the team they support, the demographic importance of the city a given club represents, as well as seniority. Some

1- Before 1995, football in Tunisia was an amateur sport. That means that a player could be a member of one big team, play on Sunday, and then work the rest of the week in different vocations. This used to also apply to the technical and administrative cadres, whose number was limited. Teams’ incomes were limited and depended on public funding and donations. In the early 1990s, a decision was made to adopt the professional system, based on legal contracts and regulations regarding duties, rights, salaries, and grants, requiring that those contracted to practice football must be completely devoted to it. The system also offers certain infrastructures along with certain privileges, like a share in television broadcasting rights and stadium tickets. Since most Tunisian teams were not qualified for such a quick transformation, the “non-amateur system” was adopted as a form of a transitional period. In other words, it was a professional system with watered-down conditions.

groups comprise tens or hundreds of members, while some comprise thousands.

In the following paragraphs, we'll try to draw a comprehensive picture of Tunisia's Ultras, not only as fan base frameworks with their own structures, identities, and regulations, but also as artistic expressions and a political and social phenomenon in their own right.

1. Structures

Similar to Ultras groups all over the world, Tunisian Ultras do not follow any set structures. And yet, there are recurrent models, with slight differences between countries, among groups in the same country, and even among groups supporting the same team. According to researcher Mohamed Fakhreddine Louati, two dominant models exist in Tunisia. The first is perfectly top-down, where we find the Capo ("leader" in Italian) at the top, the "Nucleus" (Noyau) as the second men right below the Capo, followed by a median group called the "Staff", then the "Sector Chiefs" who overlook the sectors or regions that house the ultras' branches. At the very bottom of the pyramid, we find the rest of the members. Louati finds that in this model is the one most commonly adopted by Ultras groups in Tunisia, especially among the most senior and popular Ultras, and sees that it "depends on a hierarchal structure of organization and centralized decision-making, because it relies on the Capo to lead the group²."

2. Identity components

Naturally, the first identity component would be the name. Most Ultras in Tunisia have given their groups English, Spanish, or Italian names, perhaps to affirm their affiliation with an international/globalised movement, as well as with South American and Italian Ultras' heritage. French names are moderately present, while Arabic names are semi-absent. Ultras seek inspiration for their group names from various sources:

- The distinctive colours of their team
- The name of their team or its hometown
- A lexicon of force, war, and courage: Fedyan, Power Marines, Gladiators, Fighters, Brigade rouge, Zapatista, Ultras Vikings, Partisans, Espérantistes, Pirates, Vandals...
- A lexicon of fraternities and gangs: the word "boys" comes up, in the sense of an organized group, in more than ten Ultras groups. Sometimes it comes up in Spanish, as in the Chicos Latinos group.
- A lexicon of playing fields and fans: in reference to the positions that Ultras members

2- محمد فخر الدين اللواتي، «ثقافة الأتراس في تونس»، المرصد الوطني للشباب، تونس، 2021.

take in the public stadiums, often a southern or northern “curva” (curve, in Italian).



Ultras raising their “bâche” in the stadium.

Logos are the second identity component in Ultras’ identity making. It is a condensation of various elements at the same time: the group’s name and date of birth, the distinctive colours of the team it supports, and the mascot. In many logos, images of vigorous fighters from ancient or modern history appear, as well as characters inspired by global series and films. Sometimes, a mascot may be present in the stereotypical image of an Ultras’ member, who covers their face with a headband and a scarf. Some groups choose a wild beast or an animal that symbolises power, like a bulldog, a lion, or an eagle, or make do with symbols, like a shield, a spear, swords, the revolution hand, or a skull.

The first generation of Tunisian team founders belonged to the educated and affluent classes. These are the same circles that played an important role in founding the Constitutional Liberal Party in 1920, which later became the leading force of the national liberation struggle against French colonialism.

The third, and possibly most important, element, as it is related to the birth and “death” of an ultras group, is the “bâche”. The bâche is a rectangular textile or plastic piece

upon which the name of the group, its distinguishing colours, logo, and other elements that express its identity appear. An Ultras group will not receive real acknowledgement unless it raises its own distinguished “bâche” for the first time in the stadium. In fact, when an Ultras group seizes another group’s “bâche” and raises it or hangs it upside down in the stadium, the group that had lost its “bâche” must dissolve itself.

3. Forms of artistic expression

Being a sports team fanatic isn’t limited to the Ultras, nor is joining a fan base and clashing with the police. What truly distinguishes Ultras from other fans is the forms by which they express their identity and culture, particularly through aesthetics and creativity. Match day becomes the theatre for their spectacle, for which preparations last for days, integrating chants, drums, banners, and pyros...

In the stands, Ultras take their positions wearing their team’s colours and symbols. They carry war drums, megaphones, and pyros, and they hang their own “bâches” over fences and walls, while raising banners with various messages. They are always ready to cheer relentlessly until the end of the match.

The preparations and efforts become even more elaborate when it comes to the “grand entrance” which the ultras call “El-Dakhla”. This is usually a captivating audio-visual spectacle, with its star element being the Tifo, a huge choreographed image that fans form by carrying parts of a the larger banner on canvas or another medium.

Tunisian football reflects major injustices and the failed economic decisions in the country, whereby wealth, economic vitality, and official concern remain channeled towards the very same regions. Since independence (1956), Tunisia has had 67 sports seasons. The “Big Four” clubs have garnered 60 titles!

The main visual elements in tifos are inspired by various sources, most prominently images of fighters and heroes, both good and evil, real and mythical. Tifos also draw inspiration from mafia and action films, anime, and famous international television series.

4. Chants and songs

Chants and songs form yet another integral element of Ultras’ culture, both within and beyond the playing field. While security may be able to expropriate the Ultras’ signs

and flags, it cannot take away their slogans and chants. These chants talk about the daily lives of Ultras, their love for their team, and their sincere readiness to sacrifice what is dear to them for their beloved team. The songs try to explain the reasons young people are attracted to Ultras' culture, and the emotions they experience in the stadiums. They expose the security forces' oppression of ultras and stress the "eternal" animosity between Ultras and the police. The songs deliver strong messages to the corrupt political authorities and the rich who steal football from the poor. Of course, Palestine and other oppressed peoples of the world are not absent from the Ultras epic songs.

Here are parts of the chant, "Ya Hayetna," by the African Winners, supporters of the Club Africain. It is undisputedly the most famous chant in Tunisia, given its strong political character:

*"Here is a song
About the Club Africain and its triumphant feats
About freedom and the country that has forsaken us
About the oppressed and the land that gave them up
And about revenge that remains ours to take.*

*The situation is this:
They steal, loot, and want to keep their immunity
Corrupt and crooked are these forces of security
How many hoods live marginalized, unemployed, in scarcity
Defeated people, sunken into drugs and alcohol.*

*You've sold us out
Looted millions and hid them abroad
And you looked away as they took it all
Let cocaine into the country and made it worse
Pushed people out of their homes into faraway lands.*

*A system
We hate, so merciless
We'll never forget those who died in the truck accident
(Women farmers having to use unsafe transportation)
Or the mother who delivered her child in a cardboard box*

*What a pity that they die and you remain alive.
O, judge,
We're demanding justice, tired of empty words
Everyone dies, and we accept God's judgement
Only the Curva can cure my ailment
We fight the system with no regret."*

5. Graffiti

Artistic expressions are not limited to the Ultras' presence in the stands, but go beyond the stadiums and onto the white walls of the city streets. Of these expressions, Graffiti appears to be the most prominent form of Ultras' artistic articulation. With the fall of Ben Ali and the liberation of the public sphere, the road was paved for a new era in Ultras' culture, fuelled by the flourishing street arts and freedom of expression in the country.

Ultras were given the chance to create colourful graffiti art and grand murals, ushering in a new era of creative rivalry among the various groups.

No justice, no peace!

A quarter of a century ago, the Ultras stormed the Tunisian socio-political scene, transcending the boundaries of football fields. However, during this relatively short time span, the Ultras' journey can be understood through discerning three distinct phases.

Authoritarian practices and economic injustices stirred up regional sensibilities across the country and intensified rivalries between teams in the stadium. Since the late 1990s, violence has been on the rise in playing fields, as slogans and chants became more politicized, especially when the "ultras" came into the picture.

The first phase encompasses the final decade of Ben Ali's rule, from 2000 to 2010. Ultra groups began to emerge during that period, the majority of which comprised the supporters of one of the "Big Four" clubs. Ultras' presence and influence grew in the stands, but never reached the same levels observed in Europe or South America. While tolerant at first of the new phenomenon, Ben Ali's police state iron grip imposed certain limits on the ultras. Those limits were broken for the first time, however, on April 8, 2010, when heated confrontations broke out between the Espérance supporters, including the Ultras, and the security forces, where the authorities resorted to extreme violence to "control" the crowds. Prior to that "incident", physical violence was present

in the stadiums, but would often take place among the competing teams' supporters. Violence towards the regime, on the other hand, was predominantly verbal and allusive. Ben Ali's downfall in January 2011 signified a rebirth for Ultras' culture in Tunisia. The numbers of Ultras' members surged as fans of teams big and small in the premier league and beyond began to found their own groups. This widespread phenomenon unfolded despite the governments' and security forces' attempts to restrict ultras and football crowds in general. In between December 2010 and November 2012, the public was prohibited from attending football games, citing the "volatile security situation" as an excuse. Then crowds over the age of 20 (later revised to over 18) were gradually allowed back into the stands. Curbing the ultras' participation in matches intensified the resentment they had for the regime, but also consolidated their presence in the street as an alternative to the stadium. Hence, they expanded their presence in the streets through artistic expression and mobilizing in social movements.



Examples of graffiti works.

The third phase, which is still ongoing, began on March 31, 2018. On that day, a game took place between the Club Africain and the Médenine Olympic at Radès Stadium, which concluded with police violence and a horrific oppression of fans. Police brutality extended beyond the stands, as they pursued and targeted individuals outside the

stadium. Omar Laabidi was a member of the Club Africain ultras' who fell into the hands of security forces. The young man was thrown by the security officers into the waters of the Oued Miliane valley. According to eyewitnesses, Omar tragically pleaded for help, but the security forces taunted him with the words "Learn to swim!" Eventually, the water swept Omar away, and he drowned at the young age of 19.

The 2011 uprising ushered in a new era in the ultras' history in Tunisia, not only in terms of the multiplying number of groups, but also in terms of their culture's reach. More than 60 Tunisian ultras groups have emerged since 2002, and the biggest four clubs control almost half of these groups.

This coldblooded crime infuriated public opinion beyond the Ultras' circles. The hashtag #learn_to_swim spread throughout social media. Thanks to public pressure from the football crowds and the mobilization among civil society organizations and a large number of lawyers, the case was submitted to the courts. After more than four years of painstaking efforts, the court of trials charged 12 policemen involved in the case with "involuntary manslaughter".



Graffiti with Omar Laabidi's face and the #learn_to_swim hashtag.

Omar's death further marred the atmosphere in the football stadiums, and violent clashes became more frequent, to a point where in 2019, the authorities decided to prevent football crowds from sharing the same stands the Ultras usually occupy in the stands. This raised the Ultras' youth vengefulness against security forces, further

fuelling the strife.

Football is more than a game. It has always exposed the political power's endeavours to control, survey, subjugate, and whitewash. In a way, it's a mirror that reflects the country's illnesses (dictatorship, classism, regionalism, and corruption) as well as its prettier face: its passionate and, sometimes, fiercely angry fans, with their resistance and creativity. Today, Tunisian authorities face one of the most confrontational generations of football fans in the history of the country. What the Ultras demand is exactly what the majority of Tunisians have been demanding; their right to dignity and joy.



Egypt



Al-Ahly fans forming a tifo that reads “Football is for the people”, which they wrote in different languages in the stands.

Football in Egypt: Where People Find Solace

Rabab Azzam

Researcher from Egypt

Translated by **Sabry Zaki**

Throughout its history, Egypt’s first locally run club, Al-Ahly, has earned its reputation as a national player: Historically, Al-Ahly refused to participate in the championships organized by the Mixed Federation for Sports Clubs, which was largely run by the British. Al-Ahly fans staged popular demonstrations each time their club won over a British team, and Al-Ahly members were at the forefront of the Fidayeen groups in the 1948 Palestine War, while the club’s stadiums turned into training grounds for members of the popular resistance during the 1956 Suez Canal War and the 1967 War.

Since the late 1800s, football has captivated Egyptians from the lower classes, offering them an exceptional opportunity to express their rivalry towards the British and show their national identity. Contrary to the sports favored by the rich, football carried all those implicit meanings, and, as a result, the public perception of football shifted from being a sport that reflected the culture of “the other”, the British, to a popular lever for the national movement, and from a game that perpetuated the Egyptians’ sense of oppression by the colonizer into a means of resistance by the colonizer’s own weapon. Since then, football has not ceased to be a “political tool”, in the noble sense of the phrase.

While ball games were played in Ancient China and Ancient Egypt before spreading to the Greeks and Romans, modern football originated as a colonial tool used to educate and discipline Egyptian workers and soldiers in occupation camps. However, the independence movements quickly adopted the game, turning the neighborhoods and alleys into football pitches and vital social spaces. During the occupation between 1882 and 1895, most Egyptians resisted football, considering it to be one of the occupier’s means of influencing them. In February and March 1892, editorials appeared in Al-Ahram newspaper warning people about the “English game.” The decision made by the Minister of Education to introduce physical education and football as compulsory classes in schools was faced by strong condemnation by most and was described as a plan to prevent the creation of a national elite by imposing colonial educational values¹.

This public perception of football persisted until 1895, when some Egyptians started to view the game as a tool of resistance. In the British army camp in Cairo’s Abbasiya, Muhammad Effendi stood observing the occupation soldiers playing football, and in that moment, an innovative idea of a resistance without bloodshed or guns crossed his mind. Muhammad Effendi saw an opportunity to domesticize the colonial game and contribute to its dissemination as a symbolic challenge and a way for organizing and educating the masses. He formed the Egyptian team, then challenged and defeated the Orans team which represented the British army. The match marked the starting point for the game’s history in Egypt and became a symbol of resistance.

The bases for supporting or opposing football in Egypt remained blurry until the

1- The decision to amend the study plan in Egyptian schools was issued to approve teaching geography, history, and natural sciences in English, canceling the time allotted for studying the Turkish language and adding two hours per week for physical education. It was indeed a British plan to reduce the number of accredited education hours; it prompted the Shura Council of Laws to object two years later to the neglectful ministry of education.

establishment of Al-Ahly Club in 1907. From that point onward, football, according to specific contexts, began to be regarded as the “opium of the masses.” But how did this transformation occur?

The National Team

In 1943, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husseini, approached Fouad Serageldin, the president of the Al-Ahly Club and Minister of the Interior, to host Al-Ahly on a tour in Palestine to support the Palestinian resistance against the British and the Zionists. Al-Ahly president and team captain Mukhtar al-Tetsh agreed to the proposal; however, the king, the occupation, and Haydar Pasha, the president of Al-Mokhtalat (currently Zamalek SC) and the Egyptian Football Association (EFA), refused the idea.



The first Al-Ahly football team in 1911.



An invitation to contribute to the founding of Al-Ahly club in 1907. (Al-Ahly Club’s official website)

Al-Ahly circumvented the travel ban and went to Palestine in 1943 on a 23-day tour, under the name of the Cairo Stars team. Upon their return to Cairo, Al-Ahly found that the EFA had issued a decision to suspend the team’s sports activities for several months. In response, fans organized a massive demonstration at Abdeen Palace, where they chanted slogans against the king and the occupation. This frightened the king who ordered the immediate annulment of the decision. As a plot against Al-Ahly, EFA chairman Haydar Pasha decided to hold the postponed Egyptian Cup Final 1943/44 between Al-Ahly and its historic rival, Zamalek, when the suspension was still in effect, forcing Al-Ahly to send its junior players to the pitch since the players who had

visited Palestine were still suspended. Al-Ahly was defeated 6-0, but it was a defeat with the taste of victory. While Al-Ahly continued to pride itself about the 6-0 defeat as a testament of its “patriotism,” Zamalek boasted of it as evidence of its footballing supremacy.

Al-Ahly Legends is a famous anthem in Egypt that praises the courage of Al-Ahly for supporting Palestine and opposing the Zionist movement. It honors those who have managed the club since its inception. The lyrics say:

Omar Lotfi was a lawyer and revolutionary

He defied the occupation and stood against it

He fought for independence and built Al-Ahly Club

It was his dream to establish the first national club

In 1943, Mukhtar al-Tetsh disobeyed the king

and led Al-Ahly on a journey to Palestine

Our 6-0 defeat by Zamalek is a badge of honor we wear until Judgment Day

The stance of Mukhtar and Haydar is a crown of pride that lights our way”

Let’s start at the very beginning. Before the establishment of Al-Ahly, foreign communities residing in Egypt founded several social and sportive clubs. The British authorities founded the first sports club for workers, Al-Seka al-Hadid (The Railway Club) in 1903, which allowed Egyptian workers in workshops and camps to apply for membership. It was preceded by the Khedive’s Club for Officers and the British Community (Al-Jazeera today) in 1882. This club prevented Egyptians from applying for its membership until 1956, after which royalty and wealthy people exclusively were granted membership. To this day, Al-Jazeera Club continues to apply this policy. It has the highest membership fee, which amounted to 1.5 million EGP [about \$48,500] per member in 2023. This was one of the main reasons that prompted the national movement to consider establishing a club for students. Hence, the High School Students Club was founded in 1905 as a political club. Afterward, its president Omar Lotfi established the first Egyptian sports club for all Egyptians. After further discussion with friends, Al-Ahly was established in April 1907 with a power base of high school students. Saad Pasha Zaghloul was the first head of the General Assembly. Mitchell Innes was elected the first president for only one year to take advantage of his influence and expertise in the founding period.

In fact, the establishment of Al-Ahly was in response to the emergence of British and mixed clubs in Egypt.

Throughout history, Al-Ahly has earned its reputation as a national player. Historically, the club refused to participate in the championships organized by the Mixed Federation for Sports Clubs, which was largely run by the British, putting forward the idea of nationalizing sports federations. Al-Ahly fans occupied a significant space in the public sphere, and they used to stage popular demonstrations after each victory scored by their club over a British team. Al-Ahly members also volunteered to defend Egypt in the wars waged against it in the 20th century. They were at the forefront of the Fida'yeen resistance groups in the 1948 Palestine War. Al-Ahly also turned its stadiums into training centers for members of the popular resistance in the 1956 Suez Canal War and the 1967 War.

In 1943, Al-Ahly was invited to visit Palestine to support the Palestinian resistance against the British and the Zionists. However, the king, the occupation, and Haydar Pasha refused the idea, but Al-Ahly circumvented the travel ban and went on a 23-day tour to Palestine, under the name of the Cairo Stars team.

Several other factors have contributed to making Al-Ahly the most popular football club in Egypt. According to a local study conducted in 2014, 72% of football fans in Egypt support Al-Ahly, while its closest competitor, Zamalek, had only 21% of the fanbase. On social media, Al-Ahly sits comfortably on top of the game among Egyptian, Arab, and African football clubs, with millions of followers across various social media platforms. All this made Al-Ahly a football phenomenon; an “almost incomprehensible miracle,” as described by journalist Fikri Abaza.

Historic arch-rivals

Many wonder about the reasons behind the historical rivalry between Al-Ahly and Zamalek. Exploring the historical and social contexts in which the Zamalek was established can provide some answers. Al-Ahly's growing popularity in Cairo prompted the Belgian George Merzbach to found Qasr al-Nil Club in 1911, which was later known as the Cairo International Sports Club (colloquially El-Mokhtalat Club) because it allowed both Europeans and Egyptians to apply for its membership. Unlike Al-Ahly, it was a club for the affluent class. The club was renamed after King Farouk of Egypt, and

it became known as Farouk El-Awal Club and remained associated with the monarchy until the success of the Free Officers Movement in seizing power in 1952. From then on, the club adopted the name Zamalek, and its nickname was the Royal Club. Hence, the two clubs, Al-Ahly and Zamalek were established based on political and class orientations and tendencies. For instance, in 1916, Zamalek won Sultan Hussein Cup, which included Egyptian and British clubs, while Al-Ahly refused to play with colonial clubs.

There was no direct animosity between the two clubs until 1914 when player Hussein Hegazy decided to leave his English club and return to Egypt. This sparked a heated battle between the two clubs over Hegazy's transfer, as he went back and forth between the two clubs until his retirement while he was playing for Zamalek. The conflict continued between the "club of the people," Al-Ahly, and the "club of the rich," Zamalek, for nearly 90 years. Tensions escalated in 2000 when the Confederation of African Football (CAF) awarded Al-Ahly the title of African Club of the Century. Hostility increased between the two clubs' fans, especially after Zamalek's fans demanded CAF award Zamalek the title instead of Al-Ahly. It is worth noting that Zamalek ranked sixth, according to the CAF classification at the time.

The Qasr al-Nil Club was established in 1911. It was later known as the Cairo International Sports Club, or El-Mokhtalat (mixed) club, because it allowed Europeans and Egyptians to apply for its membership. Unlike Al-Ahly, it was a club for the affluent class, and it remained associated with the monarchy until the success of the Free Officers Movement in seizing power in 1952. From then on, its name became Zamalek, and its nickname was the Royal Club.

Zamalek and its fans have led campaigns accusing Al-Ahly of corruption and accusing football officials in Egypt for showing favoritism towards Al-Ahly, regarding it as the state's pet club. It is true that Al-Ahly wields significant social and political influence in the country, given that it has the largest fan base. Evidence of this influence appeared when Saleh Selim, the club's president, refused to receive the late President Mubarak after the presidential plane landed on the club's pitch against his will, and again when Selim refused presidential directives to hold a match between the two poles of Egyptian football following the tragic Upper Egypt train accident in 2002.

However, the animosity towards Al-Ahly goes beyond the Zamalek fanbase. There

are some popular football clubs in the provinces whose fans bear hostility towards Al-Ahly, such as the Ismaili Club (founded in 1924) and Al-Masry Club based in Port Said (established as the first club for Egyptians in the cities of the Canal in 1920). These clubs' fans supported whichever club played against Al-Ahly, which meant that they aligned themselves with Al-Ahly's arch-rival, Zamalek. Nevertheless, the number of Al-Ahly fans is notably increasing in the governorates of Lower and Upper Egypt.

Football as a class game

Football has always been a game for the working class. It was passed on with ease from the poor occupation soldiers to the residents of the narrow streets and alleys of Egypt, where the underprivileged found solace and joy in the game after decades of deprivation. This was characteristic of the game elsewhere as well. The British Isles had dismissed football for centuries, and it was described as "a social vice practiced only by the lowest classes," as author Eduardo Galeano documents in his book "Football in Sun and Shadow." The affluent class, both British and Egyptian, looked down on football as belonging to poor people. However, the decision of the Minister of Education to include it in physical education classes in 1892 was a pivotal moment that reshaped the social map of football in Egypt. When the British High Commissioner abolished free education, only children of wealthy families who could afford the fees remained in schools. Thus, the opportunity arose for children of the wealthy class to play football as well. However, the two classes evidently held different perspectives on football: while the wealthy saw it as a leisure activity, the poor embraced it as a vital form of self-expression.

Football has provided solace and escapism, particularly for young people experiencing poverty, exclusion, and social marginalization. However, since the introduction of the professional football system in Egypt, the game has turned into a means to move up the social ladder. In clubs like Al-Ahly and Zamalek, players receive a minimum salary of 7 million EGP (about \$226,515 USD) per season, while in less renowned clubs in the Egyptian Premier League, salaries stand at around 500,000 EGP or slightly higher.

Nevertheless, playing football or supporting football teams remained a form of social rebellion against the disparity in income and wealth distribution, as well as the erosion of the middle class resulting from the state's abandonment of its social responsibilities towards its citizens. That is in addition to the repressive climate and the monopolization of the public sphere that characterized the rule of former President Hosni Mubarak, together with the regime's lack of ambition, resources, and institutions which might be

able to engage and support the frustrated youth.

Perhaps that rebellion was evident in the movements of the football-passionate fans, widely known as the Ultras, who have emerged in Egypt since 2007.



A banner raised in the stands after the Port Said massacre against Al-Ahly fans. It reads “Al-Ahly supporters do not apologize to murderers.”

Ultras harnessed the power of social media, mobilized, and networked with group members to claim their space in the public sphere and break the arbitrary ban imposed by the regime or club administrations. The Ultras emerged as an unconventional alternative to demonstrations, openly expressing their political leanings in the stands by adopting multiple discourses. At first, their slogans took a sport-themed tone against football capitalism, but they later turned into expressions of revolutionary protest (Al-Ahly Ultras and Zamalek Ultras took part in the events of the 2011 revolution). Eventually, the slogans took on political and religious dimensions, with some of the Zamalek Ultras joining political-Islamic groups and founding the movement Hazimun wa Ahrar (“The Determined and the Free”).

The 2006 Africa Cup of Nations marked a turning point for football within Egyptian

society, attracting new audiences from the upper middle class and women. It is possible to say that this tournament contributed to opening up the public space for Egyptians; allowing millions of people to attend at the stands and streets after each match at a time when gatherings were prohibited. It also led to the emergence of the Ultras in the following year.

Following the 2011 revolution, football became a powerful tool for political and mass mobilization through the activities of the Ultras in various areas. In this regard, researcher Ziyad Aql said that football created a sense of national belonging among Egyptians, which the usual political entities failed to achieve. He added that using football as one of the mechanisms for shaping national affiliations occurred due to the absence of sufficient collective entities capable of expressing a distinct identity.

Game to industry

Political systems quickly recognized the ability of football to deflect attention from political and social grievances and growing resentment over economic crises and police violence. For example, the Mubarak regime arranged for the president to attend the final match of the national team in the 2006 Africa Cup of Nations, aiming to distract people from the tragic sinking of the Al-Salam 98 ferry in the Red Sea that same year. The regime also used the home and away matches between Egypt and Algeria in the 2010 qualifiers to legitimize its political actions. Moreover, on the first anniversary of the Battle of the Camel, which witnessed the Ultras defending Tahrir Square and the demonstrators, the regime took revenge on the Ultras in the infamous Port Said massacre in February 2012². In February 2015, another massacre targeted the Zamalek Ultras, effectively ending the Egyptian Ultras phenomenon. Even the football fans have disappeared from the stands and public squares until present.

The 2006 Africa Cup of Nations marked a turning point for football within Egyptian society, attracting new audiences from the upper middle class and women. The tournament contributed to opening up the public space for Egyptians, allowing millions of people to attend at the stands and streets after each match at a time when gatherings were prohibited, and eventually leading to the emergence of the Ultras.

On the economic level, football has turned from a game into an industry after introducing

2- إسلام ضيف، «يوم الغدر بجمهورية الألتراس»، موقع «السفير العربي»، 08/02/2023..

the professional system in the 1990s. The transformation marked the birth of a new form of football as a game for the masses that carries different values and relies on youth as a consumer audience and as active supporters who are familiar with the tools of the new football era.

The rise of the sports economy paved the way for the emergence of the Ultras, who categorically rejected the dominance of capital over their popular game. The Ultras, an extension of Al-Ahly fans who have emerged abroad since 1996, launched a website and the Al-Ahly Fans Club (AFC) association in 2005³. An association of Zamalek fans emerged simultaneously.

Football turned from a game into an industry after introducing the professional system in the 1990s. However, the rise of the sports economy paved the way for the emergence of the Ultras, who categorically rejected the dominance of capital over their popular game.

However, one young Al-Ahly supporter, Amr Fahmy, was uneasy about the way the fanbase was organized. Fahmy⁴ drew inspiration from the Italian experience, and expanded the Ultras experience in Egypt, considering that football fan associations had fallen into the trap of subordination to club leaders. The interests associated with profitable and non-profitable activities outside the stadiums have become prominent. Consequently, the birth of the Ultras was a form of rebellion against the subordination and paternalism practiced by the boards of directors of the two clubs over their own fans, who raised slogans like “football is for the people” and “we are against the police, capital, and the media.”

Since 2006, investments in sports media have exploded, with sponsors raising the value of the Egyptian Premier League. In 2020, the Egyptian Premier League ranked second in the list of the richest football leagues in Africa, with a net valuation of approximately 138 million euros, while the value of football-related economies in Egypt was 1.25 billion EGP (about 38 million euros) in 2012. This new situation has forced fans to buy tickets at higher prices to attend matches.

3- A.F.C or Al-Ahly Fans Club is an association formed in 2005 and officially supported by the club’s management at that time.

4- Amr Fahmy was an Egyptian football manager and the General Secretary of CAF from 2017 to 2019. He resigned after discovering widespread corruption in the CAF. He was known as one of the founders of the Al-Ahly Fan Club or the Al-Ahly Ultras. In 2020, he passed away in his prime due to illness.

In 2019, the authorities launched the “My Ticket” system to regulate the audience, maintain accurate spectator records, and control the clothing and sports equipment market by granting monopolies to specific companies. In the past, TV subscription cards were introduced to allow viewers to watch matches from home, with the Saudi ART channels holding exclusive rights for years. Later, the exclusive rights were transferred to the Qatari beIN Sports channels, which meant less access for the poorer fans to watching the tournaments.



The empty stands during local matches.

Despite increased investments in the football industry and market, the desired economic benefits for the Egyptian economy remained limited. The revenues generated by the industry do not constitute more than 2% of the state’s financial resources. Perhaps this is due to the Sports Law, which previously granted clubs the right to obtain significant facilities and tax exemptions almost free of charge.

The current regime wanted to invest in football to create a new revenue stream, opening the door to foreign investment in Egyptian football through Turki Al Al-Sheikh, chairman of the Saudi General Sports Authority. Al-Sheikh bought Al-Assiouty Club (a privately owned club) and changed its name to Pyramids FC, before he launched a channel with the same name in 2018. Pyramids FC finished third in the 2018 - 19 Egyptian Premier League. However, the Saudi owner had numerous conflicts with Al-Ahly and

its fans, resulting in his withdrawal of all investments and his departure from Egypt. This ultimately failed experiment disrupted the Egyptian league because it raised the financial ceiling for player contracts to absurd amounts.

The current regime wanted to invest in football to create a new revenue stream, opening the door to foreign investment. Turki Al Al-Sheikh, chairman of the Saudi General Sports Authority, bought Al-Assiouty Club and changed its name to Pyramids FC, then launched a channel of the same name in 2018. Pyramids finished third in the 2018–19 Egyptian Premier League. However, the Saudi owner had numerous conflicts with Al-Ahly, resulting in his withdrawal of all investments and departure from Egypt.

In early April 2023, Salem Al-Shamsi, the current Emirati owner of Pyramids SC, issued a statement announcing his decision to withdraw his sports investments from Egypt, in protest of what he called “the unfairness of football referees.” The decision was another sign of the failure of the Gulf investment in sports experiment in Egypt, bringing the sports investment issue back to the fore.

In 2019, the authorities launched the “My Ticket” system to regulate the audience, maintain accurate spectator records, and control the sports market through monopolies. In the past, TV subscriptions were introduced to allow viewers to watch matches from home, with the Saudi ART channels holding exclusive rights for years. Later, the exclusive rights were transferred to the Qatari beIN Sports channels, which meant less access for the poorer fans.

The current authority, aiming to attract investments and raise funds to facilitate its major projects, now views football as an industry. President El-Sissi expressed this perspective at the 2019 youth conference, as the regime continues to set the ground to capitalize on football, overlooking the fact that the game is the only enduring source of joy for the poor.



A banner that reads “Ahly martyrs, you are now at peace in heaven, while we remain steadfast here”, raised by Moroccan Raja Casablanca fans in solidarity with the victims of the Port Said massacre.

Egypt's Ultras and the Years of the Crackdown

Islam Deif

Journalist from Egypt

Translated by **Sabry Zaki**

“Strike with your tear gas. Strike with bullets and brass. Our generation no longer fears death at your hands”... “In every corner of my land, the martyr’s voice is loud and clear. With his life, he writes a song for a new dawn without any fear. No longer shall we live as slaves. In our country, we shall be free.”

A banner strung across the stands of the Cairo Stadium read, "Football is for the masses." Before the kick-off of the 2014 CAF Confederation Cup final, Ultras Ahlawy, an organized group of football fans who support Al-Ahly Club, delivered a message to the authorities in multiple languages by hanging out a huge banner that read, "In all languages of the world, so that you may understand: football is for the masses."

In 2007, Egyptian football Ultras (a name given to the hardcore fan base) emerged as groups capable of collective organization, garnering the attention of the government and society for their adoption of new traditions in football fandom. Before 2007, traditional forms of support prevailed in the stands until these rebellious movements introduced a novel culture that laid down the rule that loyalty to the club was defined by belonging to the entity.

Regarding the origins of Ultras' groups in Arab countries, the first to be established was the Ultras Dragon group in Libya in 1989¹, in support of the Libyan Al-Ittihad Club. However, the group succumbed to the authority's crackdown less than two weeks after its emergence, resulting in its dissolution and the imprisonment of its members. In 1995, Ultras made their appearance in Tunisia, where they formed the African Club Fan Association known as African Winners. Subsequently, similar groups emerged from underprivileged neighborhoods, and from then on, Ultra groups swept other countries in the region.

Ultra's debut in Cairo stadiums

Given the paramount importance of football to the passionate fans of the most popular game in the region, it was only natural that the Ultras' phenomenon would reach Egypt. Establishing Ultras-style fan associations started with two groups: Ultras Ahlawy and Ultras White Knights, supporting Al-Ahly and Zamalek clubs respectively. These two clubs, known as the pillars of Egyptian football, hold a longstanding rivalry fueled by their fans. Al-Ahly undoubtedly surpasses Zamalek in the number of titles it has garnered and has a more extensive fan base. When it comes to a match between the two teams, there is absolutely no room for neutrality; one simply must pick a side: Ahly or Zamalek. This is the Cairo derby, capable of pitting members of the same family against each other, where a fierce loyalty prevails to either the Red (Al-Ahly fans) or the White (Zamalek fans).

1- محمد جمال بشير، «كتاب الألتراس»، دار «دُون» للنشر والتوزيع، القاهرة، 2011.

The two Ultras groups, initially composed of just a few members, quickly expanded and claimed the third-class stands as their zone. The first Egyptian Ultras group, White Knights (UWK07), was officially established in March 2007 to support Zamalek, occupying the right side of the third-class zone. One month later, Ultras Ahlawy (UA07) was founded and chose to occupy the left side of the third-class zone.

Soon, similar fan associations were established for clubs with a fan base outside the capital, such as the Green Magic group that supports Al-Ittihad SC in Alexandria, the Green Eagles who supports Al-Masry SC in Port Said, and the Yellow Dragons who supports Ismaili SC in Ismailia.

Prior to the emergence of the Ultras, there were other groups recognized by the clubs that tried to redefine forms of fandom, such as Al-Ahly Fans Club (AFC), preceded by Al-Ahly Lovers Union (ALU). The latter made the largest banner of the club's logo and raised it in the Egyptian stands for the first time in 2001 during the Al-Ahly and Spanish Real Madrid match in Cairo. There was also Zamalek Lovers Union (ZLU) and the Ghazl El-Mahalla Club fans association.

Due to the prevailing societal stereotypes, Ultras' members are exclusively male. And even though most of the individuals belonging to these groups come from slum areas, it is difficult to say that they have a particular class character, as the groups comprise members of diverse social backgrounds.

From the stands to Tahrir Square

"Football before us was but lies and deceit." Thus begins the chant of Ultras Ahlawy, "Hekayetna" ("Our Story"), which emerged in the aftermath of the brutal Port Said massacre and the subsequent suspension of the Egyptian Premier League. The powerful lyrics narrate the conflict between the Ultras and the regime, emphasizing the Ultras' rejection of the regime's exploitation of football and its falsification of public awareness. The song also portrayed the relentless crackdown against the Ultras, culminating in the authorities plotting revenge on these groups.

On February 1, 2012, Ultras Ahlawy were at the center of one of the deadliest disasters in football history. Immediately following a 3 -1 loss to the Al-Masry club in Port Said, Al-Masry fans stormed the pitch and targeted Al-Ahly's partition of the stands. 72 Al-Ahly fans were killed in the violent attack with knives, stones, and machetes, or died in

the subsequent stampede to the stadium exits. During the riot, security forces did not lift a finger to stop the massacre. Instead, they closed the exit doors in the face of Al-Ahly fans, which worsened the stampede and led to a greater victim toll.

Due to the prevailing societal stereotypes, Ultras' members are exclusively male. And even though most of the individuals belonging to these groups come from slum areas, it is difficult to say that they have a particular class character, as the groups contain members of diverse social backgrounds.

The lyrical production of the Ultras burgeoned after the massacre, sweeping not just the stands, but the squares of the Egyptian revolution as well, expressing anti-regime rage in the streets to the music of the trompeta².

The influence of these songs and chants spread to other squares, far beyond the borders of Egypt, and were sung around the world.

Kill the revolution more and more

The word 'free' drives you crazy

No matter how brutal the warden may be

He's a coward when facing my voice

These are some of the most well-known verses of the song "Our Story," which was repeatedly chanted by protesters in the squares of the October 2019 uprising in the Lebanese capital Beirut. This identification reflected the ability of the protest discourse in these songs to apply a dramatic impact elsewhere, as it traces a portrait of the poor social and political realities in the region and points a finger at the destructive counter-revolutionary forces that tried to stifle the voice of the people.

Amid the conflict, the authorities disallowed the Ultras from attending matches. In 2017, the parliament passed Sports Law No. 71, which banned the establishment of sports fans' associations. Earlier, courts had handed down rulings classifying Ultras' associations as outlawed terrorist groups. In May 2015, the Court of Urgent Matters convicted fan groups of being terrorist organizations and banned their activities. The

2- The trompeta (not to be confused with the trumpet) is a musical instrument used by Ultras groups in the stands. It is a large drum which accompanies the chants and songs.

conflict ended after a series of crackdown campaigns and the arrest of individuals affiliated with these groups, some of whom have recently announced the dissolution of their groups and the suspension of their activities.

Egyptian security services have sought to exert control over the Ultras since their inception. The police adopted an aggressive approach towards these groups, coupled with a violent attack from the media, which was a principal partner of the security services in the incitement against ultras groups.

Only three years separate the two bloodiest massacres in Egyptian football history. The Port Said Stadium massacre left 72 dead among the Ultras Ahlawy, while the Air Defense Stadium massacre left 20 dead among the Ultras White Knights. The Ultras had long been a nightmare for the regime, and for that, the authorities sought to exterminate their movement.

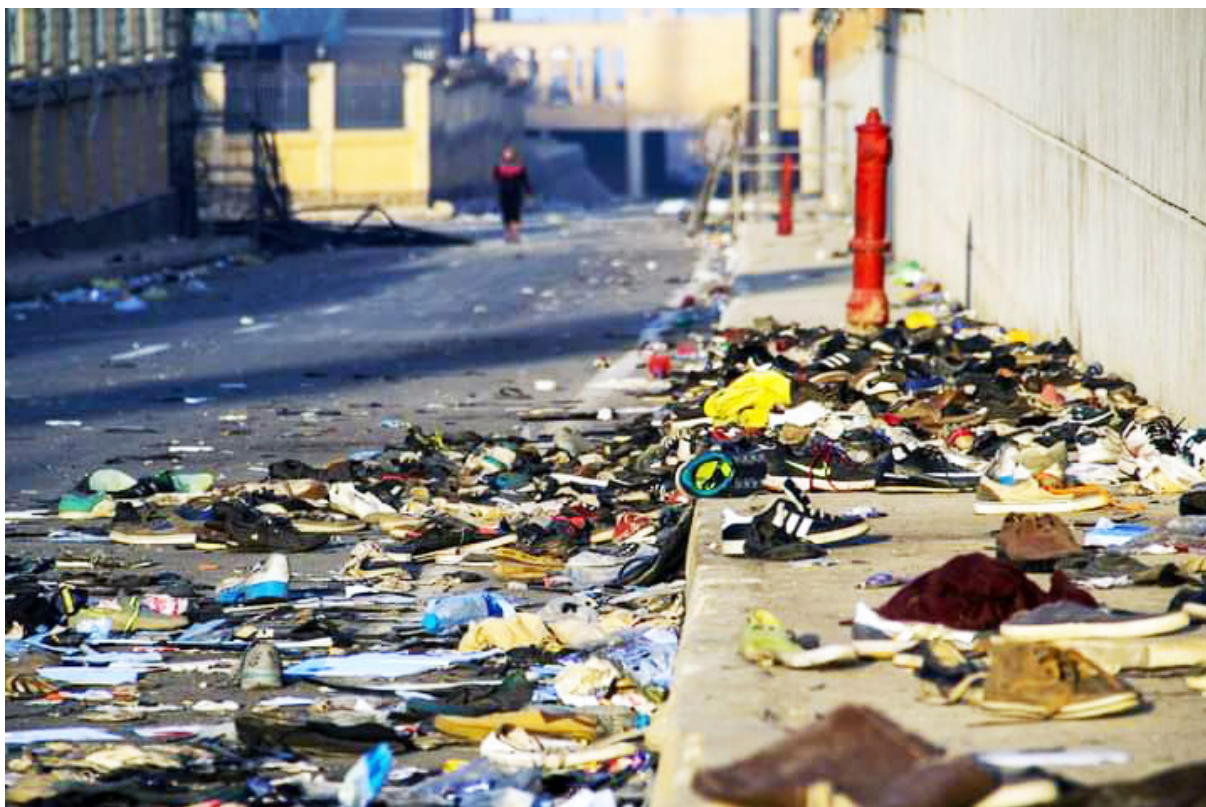
In response, Ultras, with their chants and slogans, transformed stadiums into spaces of protest and defiance of the Egyptian authority and the Ministry of Interior. The most prominent of the slogans was the notorious “ACAB” against the Ministry of Interior, an acronym for “All Cops Are Bastards”. Meanwhile, police forces applied humiliating practices against football fans, such as ordering them to empty their pockets, confiscating their cheering props before the matches, and arbitrarily arresting members of the cheering squads.

The song “Hekayetna” (“Our Story”) crossed borders, reaching the Lebanese capital, Beirut, where it was chanted by protesters in the squares of the October 2019 uprising. This identification reflected the ability of the protest discourse to have a dramatic impact elsewhere.

These violent practices began with the first appearance of Ultras Ahlawy in the stands, when its members objected to the security forces’ refusal to hang their banner during a match between Al-Ahly and Enppi on April 13, 2007³. After skirmishes with security personnel, Ultras Ahlawy were able to raise the banner. However, the violent clashes began in 2010 when the police tried to prevent cheering props in a friendly match between Al-Ahly and Kafr El-Sheikh and arrested seven Al-Ahly fans.

3- Enppi is an Egyptian sports club established in 1985 and owned by the Engineering Company for Petroleum and Petrochemical Industries.

“Fabricating cases is the habit of the Ministry of Interior,” says one of the Ultras Ahlawy chants. It is similar to the lyrics chanted by Ultras White Knights about security prosecutions: *“You beat us, imprisoned us, and tried us on many trumped-up charges.”*



After the clashes between the security forces and the Ultras at the Cairo Stadium in 2011.

But long before the January 2011 uprising, solidarity with peoples' causes has always been part of the ultras' culture. Ultras have always raised the Palestinian flag and advocated for the Palestinian cause with special slogans and chants. On January 22, 2011, Al-Ahly fans chanted in the name of Tunisia to celebrate the Tunisian revolution, raising the Tunisian flag at the Arab Contractors Stadium. The same thing was done in the indoor basketball court of Al-Ittihad Alexandria Club, where Al-Ittihad fans defied the security forces, loudly chanting the name of Tunisia during a match between Al-Ittihad and Al-Jazira Club.

The confrontations moved from the stadiums to the squares, with the January 2011 revolution marking a turning point. Ultras groups played a significant role in the protests that led to the ousting of former President Hosni Mubarak. Drawing on their previous experience and tactics in dealing with clashes with police forces, they were able to

defend Tahrir Square, particularly in the infamous “Battle of the Camel”. After that fateful incident, the Ultras earned a reputation for being the “protectors of the revolution.” Among the ultras’ martyrs on what was called the “Friday of Wrath” were Ahmed Kamal, member of the Ultras Ahlawy, and Hussein Taha, member of the Ultras White Knights. When the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces assumed power, Ultras’ youth were among the protesters who returned to the squares to voice their refusal of military rule. They vigorously participated in the violent confrontations with the Ministry of Interior and the Military Police, offering martyrs in these battles. Among their martyrs were Ultras White Knights member Shihab al-Din Ahmed, who was shot dead in the events of Muhammad Mahmoud Street, and Ultras Ahlawy member Muhammad Mustafa, also known as Karika, who was killed in an altercation with the military police at the Council of Ministers.

Solidarity with peoples’ causes was part of the Ultras’ culture long before the January 2011 uprising. Ultras have always raised the Palestinian flag and advocated for the Palestinian cause with slogans and chants. And on January 22, 2011, Al-Ahly fans chanted Tunisia’s name to celebrate the Tunisian revolution, raising the country’s flag.

“Strike with your tear gas. Strike with bullets and brass. Our generation no longer fears death at your hands”... “In every corner of my land, the martyr’s voice is loud and clear. With his life, he writes a song for a new dawn without any fear. No longer shall we live as slaves. In our country, we shall be free.” Those were the words of the anthem chanted by Ultras youth as they bravely faced the bullets in the squares.

The confrontations spilled out from the stadiums to the squares, with the January 2011 revolution marking a turning point. Ultras groups played a significant role in the protests that led to the ousting of former President Hosni Mubarak.

Ultras groups had a profound impact on other protesters who adopted their organizational style and chanted their songs and protest slogans in demonstrations. The young people of the January 2011 revolution also formed political Ultras’ movements along the lines of the sports fan associations, such as the Ultras Thoragi (Ultras Revolutionary) during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. With the first post-revolution presidential elections, electoral campaigns created Ultras groups named after their respective candidates to promote and support those candidates. Following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the Brotherhood quickly formed

new political Ultras movements, such as the Ultras Rabaawi, rooted in political Islam to mobilize the Rabaa Square protests. During this period, the activities of the Islamic-affiliated Ahrar Movement emerged. Most of the group’s members and leaders were associated with the Ultras White Knights.

*“Their affiliated media called for the audience to return. They gathered the fans; let them enter for free. Finally, we thought we were going back. But it was an ambush, an attack.”*This is an excerpt from the song “The Cry of the Twenty”, chanted by the Ultras White Knights following the Air Defense Stadium massacre. In 2015, the Ministry of Interior installed iron wire cages at the entrances to the Air Defense Stadium. These cages turned the gates into harrowing corridors of death, where security forces fired tear gas and gunshots, causing the tightly packed fans of Zamalek to suffocate and die. The police went on to arrest some Ultras White Knights members, and instead of holding the actual perpetrators accountable, the prosecution charged those members with the murder of their fellow fans.



The public raises the Palestinian flag and supports the cause.

Only three years separate the two bloodiest massacres in Egyptian football history. The Port Said Stadium massacre left 72 dead among the Ultras Ahlawy, while the Air Defense Stadium massacre left 20 dead among the Ultras White Knights. The Ultras had long been a nightmare for the regime, and for that, the authorities sought

to exterminate their movement. This was a fearless movement that did not hesitate to confront the government and chant against it in the stands. Ultras have chanted *“The people want the execution of the Field Marshal,”* and tirelessly reminded the regime of the painful past, yelling out: *“We will never forget Tahrir Square.”*

A supporter, not an “inmate”

“I am a supporter, not an inmate ... I wouldn’t trade my freedom for anything.” The Ultras White Knights composed this song as a plea for the release of their fellow supporters, in which they demanded *“Freedom for the stadium, freedom for the fans.”* The ultras dedicated this song to every imprisoned supporter inside or outside Egypt and to the souls of their martyrs.

Sayed Moshagheb, a leader of the Ultras White Knights and one of its co-founders, is one of the defendants against whom court rulings have been issued. Since his arrest, Moshagheb, who has received a 7-year prison sentence, has been living in harsh conditions inside his prison cell, prompting him to object by going on hunger strike more than once.

The young people of the January 2011 revolution formed political ultras’ movements along the lines of the sports fan associations, such as the Ultras Revolutionary. With the first post-revolution presidential elections, electoral campaigns created ultras groups named after their candidates to promote them.

Even with an unprecedentedly tightened grip on the Egyptian stadiums, the regime continued launching crackdown campaigns within the stands, relentlessly pursuing and arresting supporters and Ultras. During the Al-Ahly and Moroccan Raja match at Cairo Stadium on April 22, 2023, security forces arrested several Al-Ahly supporters because of a chant against the “narcs”, referring to the fake fans who work as police informants. Despite the Public Prosecution’s order of their release, the Supreme State Security Prosecution held them in jail in connection with Case No. 708 of the Supreme State Security on charges of “joining a terrorist group.”

In response to the security crackdown in the stadiums, the Ultras led a campaign calling for a boycott of the stadiums and publishing the hashtag #Leave_it_Empty on

social media websites. In a statement on its Twitter page⁴, the Ultras White Knights expressed solidarity with the Ultras Ahlawy imprisoned members, calling on fans to boycott matches. The statement emphasized: “We declare our full solidarity with Al-Ahly fans and all Egyptian fans who suffer from these practices. We call on all free fans and people of dignity to boycott attending the matches in such an atmosphere which fails to guarantee fans their most basic rights of dignity and freedom within their own country and the stadiums (...), rights which the authorities, regrettably, reserve solely for non-Egyptian fans.

Eulogies on the walls

Graffiti is one of the artistic forms that the ultras have mastered and used to protest and pay tribute to its martyrs. Murals have appeared, particularly on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, adorned with depictions of the ultras who were martyred during the events of the revolution and the treacherous massacres orchestrated by the authorities.

These murals quickly spread to the rest of the public squares and the governorates. Despite the authorities’ repeated attempts to remove or cover these works, young revolutionaries have persistently re-drawn them, adding defiant phrases that challenge the government, such as “Wipe it again, you cowardly regime.”



Security forces forcibly remove the Ultras from Cairo Stadium in 2011.

⁴- Statement by the Ultras White Knights on its Twitter page, 24/04/2023.

In response to the attempts to muffle these voices, Ultras Devils released a song entitled “Graffiti”. The song’s lyrics say: *“Erase my graffiti / Distort my murals / The Interior dogs have lost their wits / because my murals expose them and their tricks...”* “Glory to the Martyrs” is another song by the Ultras Devils, made in memory of Khaled Omar, the graffiti painter killed in the Port Said massacre: *“His name was Khaled, and he was a painter / His graffiti spoke louder than words and wiser.”*



A Grafitti by Ammar Abu Bakr, in memory of the martyrs of Mohamed Mahmoud Street.





“My passion since childhood.” Graffiti created by fans of Al-Shabab Sports Club in Belouizdad, Algeria.

From Anti-Colonial Struggle to Mobilizing for Freedom: The Algerian Football of the People

Omar Benderra

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Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

Football stadiums have emerged as centers for popular mobilization and the production of politically-charged symbols that resonated profoundly in public opinion, transcending all social categories. In Algeria, the enthusiasm for football has played an integral role in the country’s history, as football clubs embraced anticolonial political stances. The sport has served as a vehicle for resistance against colonialists and the pursuit of freedom and dignity, and it continues to amplify the political demands of the Algerian people.

The protestors of the Hirak, while chanting their slogans and protest songs in unison in the Algerian capital, imposed the loud recognition of football stadiums as major political spaces. The passionately angry chants of football supporters have overflowed from the stadiums onto the streets of cities all over Algeria. The stadium has thus emerged as a center for popular mobilization and the production of politically-charged symbols that resonated profoundly in public opinion, transcending all social categories. The abundance of studies, historical and sociological analyses, and diverse articles by journalists or political commentators covering various aspects of football in Algeria proves the importance of the sport in the socio-political landscape, and a simple internet search can confirm this¹.

In Algeria, as in many countries where entertainment is scarce or inaccessible to the working class, football undoubtedly reigns over all sports, more so in terms of being a grand spectacle rather than a sport for mass participation. While large stadiums have been built throughout the country since the 1970s, the infrastructure for training and playing spaces in the neighborhoods is scarce and far from meeting the expectations of a neglected youth. The investment in local sports facilities is indeed very limited, negligible in comparison to the needs. In working-class neighborhoods, football is predominantly played in the streets or in vacant lands.

Despite the lack of a public policy for the development of sports activities, the Algerian public's enthusiasm for the sport remains strong. Every Friday, the stands of every stadium in the country become equally packed with supporters, especially during the matches of the national team, which are marked by a passionate intensity that overflows into the public space, filling it with an electrifying energy.

Football's origins and anti-colonial emancipation

The enthusiasm for this sport, its political significance, and the emotional charge it carries are integral parts of Algeria's history. Football played a significant role in the resistance to colonialism. The first all-Algerian sports clubs emerged during the height of colonial domination in the early 20th century, a few years before the arrogant celebration of a century of colonization in Algeria in 1930.

Although other sports clubs dispute its precedence, such as the Mouloudia Club of

1- Djamel Boulebier, *Le foot, l'urbain et la démocratie*, Insaniyat [édition électronique] (N°8), Mai-Août/1999.

Oran (MCO) or the Constantine Sports Club (CSC), which claim earlier founding dates, the highly popular Mouloudia Club of Algiers (MCA), officially established in 1921, is considered the oldest Algerian football club.

These clubs, which quickly multiplied across the country, were named after their cities of origin and often made references to Islam to distinguish themselves from European teams composed mainly of “pieds-noirs” (French colonizers born in Algeria), with whom the competition was not only athletic but also carried deeper social implications. And thus, football became an active factor in the formation of a modern national political consciousness.

The victory of a North African team over the French team in a friendly match in Paris in September 1954, two months before the start of the national liberation war on November 1, 1954, was perceived as a prophetic event by many independence enthusiasts.

In fact, even before the founding of the Algerian Muslim Scouts Movement (the first public school for nationalist youth) in 1935, football clubs served as the initial structures for political expression, with some more openly anti-colonialist than others. Naturally, the colonial authorities understood the danger that these gatherings could pose and attempted through various means to prevent football clubs from becoming hotbeds of nationalist sentiment. Consequently, a number of constraints were imposed on these clubs, such as the requirement to integrate one or more non-Muslim players into their teams and to reserve the use of their premises exclusively for activities directly related to sports².

The clashes between “indigenous” football supporters and the pieds-noirs in the strictly segregated stands often mirrored the conflicts between players on the pitch³. The victory of a North African team⁴ over the French team in a friendly match in Paris in September

2- Philip Dine, Didier Rey, *Le football en guerre d'Algérie*, Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps - [édition électronique] (N°106), Février/2012.

3- The stadium quickly became a microcosm of ethnic clashes, as per a report from the governor of Constantine addressing the violence provoked by supporters of the Muslim club of the Jeunesse Sportive Djidjellienne in 1937, in: Vincent Jacquet, *D'instrument de propagande à miroir de la guerre d'Algérie: l'équipe de football du Front de Libération Nationale, 1954-1962*, Bulletin de l'Institut Pierre Renouvin - [édition électronique]- (N°47), Janvier/2018.

4- Alongside the legendary Ben Mbarek, the North African team lined up the Algerians Mustapha Zitouni, Abdelaziz Bentifour, Mokhtar Aribi, Abderrahmane Boubekour, Abderrahmane Meftah, Rachid Belaid and Said Haddad, the Moroccans Abderrahmane Mahdjoub, Mohamed Abderrazak and Salem Benmiloud, as well as the Tunisian Kassem Hassouna.

1954, two months before the start of the national liberation war on November 1, 1954, was perceived as a prophetic event by many independence aficionados⁵.

The matches played during the early months of the liberation war were marked by increasingly violent clashes between “indigenous” (Algerian) supporters and pieds-noirs (Europeans) and often escalated into riots. Following the call from the National Liberation Front (FLN), Algerian sports clubs permanently withdrew from all official competitions.



The first page of L'Équipe French newspaper, issued on April 15, 1958.

However, politically, the most remarkable victory for the FLN was the defection of well-known Algerian footballers playing in major French clubs⁶ in April 1958. The FLN's football team, known as the ALN, had been established a few months earlier in 1957, at the height of the liberation war, and it became the national team of the resisting Algeria. The team played nearly 90 matches worldwide until 1962 and served as an effective lever for international propaganda. For the Algerian sports public, the team became a unifying symbol of the reclamation of a violated dignity. Throughout the years, it has created unparalleled enthusiasm and a deep attachment to the national

5- Séverine Floch, *L'équipe du FLN au cœur de la lutte pour l'indépendance de l'Algérie*, Footpol.fr, 28/04/2020.

6- *Comment un match arrangé entre pays européens pour éliminer l'Algérie a marqué à jamais l'histoire de la Coupe du monde?*, Middle East Eye (édition française), 30/11/2022.

team that persists to this day.

The stadium as an outlet and protest forum

This period in which the national team and resistance football were founded remains vivid in collective memory, but the post-independence reality bears little resemblance to that treasured legacy. In fact, the sport was generally considered secondary by the authoritarian regime that had emerged from the power struggle during the summer of 1962⁷. While successive leaders were interested in the political benefits of the game, in terms of the popularity of the game and the social base it provides, they refrained from investing in its development. The generalization of education represented the main strategy of successive administrations towards the youth. As a result, Algerian football was founded without a real sports project, while the 1977 reform was the only genuine attempt to organize the sport and lay the foundations for infrastructures that could meet the expectations of a young and rapidly growing demographic.

Following the call from the National Liberation Front (FLN), Algerian sports clubs permanently withdrew from all official competitions. The most politically remarkable victory for the FLN was the defection of well-known Algerian footballers playing in major French clubs in April 1958.

This “socialist-inspired” reform aimed to connect the most important sports associations to public enterprises in order to provide them with the necessary means for the development of their activities. While this justification is undoubtedly sincere, there is little doubt that the intention of the decision-makers at the time was primarily to deprive the poorly organized political forces of a means of influencing the youth. Indeed, the end of the reign of Houari Boumediene, who died in December 1978, coincided with the emergence of identity tensions in Kabylia, following a policy of Arabization that disregarded the historical specificities and socio-cultural particularities of the country. As a result, during the Algerian Cup final in June 1976, President Boumediene, who was present in the official VIP box, was booed by supporters of the Jeunesse Sportive de Kabylie (JSK).

Since that unprecedented event, football stadiums, once rare spaces for gatherings and free expression, gradually transformed into echo chambers of popular discontent.

7- A talk by Muhannad Amer Ammar at the symposium organized by the “Ecole Normale Supérieure” in Lyon in June 2006 on the political crisis after independence in the summer of 1962.

The outstanding performance of the national team during the 1982 World Cup, and the subsequent deceit⁸ it was subjected to, briefly ignited a collective fervor in a time of accelerated degradation caused by the deteriorating socio-economic situation since the fall of oil prices in 1986. In this period of mounting tension, the presence of officials in the stadiums was met with ridicule and insults from football fans in the stands. During the 1980s, football matches, especially derbies that reignited rivalries extending beyond mere sports competition, often culminated in anarchic demonstrations and confrontations, at times escalating into highly violent clashes with the security services.



President Ahmed Ben Bella receives Houari Boumediene, Commander of the National Liberation Army, upon his arrival at the municipal stadium in Algiers, September 10, 1962. (AFP)

Tensions manifested at the power summit in the beginning of October 1988, between supporters of a neo-liberal “infatih” (openness) and defenders of the status quo, resulting in “spontaneous” demonstrations that attracted thousands of young people across the country. Against a backdrop of prevalent unemployment, shortages of all kinds, and price hikes, these upheavals expressed the conditions endured by the working classes of a society oppressed by the rule of the single party. These upheavals were violently

8- *Comment un match arrangé entre pays européens pour éliminer l'Algérie a marqué à jamais l'histoire de la Coupe du monde?*, Middle East Eye (édition française), 30/11/2022.

repressed by the army and the political police in a horrific carnage that led to several hundred deaths, most of whom were very young people, accompanied by atrocious human rights violations.

Between political police and oligarchs: manipulation and diversion

Since that event, stadiums have been bastions of popular political expression, serving as a mass outlet for the youth who chant their anger and despair in the form of insults directed at all authorities. The coup d'état on January 11, 1992, which interrupted the democratic process that was initiated following the events of October 1988, marked the beginning of a long period of hyper-violence and bloodshed. During the “dirty war” against civilians, which lasted until the early 2000s, tens of thousands of Algerians died in questionable circumstances⁹. The perpetrators of these crimes against humanity have largely remained unknown, and those of them who were identified enjoy total immunity. Throughout this harrowing period, the football stands echoed provocative chants glorifying some leaders of terrorist groups that claimed to represent Islam. The supporters were unaware at the time that these “Emirs” were, in fact, infiltrators or agents planted by the political police. The fact would become clear to them only later¹⁰.

Against a backdrop of widespread unemployment, shortages of all kinds, and price hikes, upheavals erupted in 1988, reflecting the conditions endured by the working class of a society oppressed by the rule of the single party. These upheavals were violently repressed by the army and the political police in a horrific carnage that led to several hundred deaths, accompanied by atrocious human rights violations.

Since halting all matches was an impossible task during that period of violence in the 1990s, the authorities resorted to a strategy of exerting control and attempting to channel the outrage of passionate football fans. To achieve this, political police employed loyal individuals who were aligned with their political agenda to seize control of the Algerian Football Federation (AFF) and football clubs. The police also made efforts to establish communication channels with the fervent fanbase, known as the “tifosis”. However, infiltrating and manipulating these groups of supporters proved to be a complicated task. These grassroots, informal groups comprise young people from

9- Algeria-Watch, Salah- Eddine Sidhoum, *Algérie : La machine du mort*, Algeria-Watch, 15/07/2017.

10- Salima Mellah, *Le mouvement islamiste algérien entre autonomie et manipulation*, Comité Justice pour l'Algérie (Dossier N°19), Mai/2004.

neighborhoods who know each other very well. So despite all the police measures, officials who attended games in the stadiums every Friday had to endure the barrage of insults and curses shot at them by a furious, politically charged public.



Graffiti made by JS Kabylie fans.

In the early 2010s, in line with the privatization policy that resulted from the rescheduling agreements with the IMF in 1994 and 1995 and in the predatory business climate of the Bouteflika era, the authorities decided to professionalize football for the top football clubs in Algeria. Oligarchs became the heads of the clubs, and the political police relied on their proven corruption to absorb the head supporters and tune down the wrath of young fans. Despite the tremendous injection of capital into the game, this professionalization of clubs and the erratic management of the complicit “businessmen” have brought absolutely nothing in terms of the quality of national Algerian football and have not led to reducing the supporters’ anger.

Nevertheless, the decision-makers, anxious to divert attention from a furious public that has grown weary of the mediocrity and incompetence of the rulers, find in the unwavering support of large segments of the population for the national football team

an effective lever for improving the general climate of the country through tactics of distraction.

Thus, in November 2009, the regime did not hesitate to exploit the strong indignation of the public following the violence suffered by the Algerian national team in Cairo. The authorities of the two countries did absolutely nothing to calm the poisoned atmosphere¹¹. On the contrary, Egyptian and Algerian media vindictively escalated the hostility. The Algerian air fleets, civil and military, were mobilized, as per President Bouteflika's instructions, to transport thousands of angry supporters to Sudan, which hosted the away match. The victory achieved in that match was an ephemeral moment of communion between the people and the decision-makers. The successes of the "Fennecs" (desert foxes, as the players of the Algerian team are called) during the 2013/2019 period, which culminated in their coronation at the African Cup, were celebrated by the public in bursts of collective joy rarely seen since the country's independence.

The stages of irredentism

However, these rare moments of euphoria were short-lived, as the stadiums remained boiling cauldrons where the pent-up anger of the disadvantaged youth exploded unreservedly. This anger was not solely directed at the country's leaders. Known for their unwavering solidarity with Palestine, football supporters never hesitated to voice their discontent¹² and openly criticize those who have turned their backs on the Palestinian cause¹³.

These millions of football fans and "tifosis" do not align themselves with any particular opposition group but rather only express their love for their country. These irredentist and diligent young people believe that meaningful progress cannot be expected of a brutal and completely corrupt military-police dictatorship.

The popular demonstrations of the Algerian Hirak, which started on February 22, 2019 and quickly spread to cities across the nation, provided a platform for the protesters to showcase their remarkable creativity through slogans, songs, and banners. However,

11- Omar Benderra, *Algérie - Egypte : le match truqué des dictatures*, Algeria-Watch, 13/12/2009.

12- The chants were transmitted by USMA fans in 2018 (see the video link in the article on "Assafir Al-Arabi" website).

13- *Alger s'excuse auprès de Riyad pour une banderole dans un stade*, Middle East Eye (édition française), 20/12/2017.

what caught the attention of observers initially was a song titled “La Casa d’El Mouradia¹⁴”, chanted in unison by people of all classes and social segments.

This song, memorized by heart by many, drew inspiration from “La Casa de Papel”, a popular Spanish TV series. The chant was created by supporters of USMA, a widely popular football club based in the capital. The club’s “tifosis”, known for their inventive stadium performances, excel in combining mockery, sarcasm, and political protest.

In the early 2010s, in line with the privatization policy and in the predatory business climate of the Bouteflika era, the authorities decided to professionalize football for the top clubs in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic, exhaustion, and violent repression caused the street demonstrations to dwindle in the major cities, but the chants of football supporters in “Darja,” the language spoken by the capital’s residents but understood by all Algerians, continued to echo the despair of a politicized and intelligent youth who realize what is at stake and know that the full weight of the responsibility lies upon the ruling class.



Ultras culture has profoundly impacted the Hirak’s demonstrations and slogans.

14- عمر زليق، «سمفونية جزائرية غير مكتملة»، موقع «السفير العربي»، 07/01/2021.

These millions of football fans and “tifosis” do not align themselves with any particular opposition group but rather only express their love for their country. These irredentist and diligent young people believe that meaningful progress cannot emerge from a brutal and corrupt military-police dictatorship. Who can dispute the argument that this senile regime, resistant to any form of development, offers the youth nothing more than the catastrophic escape into drugs or illegal exile to Europe, where they face countless risks? It is obvious that the immoral, incompetent figures at the head of the regimes are responsible for the bleak future that awaits the youth.

Through football, their only open platform, Algerian youth relentlessly express their rejection of the injustice and contempt they are subjected to. This sport which has served as a vehicle for decolonial rebellion and the pursuit of freedom and dignity continues to act as an amplifier of the political demands of the Algerian people.





“You have accepted normalization, but they have not accepted you.” A banner by the Wydad Casablanca Ultras, Morocco.

Morocco’s Ultras: The People’s Friend and the Authorities’ Foe

Said Oulfakir

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Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

Ultra groups produce political and social discourses that are in line with the public’s pressing demands and concerns. In addition to the chants that condemn the regime, such as the famous “Fi Bladi Dalmouni” (“They have wronged me in my own country”), Ultras have consistently backed the demands of the regional movements that erupted in the forgotten peripheral areas of Morocco and defended the cause of the contract teachers. Ultra groups are organized in form and identity, but they are not institutionally structured, which makes them difficult to contain by the security and political authorities.

“March... March... March,” the Moroccan football crowds yelled out with gusto, their voices reverberating all over the stadium, in the hope that their national team would secure a winning streak of matches. Indeed, the Moroccan team made significant strides, culminating in its participation in the 2022 Doha World Cup, where the team brought pride not only to Moroccans but also to the peoples of our region and Africa, uniting them in a rare moment of emotional togetherness. Naturally, the Moroccan Ultras did not miss the opportunity to attend the matches and support their national team, proudly displaying their banners, tifos, and slogans, and celebrating with heartfelt chants.

However, beyond the euphoria of the World Cup, much was unfolding behind the scenes of Moroccan football, and a lot had changed about its historic patterns. These transformations were influenced by a series of events, decisions, and policies in which the ruling class played a prominent role, taking advantage of the sport for political or other undisclosed goals.

A historical glance

There are conflicting accounts regarding how Moroccans have historically engaged in football’s organized frameworks. One narrative suggests that Moroccans were introduced to the game in the mid-19th century by English sailors, who used to play the game to pass the time while waiting for their ships to be repaired in Moroccan ports. Another account argues that football had, in fact, arrived in Morocco through French soldiers and colonizers.

Several sources indicate that the year 1916 marked the first match between local teams in an organized Moroccan league. However, local media sources suggest that the first official match on Moroccan soil took place in 1913 in the village of Ain Taoujtat between the cities of Fez and Meknes in central Morocco.

On the other hand, the establishment of the very first Moroccan clubs dates back to 1937, when General Charles Noguès, the French Resident-General, approved the creation of the Wydad Casablanca Club for water polo, a project suggested by Mohamed and Abdellatif Benjelloun. As the French Protectorate years lapsed, this national club garnered immense popularity and enjoyed the wide support of Moroccans. Subsequently, several of Morocco’s greatest teams were also established, including Maghreb de Fès (1946), Kawkab Marrakech (1946), and Raja Casablanca (1949).

Founding these clubs became a weapon employed by the national resistance to combat colonialism and mobilize Moroccans through the discourse that pushed the idea that football was far more than a game played for fun; it served as a framework for bolstering national spirit. Victories of Moroccan teams over Europeans teams thus held symbolic significance as wins over colonialism itself, as was the case when the Wydad Casablanca, the largest Moroccan club with local players, won the 1948 championship title.



King Hassan II of Morocco with the players of the Royal Armed Forces Club (*AS FAR*).

In the post-colonial period, the late King Hassan II was influenced by the Spanish experience and General Franco's patronage of the Spanish sports teams to divert the population's attention from their pressing concerns. Sports, including football, were no longer solely the people's domain of action, but also became of great interest to the ruling authority. Therefore, the government sought to foster, support, and finance football as a means of upholding its own influence.

During 1986, the Moroccan national team reached its first historic milestone in football

by becoming the first Arab and African national team to qualify for the World Cup playoffs in Mexico. The red and green team faced some of football's best teams in the world, piquing the attention of many, including that of the late King Hassan II of Morocco, who began to view football as a means to rebrand Morocco. Through successful sporting achievements, the king aimed to present an image of a prosperous Morocco, despite the tough circumstances the country was facing at the time. Internally, Morocco was grappling with political conflicts such as military coup attempts, opposition from leftist forces, popular protests, violent repression, and widespread arrests and imprisonment, and regionally, the country was in the middle of the "sand war" with Algeria, all while corruption, autocracy, and various social and economic dilemmas remained rampant.

National resistance employed the newly founded teams to combat colonialism and mobilize Moroccans through the discourse that football was far more than a game. It served as a framework for strengthening national spirit. Victories of Moroccan teams over Europeans teams held symbolic significance as triumphs over colonialism itself.

The ruling class became increasingly interested in football. A football victory was seen as a triumph for the king who missed no opportunity to host footballers and take pictures with them in traditional coronation ceremonies.

The national resistance utilized the establishment of the Wydad Casablanca Club and others as a means to confront colonialism and mobilize the Moroccan population. Speeches were given emphasizing that football served a greater purpose than mere entertainment; it was a way to strengthen national unity and achieve moral victories over clubs from European-majority countries at the time. In 1948, Wydad won the championship, further solidifying its reigning position.

The king's special attention to football became a "focal point in the management of the sports sector, from which sprung all the major administrative decisions of sporting federations¹." The late King was keen on giving technical directives to Guy Cluseau, French coach of the Royal Armed Forces team, which was founded by the King himself. On August 26, 1962, and regarding a match between the Army Forces Club and Real Madrid within the Mohamed V Cup, King Hassan II wrote to Cluseau in French²:

1- «اليازغي: الحسن الثاني وظَّف كرة القدم لدعم مشروعية النظام»، موقع «اليوم 24»، 17/06/2018.

2- His exact words in French were: «Parfait, it's bon, on n'est pas ridicules, Mokhtatif is 1 (un) gros balourd, touchez de mettre Mustapha l'avant-centre....appliquer le jeu de soutien.»

“Perfect, that’s good, we’re not ridiculous. Mokhtatif is a big clumsy guy. Make sure to place Mustapha as the center attacking midfield... Apply the support play.”

Towards for-profit clubs

In recent years, the ruling authorities have refrained from interfering openly and directly in the management of some clubs, as had happened with the Royal Armed Forces Club during the 1960s. For many decades, football clubs have been run as sports associations, organized by internal regulations within an office that manages the club’s objectives, incomes, and expenses. This office also organizes the general assemblies, the highest administrative board in charge of electing and determining all cadres.

However, football clubs are no longer necessarily classified as sports associations, as new efforts emerged to transform them into sports companies based on the provisions of Law No. 30.09, which states that “a sports association can carry out the process of shareholding its assets and credits, in part or in whole, in a sports company.” This law applies to 16 professional league teams and 8 second division teams. Most of the clubs thus developed their institutional and financial models with the aim of transferring their ownership from associations to companies within the deadline of June 30, 2023.

During 1986, the Moroccan national team reached a historic milestone in football by becoming the first Arab and African national team to qualify for the World Cup playoffs in Mexico. The team faced some of football’s greatest teams in the world, piquing the attention of the late King Hassan II of Morocco, who began to view football as a means to rebrand Morocco.

Nevertheless, this law did not bring associations to an end. Rather, the process resembles a delegation of responsibilities, meaning the association entrusts the newly founded company with the managerial tasks. The law specifies that the association must hold a minimum of 30% of the company’s shares and possess at least 30% of the voting rights.

This transitional move was justified as a means for local football clubs to cross from the realm of amateur sports to that of professional sports, and to transform the sport into an economic market for investors who possess the power to “revitalize” it and pump in new resources for its development. Contrastingly, in the past few decades, football has relied almost completely on government and local support. Approximately

1.7 billion dirhams in public funding were granted by the Moroccan Football Federation to clubs in the first division or the Premier League during the 2018-2019 season. Moreover, television broadcasting is considered one of the main sources of income for football clubs, and Law 30-09 stipulates that “50% of these revenues are distributed in a cooperative manner.”

Football experts believe that the process of transforming clubs into companies will effectively eliminate the reliance on a single individual, such as a club’s president, for the club’s financial management. Many of the financial crises faced by these clubs is caused by the inadequate management of specific individuals or by “tying a club’s financial situation to that of one person.”

Moroccan football clubs, with their legal and financial structures, cannot survive in isolation from the non-institutionalized ultras groups. These fans are in many ways distinct from the “hooligan culture” associated with English football teams, whose actions do not reflect social or political stances.

However, it seems that this transition was rendered a formality after it failed to adhere to the required conditions. Three years after the law was issued, investors are still reluctant to spend their money on local football teams. Distributing the profits of television broadcasting also posed a problem, as the Royal Moroccan Football Federation is responsible to the allocation of funds to clubs according to merit, which the federation has failed to do. Broadcasting revenues are practically still completely distributed in a cooperative manner. Consequently, “it is a bad deal for investors to invest in a major club, because a club that attracts millions of views will benefit from the same broadcasting revenues as small clubs supported by only a few dozens or hundreds of people³.”

Not “hooligans”...

Moroccan football clubs, with all their legal and financial structures, cannot survive in isolation from the non-institutionalized groups of Ultras, who provide the teams with vital moral support during matches. However, these groups are often “exploited by the clubs’ managements as pawns in internal disputes⁴.” This triggers violent clashes among fans in the stands, accompanied by vandalizing public and private property and

3- مهدي حبشي، «لماذا يمتنع رجال الأعمال عن الاستثمار في الأندية العربية؟»، منصة «إقتصاد. كوم»، 06/12/2021.

4- محمد مالك الزواوي، «المتطرفون أخلاقياً»، موقع «الجزيرة نت»، 02/05/2017.

physical violence that may lead to serious injuries or even death.

It is very important to note that not all Ultras groups fit the negative stereotype perpetuated by the local media. Some football experts argue that these ultra-fans are not hooligans, and they are not entirely comprised of students, unemployed youth, or wage laborers. In fact, these fans are in many ways distinct from the “hooligan culture” associated with English football teams, whose actions do not reflect social or political objections. In fact, some Ultras organizations engage in activities beyond football, such as charitable action in underprivileged and remote villages and participating in blood donation campaigns.



One of the Ultras' tifos.

Currently, there are numerous Ultras groups in Morocco. Their establishment dates back to 2005. Among the most notable groups are the ASFAR Ultras who support the Royal Armed Forces, the Ultras Green Boys who support Raja Casablanca, and the Ultras Winners who support Wydad Casablanca.

Ultras fans are estimated at one million persons. They are organized into small working groups called “Top Toys”. Each of them is assigned a specific task, such as designing

and choreographing creative banners known as tifos, managing the cheers and chants in the stands, overseeing the group's funding sources, and organizing excursions to attend their teams' matches in various regions.

Ultras groups often reject financial support from external entities. Their income comes from member contributions and merch sales. Ultra fans are given membership cards (although the procedure is not official and is neither recognized by the authorities nor regulated by legislation), which guarantee additional financial incomes through a subscription fee determined by each group.

Ultra groups do not comply with set laws and regulations. Although these entities may structurally resemble a disarrayed pile of stones, their members are closely knit and coherent. They dedicate their time, support, and unconditional loyalty to their clubs.

Ultras adhere to four key principles to determine whether a group of football supporters qualifies as an ultras group.

1. Irrespective of the outcome, Ultras must continue to chant and cheer for their team during matches. Their chants must be loud and powerful, often accompanied by symbols and gestures aimed at intimidating opponents and retorting insults. A designated leader, known as the "Capo", is responsible for determining slogans, chants, songs, and their timings, and organizing visual displays such as coordinated hand movements and tifos. The Capo positions himself the higher stands where he can be seen and heard by the rest of the ultras.
2. Ultra fans must not sit during matches; they are in the stands to cheer and support with unmatched enthusiasm, not to sit back and watch like a regular spectator.
3. They must prove an unwavering commitment to attending all matches, both home and away, regardless of the expenses and distances involved. Ultras employ mobilization tactics to travel to matches outside their club's city in affordable transportation. They also organize processions, known as "cortèges," where members march together before their team's matches. This display is meant to show the media the club's strength, popularity, and the passionate dedication of the fan base that is ready to stand by their team anywhere and at any cost.
4. Loyalty to their zones in the stands. The Ultras choose their seats away from the

regular football supporters. They usually pick the cheapest seats in the third zone, dubbed the “Curva”, an Italian word that means the curve. The zone becomes home for all their acts of support, where they raise their logo which displays their name and symbolizes their “honor”.

Ultra groups do not comply with set laws and regulations. These non-institutionalized entities may structurally resemble a disarrayed pile of stones, yet their members are closely knit and coherent. They dedicate their time, support, and unconditional loyalty to their clubs, providing their players with a dynamic and interactive environment where they can freely and unhesitantly take initiative and make progress. This system fuels the enthusiasm of young members, strengthening their capacity to seamlessly assimilate in the Ultras community. Here, individualism is nonexistent, and the key principles are self-denial, community, and loyalty.

Ultra groups are organized in form and identity, but they refuse institutional structures, which makes them difficult to contain by the security and political authorities. These authorities have made numerous attempts to restrict Ultras’ activities through legislation (Law 09-09 on combating stadium riots) and physical violence, sometimes with the help of law and other times through a policy of “carrot and stick”. However, all of these efforts proved futile. It was only in recent years, when the Ultras were banned from entering the stadiums, that the authorities realized the irreplaceable influence and significance of the Ultras presence in the now empty, lifeless stands.

Chants: more than cheers

Ultras movements continually seek ways to resist the undeclared war the authorities have waged against them. One of those ways is chants. The song “Fi Bladi Dalmouni” (They have wronged me in my own country), which was chanted by the Ultras Eagles in support of Raja Casablanca in 2017, shot Moroccan Ultras to fame. The song became the hottest topic of discussion in the country because it touched on the authorities’ attempts to control and subjugate the activities of Ultras under the pretext of fighting riots, or the activities which the Ultras refer to as “zero fear”.

This chant describes the security and political authorities in the country as unjust, while portraying the ultras and football supporters as the oppressed. Speaking in the second person plural, the song addresses all those in positions of authority on behalf of all those people who live in miserable conditions in their country, highlighting their

hardships through a lexicon of oppression, injustice, and deprivation⁵.

The chants and songs of the Ultras address an unnamed “other”, often the referring to political or security authorities who unleash symbolic and material violence against an oppressed population. This sentiment is conveyed in lyrics such as: “*You didn’t want us to receive an education, you didn’t want us to work, and you didn’t want us to be aware of what’s going on... You drugged us with Valium and abandoned us... We were orphaned in our own country.*”



Graffiti by Moroccan Ultras.

The songs and chants of the Ultras⁶ are rife with meanings of resilience (“We shall not give up”) and feelings of oppression (“Who will heed our grievances?”; “We are the oppressed⁷”). Other lyrics demonstrate a challenging political stance that opposes the security and political authorities (“We are here to stand in the face of the government”; “I refuse to do compulsory military service⁸”)...

5- حسن الطويل، «الخطاب الاحتجاجي في أغاني الألتراس... قراءة بلاغية»، مجلة «ضاد»، 08/12/2022.

6- سعيد بنيس، «تمثلات الخطاب الاحتجاجي للألتراس في المغرب وتأثيراته السياسية»، موقع «مركز الجزيرة للدراسات»، 04/07/2019.

7- Lyrics from a song performed by the Ultras Dos Kallas for the Difaa Hassani El-Jadidi team, a Moroccan football club in the city of El-Jadida in West Morocco.

8- Lyrics of the song “Fi Bladi Dalmouni”.

The language of protest intensifies in the song “Voice of the People” performed by the Ultras Winners: *“The freedom which we have always desired, my Lord... Freedom soothes my aching heart!”* The word freedom becomes a recurring mantra in the song. It is the ultimate, unattainable demand, one which the authorities hinder with their laws and oppressive practices that view the Ultras as *“ignorant adolescents”*, while pushing them to remain *“slaves to the status quo”*, according to the song.

Allies of the oppressed

Ultra groups produce political and social discourses that are in line with the public’s pressing demands and concerns. They have repeatedly supported the demands of the regional movements that erupted in the forgotten peripheral areas of Morocco and defended the cause of the contract teachers. In response to the violent oppression of the teachers’ protests in the street, Ultras Red Men, supporters of AS Meknassi, have carried a banner that read “A country that offends its teachers cannot progress.”

“Fi Bladi Dalmouni” is a song that describes the authorities as unjust, while portraying the Ultras and football supporters as the oppressed. Speaking in second person plural, the song addresses all those in positions of authority on behalf of all those people who live in misery in their country.

Ultras Red Men have also released a statement expressing their support for the teachers who were demanding secure jobs in public schools. “In this era of freedom, renaissance, and human rights, teachers are subjected to police brutality, despite their difficult circumstances, and in violation of their right to protest. They are met with violence, including physical assault and harassment of both men and women,” the statement said.

The solidarity of the Ultras extends to other nations that hold a special emotional significance in Moroccans’ collective consciousness, including the Palestinian cause. The Ultras Los Matadores have raised tifos and arranged solidarity vigils in one of the squares of Tetouan in support of Palestine, as did the Ultras Winners.

The solidarity of the Moroccan Ultras extends beyond national boundaries, to other nations that hold a special emotional significance within the local collective

consciousness, including the Palestinian cause. The Ultras Los Matadores, known for supporting Moghreb Tetouan (a team from Northern Morocco), have raised tifos and arranged solidarity vigils in one of the squares of Tetouan in support of Palestine.

Along the same lines, the Ultras Winners wasted no time in responding to the United States' declaration recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The Winners released a statement asserting that, irrespective of any international declarations and desires, "Jerusalem remains the capital of Palestine. Their statement proclaimed, "Palestine is the greatest of our causes and the ultimate victory we eagerly await." Their banner in the stands sent a strong message to the political parties that agreed to the normalization of relations with Israel in late 2020, stating, "You have accepted normalization, but they have not accepted you."

In conclusion

The Ultras were born out of a desire to rebel against political and security authorities, their policies, discourses, and the material and symbolic capitals they possess. The Ultras perceive the authorities as adversaries, in contrast to their relationship with the general population, who consider the Ultras as allies in their fight for justice and demanding solutions for their complex and lingering issues. Consequently, these non-institutional groups have emerged as alternatives to intermediary institutions like political parties and unions. Through their chants, songs, and unwavering solidarity, the Ultras do not shy away from making their voices heard, offering support whenever and wherever they can, be it on public buses, stadium stands, or protest squares everywhere across the nation.



Sudan



“No to whitewashing murderers at the club’s expense.” A banner at the entrance of Al-Merrikh Club.

Sudanese Football and the Intrusion of Politics

Khaled Fathi

A journalist from Sudan

Translated by **Yasmine Haj**

The regime’s attempts to control the sports sector have all proven futile. Many Sudanese sports enthusiasts, especially football players and supporters, have demonstrated their readiness to put up a fierce fight against those attempts. They have expressed great sympathy with those martyred during the popular protests, as they were brutally suppressed by the regime. These football supporters were notably present during the sit-in in front of the General Command of the Sudanese Armed Forces in Khartoum in 2019.

It was love at first sight for the Sudanese - the moment they first beheld a football being kicked around with agility and skill by the British invaders across the broad fields of the British encampments in Khartoum. The invading British army had accomplished its mission to “reconquer Sudan”, a campaign led by Major General Lord Kitchener Pasha in 1899, the first British Governor-General of Sudan. Football, however, managed to temper the storm of fire and blood, as the rumbling Maxim cannons quieted down, with horrific consequences in the aftermath of the invaders’ massacres against the Mahdists¹ (supporters of Imam Mahdi in Sudan and their own independent state, especially the Omdurman battle in September 1898). Since then, football has taken the throne of sports in Sudan, capturing the hearts and minds of fans, who were so elated to the point of removing their turbans and setting them ablaze in excitement. This piqued the interest and attention of rulers and politicians, who then focused on football and tried to control it in every possible way - be it during the colonial period or under the rule of the Sudanese nation state, under both military and democratic regimes. The authorities turned to tactics of the “carrot-and-stick” to enforce their control, often resorting to retaliation when things didn’t go their way or whenever their attempts to tame the sport failed.

April 24, 1976 marked a tragic day in Sudan’s football history, as former Sudanese president Jaafar Nimeiry decided to pronounce football as a purely grassroots, non-professional sport, effectively dissolving all sports clubs and unions. The pretexts of this decision were some commonplace riots that broke out during a match between Al-Hilal and Al-Merrikh clubs, who were competing for the Health Revolution Cup. At the time, the Sudanese team was one of the most prominent in Africa, having won the Africa Cup of Nations in 1970 and almost qualifying for the World Cup in 1974.

Various attempts to advance Sudanese football have occasionally managed to yield positive outcomes, like when Al-Merrikh Club won the Africa Cup of Nations in 1989 and Al-Hilal Club reached the finals during the African Clubs Champions League in 2008, ending a 32-year absence from the cup. During the two African Championships of 2012 and 2022, the Sudanese team recurrently stood out, though such efforts remained sporadic and insufficient for building an organized athletic system that adheres to globally recognized standards.

1- As documented by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in his memoirs, *The River War*, as he accompanied the invading army to Sudan as a war correspondent.

Historic background

As things calmed down in Sudan, the colonial powers embarked on engineering the country's social fabric. They introduced regulations into Saraya al-Hakimdar, now the Republican Palace, while the first Governor-General Lord Kitchener, armed with the vanity of "an empire where the sun never sets", urban-planned Khartoum's streets in a way that matched the stripes of the British flag and instructed the construction of new buildings in Victorian style. The eastern and western squares of Gordon College, currently known as the University of Khartoum, built in 1902, were designated as football playing fields. Football found its way into residential neighbourhoods in Khartoum, and especially into the Burri suburb, through the military encampments and the Gordon Memorial College, adjacent to the British army barracks.

The Burri Sports Club was founded in 1918. Omar Ali Hasab El-Rasoul, nicknamed Hasabu el-Saghir, was considered the team's star; a top goal scorer in the history of Sudanese football. Hasabu el-Saghir scored the goal that won Sudan its only African Championship, against the Ghanaian team in the African Cup of Nations final, which was held in Sudan in 1970.

In the early 1900s, the clubs were encouraged, in the spirit of patriotism, to expand their organization of sports tournaments to support local activities. Education, which used to be exclusive to the ruling class and its entourage, became accessible through initiatives to build local schools, providing every Sudanese with an opportunity to receive an education. Sports clubs took sole responsibility over these initiatives, as political parties had yet to emerge.

From Khartoum, football crossed the river to Omdurman and into Wad Madani in central Sudan, which became the first city to welcome football beyond Khartoum, then into Atbara in the north of Sudan, an industrial city dubbed the capital of iron and fire. In other versions, it is said that the ball was kicked in Atbara's pitches long before Khartoum's, as the English army first landed there on its way to Khartoum to fight the Mahdists. Football then reached the east, around Port Sudan, the first Red Sea port. Later, following the arrival of British colonizers and the construction of railways, football spread into cities all over the country.

The Shurab Ball (a makeshift sock-football, made of socks stuffed with rags) was Sudan's favourite game until 1910, and teams were created in the capital's residential

neighbourhoods. The game has since intermixed with politics. Having sensed the power football holds and its impact on people, the British banned sports in 1924 in the wake of the White Flag League revolution² and the assassination of the Egyptian army's Commander-in-Chief and Sudan's Governor-General, Sir Lee Stack, in Cairo. The ban included all sports in clubs and residential areas, and even included gatherings for weddings and funerals. Restrictions were gradually lifted, until their complete removal two years later, where, in 1926, sports clubs were allowed official registration. While security reasons were behind the decision to officialise sports clubs, (to pave the way for curbing political activity through sports), the Sudanese rushed to register their clubs, which bore various Arabic and English names. The most famous of those was the Stack Club, the first champion of Khartoum's domestic league (1951), which changed its name into Tahrir Club (Arabic for "liberation"), following Sudan's independence. In 1927, Al-Mourada Sports Club, the biggest of Sudanese sports clubs, was founded by Sudanese generals, and their team's shirts proudly bore the military academy's emblem.

As the Gordon Memorial College and the Sudanese Military College alumni found their way into sports club management councils, they rendered them into revolutionary incubators. Clubs were encouraged, in the spirit of patriotism, to expand their organization of sports tournaments and competitions to support for local civil activities. One such example is education, which used to be exclusive to the ruling class and its entourage. The Sudanese then took initiatives to build local schools - providing every Sudanese with an opportunity to learn to read and write. Notably, sports clubs took sole responsibility over these initiatives, as political parties had yet to emerge.

However, the British became wary of any moves carried out by the Sudanese. In 1936, for instance, the British authorities announced the formation of the Sudan Football Association, which was an astounding turning point; and yet, with it, they also aimed to block any attempt to form a national trade union to organise competitions. This happened once the British authorities learned that the Tithkar Club had called in the three clubs of the capital (Khartoum, Khartoum-Bahri, and Omdurman clubs) to form a confederate or a local association to organize sports tournaments in Khartoum. The initiative was initially supposed to be launched in 1933, but the Sudan Football Association had to wait for 19 years for the team (then known as Sudan's Al-Ahli Team)

2- The 1924, revolutionary events were concentrated in cities and led by public employees, laborers, and soldiers. The revolution called for the end of colonialism and unity across the Nile valley, and it coordinated with the Egyptian Liberation Movement.

to play its first game against Ethiopia in 1955. Dr Abdel Halim Muhammad headed the Sudan Football Association, and later became a member of the Sudanese Sovereignty Council (the presidential council) in 1956. The Sudan Football Association is considered the third co-founder of the African Football Association, established in 1957, alongside Egypt and Ethiopia.

The two poles of Sudanese football

Al-Merrikh and Al-Hilal Clubs were respectively founded in 1927 and 1930. The duo receives the biggest share of attention in the country, much like Real Madrid and Barcelona in Spain, or Al-Ahli and Zamalek in Egypt. The loyalty and passion of football fans have been divided between the two iconic teams, which also share the ancient Al-Arda neighbourhood in Omdurman. Al-Hilal stadium is located in the northern part of Al-Arda and is known as the Blue Jewel, while Al-Merrikh stadium is located in the southern part of Al-Arda and is known as the Red Castle. The two sworn opponents enjoy vast financial resources and large fan bases that pledge allegiance to their respective clubs.

Fans support their clubs individually or through collectives (by affiliation with fan associations across the country and abroad), which eventually developed into the Ultras Blue Lions, supporters of Al-Hilal club, and the Ultras Olympus Mons, supporters of Al-Merrikh club.

Al-Hilal's Ultras have great influence over the playing fields and have produced a unique culture of fandom that fights injustice wherever it arises. Florent, Al-Hilal's Congolese coach, acknowledged that the Ultras "stand with us in the toughest of moments", a sentiment echoed by Al-Hilal's Malawian player, Gérald Ferry. Sudanese fans are known for their nonviolent approach, though tensions may escalate in the stands between Al-Hilal and Al-Merrikh supporters, sometimes turning into riots, violence, and throwing stones and empty bottles at players.

During the past two decades, and as the costs of running sports clubs surged, extremely wealthy businessmen, often suspected of corruption, have taken over the management of popular sports clubs - perhaps in emulation of major European clubs...

Al-Hilal fans pride themselves on being the club of the Sudanese National Movement, although it was the first generation of college alumni who were actually the founding

fathers of all Sudanese sports clubs. Al-Hilal is considered the first club in the Arab region to bear that name. Managements of sports clubs at the time comprised a mix of army officers, policemen, senior civil officials, diplomats, intellectuals, and middle-class merchants. In the 1980s, for instance, Al-Merrikh team was headed by the governor of the Central Bank of Sudan, Mahdi al-Faki, while the administrative officer, Tayeb Abdallah, became one of the most famous presidents of Al-Hilal club.

Now what?

During the last two decades, extremely rich businessmen, suspected to be corrupt, have taken over the management of sports clubs, especially of popular clubs, as management costs increased, perhaps in emulation of major European clubs. Al-Hilal was run by Salah Idris, Ashraf Sayid Ahmad (nicknamed “the Cardinal”), and, finally, Hesham Hassan al-Subat, suspected to be involved in corruption cases and the importation of non-conforming petrol ships.

Ultras groups are unbiased and have consistently distanced themselves from ethnic and regional conflicts. In fact, sports clubs have served as thresholds on which all racist and classist tendencies are discarded.

Similarly, several Al-Merrikh presidents have been businessmen suspected of financial corruption, such as Jamal al-Wali, whose funds and estates received a confiscation order in 2019 from the Committee for the Dismantling of the June 30 Regime (a post-December 2018 governmental liquidation committee). The Supreme Court, however, overruled the committee’s decision following the military coup of the October 25, 2021. Another Al-Merrikh president, Adam Abdullah (Sudakal), was sentenced to several years in prison in 2005 on charges of fraud and money laundering.

It was through this corrupt class that the National Congress Party, led by Al-Bashir, decided to infiltrate the sports sector. Attempts to take over football weren’t exclusive to the headquarters of the two major teams, al-Hilal and Al-Merrikh. Other cities were targeted as well by introducing protégés and generously supporting clubs to win the internal elections, which is what Ahmad Haroun, the North Kordofan governor, did with Al-Hilal Club.

Notably, Haroun has been charged by the International Court of Justice in The Hague for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur in 2003. After four

years behind bars, he fled prison, along with the Sudanese Islamist Movement leaders, as war broke out between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces on April 15, 2023.

The security and intelligence systems have also taken over Al-Khartoum 3 Club, renamed Al-Khartoum National Club, before it reclaimed its initial name after the fall of Al-Bashir's regime.

Attempts to co-opt the sports sector have all been in vain, however, and many Sudanese sports enthusiasts, especially football players and stars, have demonstrated their readiness to resist the regime. They have also expressed great sympathy with the martyrs of the popular protests, who were brutally suppressed by the regime. These passionate football supporters were notably present during the sit-in in front of the General Command of the Sudanese Armed Forces in Khartoum in 2019.

The fire of the revolution raged following the military coup of October 25, 2021. Every Sudanese citizen remembers that iconic scene of footballers taking a knee on the pitch before the commencement of the match between Sudan and Egypt during the African Cup of Nations in Cameroon in 2022. As they lined up for a group photograph before the match, the players raised their palms to read the Fatiha for the souls of innocent victims who were killed during the anti-coup popular protests.

As politicians, soldiers, and looters corrupted every corner of Sudan, many in the sports sector adopted an "injustice discourse", feeling that those being toppled were also taking the money away with them, while they unabashedly sought to steal the dreams of the people. Fury intensified as the Sudan Football Association became a "mirror that reflected the country's illnesses: dictatorship, classism, regionalism, and corruption,"³ among others.

Perhaps one could mention here the chants recited against Al-Merrikh's fans, "gatekeepers, gatekeepers, gatekeepers" after the Nimeiry regime was toppled in April 1985, hinting at the Nimeiry's bias to Al-Merrikh club. Whether the accusation is true or not, Nimeiry has indeed shown great interest and passion for football throughout his rule, which lasted nearly 16 years.

3- In the words of Mohamed Rami Abdelmoula in his article "In Tunisia: Power and the Public Contend over the Football Field", *Assafir Al-Arabi*.

December's revolution: sports in the spotlight

On December 23, 2018, as the revolution against Al-Bashir's regime broke out, Al-Hilal Ultras, known as the Blue Lions, came into the spotlight. In that historic moment, Ultras Blue Lions announced a sports' revolution, capitalising on a match between Al-Hilal Club and the Tunisian African Club, who were competing for the African Cup.

All at once, voices chanting "the people want to topple the regime" reverberated around the Omdurman stadium and across the nearby neighbourhoods. In an unforgettable scene, football fans stormed the streets in mass protests just as the referee blew the final whistle, amid Al-Bashir regime's brutal oppression.

The part that Al-Merrikh's Ultras played in the revolution was just as significant. They turned their club's stadium into an erupting volcano on February 16, 2019, during their team's match against the Algerian Oran Mouloudia Club. Voices ripped through the quiet night with chants of revolution and change across Omdurman yet again. On Sunday, March 3, 2019, during the match between the Sudanese Al-Hilal and the Zambian ZESCO for the African Confederation Cup, the Ultras Blue Lions attended the match in black t-shirts, in mourning for the martyrs of Sudan.

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The Sudanese national team's and Merrikh Club star, Seifeldin Teiri, also came into the spotlight during that period for his participation in numerous marches and clashed with the brutal security forces. After Al-Bashir regime was toppled, Teiri was charged with arson at a police centre, liberating detained people, and burning cars, and was arrested in June 2019. This development alarmed the FIFA, which inquired after his legal and health conditions in prison. He was released on bail at the end of July, while the judiciary has yet to issue a final verdict in his case. In the meantime, Teiri plays as a professional footballer in the Egyptian league with Pharco Club.

Thirty years into Al-Bashir's rule, these incidents proved that a barrier of fear had been shattered, inspiring Ultras and supporters to show bravery and courage in the face of security forces and police brutality.



A poster by Al-Hilal Club's supporters calling for a "Blue Revolution" from the stadium.

The pandemic and the devil's lure

As the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, sports came to a complete halt in Sudan. Al-Hilal's Ultras thus channelled their efforts into various other domains. For example, they posted letters on the walls of the Ministry of Health and the Khalifa Courtyard. One of these letters addressed the doctors of the nation: "Our white army, we know what you're going through. We're with you and we shall overcome". A second letter was addressed to Italy, the cradle of ultras around the world, which was suffering the full blow of the pandemic: "From Sudan to Italy, the cradle of Ultras, we pray for you."

In 2022, in line with other social campaigns, Ultras Blue Lions organized a futsal

championship that bore the slogan “For a drug-free Sudan,” with the aim of fighting drug addiction in Sudan’s league, after a rise in drug use was registered among younger age groups, with the most commonly abused substance being the infamously fatal ice crystal, known as the Devil’s Lure. Similarly, the group organized fun activities in the Al-Hilal stadium for children with cancer (for the association “We’re all valued - We’re hopeful”), with the participation of Al-Hilal player, Abu Akleh Abdullah. Incidentally, Sudan is considered one of the countries with record levels of cancer cases.

Ultras and neighbourhood committees

Nasser Abou Baker, a Sudanese journalist who specializes in sports, says that the Ultras in Sudan are bound by the Ultras’ global principles; they therefore make no media appearances. Nevertheless, their solid self-organization, cohesion, songs, and chants, have all factored in tightening the fabric of “neighbourhood committees” and “resistance committees”. They have seamlessly merged with those revolutionary committees, seeking no credit for themselves.

As the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, sports came to a complete halt in Sudan. Al-Hilal’s ultras channelled their efforts to other domains, posting letters on the walls of the Ministry of Health and the Khalifa Courtyard, addressing the doctors of the nation: “Our white army, we shall overcome”. A second letter was addressed to Italy which was suffering the full blow of the pandemic: “From Sudan to Italy, the cradle of ultras, we pray for you.”

Ultras groups are unbiased and have consistently distanced themselves from ethnic and regional conflicts. In fact, sports clubs have served as a threshold on which all racist and classist tendencies are discarded. Sudanese poet, Dr Omar Mahmoud Khaled, describes it in the following verses as such:

*We, in Al-Merrikh, are the closest of kin
The star is our one love and passion
And our differences in opinion
Only make us stronger, in thick and thin*

Residents of Sudan’s capital, Khartoum, formed ultras groups within the city. They flocked to Khartoum from all over the country, driven by geopolitical, economic, and

climate reasons, where their numbers grew exponentially, skyrocketing from nearly half a million in the 1980s, to almost ten million people in recent years. Consequently, the Ultras also saw a significant boom in number. Supporters' associations are currently equally spread throughout the country and abroad.

Ultras are highly committed to showing support for their clubs and maintaining complete independence from management councils, which distinguishes them from other popular fan clubs. In their desire to control fan clubs, management clubs have become increasingly concerned about the influence of the Ultras, particularly because of the Ultras' courage in expressing strong opinions about the ins and outs of their respective clubs.

In an attempt to curb political chants and songs, some countries have banned open tournaments or restricted public entry into stadiums under the pretext of security. This was also the case in Sudan, where tournaments were held without spectators once the revolution against Al-Bashir's regime began. Ultras groups were also subjected to harassment with the tacit approval of club managements, as the latter are affiliated with the ruling regime and prioritized safeguarding their own interests. For instance, in November 2019, Al-Hilal's president, known as "the Cardinal", prevented the club's Ultras from entering the club's stadium, leading to fierce opposition against his leadership. The Ultras issued a furious manifesto, vowing to spare no effort in "driving away any intruders, parasites, or corruption from Al-Hilal's pure entity". They affirmed that "Victory means liberating ourselves from the pockets of corrupt capitalism, which pays a few tainted pennies in exchange for massive propaganda and a few victories, disregarding the club's dignity, which has been completely abandoned in these dark times. This system forsakes the values, heritage, and noble principles upon which Al-Hilal Club was founded. We solemnly swear to safeguard our club using every possible means, even with our own lives, if need be..."

The fire of the revolution raged following the military coup of 2021. Every Sudanese citizen recalls that iconic scene of footballers taking a knee before the match between Sudan and Egypt during the African Cup of Nations in 2022. As they lined up for a group photograph, the players raised their palms to read the Fatiha for the souls of innocent victims who were killed during the anti-coup protests.

Likewise, Al-Merrikh's Ultras have stood firmly against the Rapid Support Forces'

leader, Mohammed Hamdan's (Hemedti) intervention to carry out maintenance work at Al-Merrikh's stadium. The Ultras said that they owed this stance to their martyrs Qussai, Abdul Azim, and Mohammed Majzoub, who were shot during the events of the December 2018 revolution. A banner they hung at the club's entrance on March 27, 2022 read: "No to whitewashing murderers at the club's expense".

In 2022, in line with other social campaigns, Ultras Blue Lions organized a futsal championship under the slogan "For a drug-free Sudan," with the aim of fighting drug addiction in Sudan's league after a rise in drug use was registered among younger age groups.

In the meantime, it appears that the ambitions of the wicked coalition of power, capital, and weaponry to exert control over sports and their supporters have been faltering, thanks to the most confrontational generation of supporters in the history of Sudanese football. The songs and chants they passionately deliver demand justice and retribution for the unarmed civilians and nonviolent protesters who had been brutally massacred. The most famous of those chants proclaimed: "*Blood must be avenged with blood. We will not accept blood money!*"

Women's Football...



In Our Region



From a match between the Palestinian and Saudi Arabian women's football teams.

Women on the Pitch: Football against All Societal Odds

Aicha Belhaj

Journalist and Researcher in Human Rights, from Morocco

Translated by **Sabah Jalloul**

Women players and sports officials have unanimously emphasized the importance of rebuilding clubs to achieve robust levels of play across various teams. They have highlighted the need for a professional women's tournament that provides the same conditions as men's tournaments and have called for establishing football schools specifically for girls and young women, with fair minimum wages and social and health insurance coverage to ensure the players' financial and mental well-being.

The road women have travelled to secure their place in various fields of life has been far from easy. Knowing this, we hold our breaths as we eagerly await their entrance into domains demanding extraordinary physical and mental efforts, with the recognition that this also entails navigating the complexities of their social environments, particularly in the realm of professional sports.

The few successful cases that emerged in individual women's sports, such as athletics, were kinds of small miracles achieved by women who had taken the road less travelled. Conversely, it was more difficult for women to engage or excel in team sports that require comprehensive systems and institutions. Nevertheless, we have already witnessed relatively early successes in some Arab women's teams, particularly in handball and basketball, while football has remained a largely male-dominated sport. Even on the stands and among supporters, the presence of women has been a rarity. This situation varies, of course, from one community to another, as women in North Africa, for example, have established a place in sports decades before their counterparts in the Arab Gulf countries.



Bahraini women's national team under 17 years old.

With the rising prominence of women football players worldwide, particularly in the recent Women's World Cup in 2019, there has been a growing interest in women's football and its unique charm. Women footballers' interactions, their interventions -

both gentle and violent - and their skills, all possess a distinct rhythm compared to those of their male counterparts, which adds a new dimension to the game.

The qualification of the Moroccan women's national football team for the Women's World Cup 2023 (hosted by Australia and New Zealand) has rekindled a distant dream in the hearts of many girls who have a passion for sports. While the Arab region has gradually embraced the presence of women in stadiums, women's football matches have always drawn a meager attendance, often consisting only of players' families and a few interested individuals. However, when Morocco hosted the Women's Africa Cup of Nations, the matches witnessed a tremendous turnout, where the spectators were introduced to an entirely new world of football. This might suggest a shift in the attitudes of football audiences, especially male audiences who comprise the primary football spectatorship, towards women's football.

1000 Girls, 1000 Dreams

In 2017, Egypt's Ministry of Youth and Sports launched the "1000 Girls, 1000 Dreams" program to introduce girls from Upper Egypt to football. The title of the initiative is perhaps an apt slogan for a sport that still represents a far-fetched dream for most girls in the region, where women footballers remain scarce.

A rough mapping of women's presence in football in Arab countries shows some discrepancies in numbers; however, these numbers remain generally small, with a few hundreds in Gulf countries, a few thousands in countries like Jordan and Lebanon, and tens of thousands in the unique case of Egypt.

At the top of the list are North African Arab countries, namely Morocco, Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia, while Jordan has the most women footballers among countries of the Arab East, followed by Palestine and Lebanon. Some Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Emirates have recently introduced the game, funneling hefty funds for its development.

The FIFA's decision in 2014 to allow women players to wear the hijab during official matches led to the participation of a greater number of young women in football clubs, and to the game's wider reach among women in Arab and Muslim communities. Several well-known female players have recounted stories of their beginnings in football as an activity they had learned from their brothers, who had encouraged, or at least accepted,

their engagement in sports. This made it easier for a number of them to enter schools' football teams, in the absence of alternative girls' football clubs.

Women's football in North Africa

According to various sources¹, women's football emerged in Morocco in the early 1980s. In Casablanca, girls participated in the amateur teams that were formed through individual or group initiatives in their neighborhoods. Nadia Mekdi, a former footballer and captain of the Moroccan women's national football team, states, "Each region had its own women's team, and we competed against each other in local tournaments." She adds, "1997 brought some good news for female football players as they could join the Moroccan national football team and compete on an international level²."

The FIFA's decision in 2014 to allow women players to wear the hijab during official matches led to the participation of a greater number of young women in football clubs, and to the game's wider reach among women in Arab and Muslim communities.

Sports champion Nawal al-Moutawakel suggested the idea of establishing a Moroccan women's national football team. In the following year, 1998, and before the commencement of the Africa Cup of Nations in Nigeria, the women's national championship was launched for the first time in Morocco, with regional leagues, such as the "Northern League³" which encompasses a larger area, as opposed to playing in small, local tournaments held in cities. This regional division persisted for nine years, until the 2007/2008 season, in which the women's national championship was organized based on a system that divided the northern and southern parts of the country. This division was cancelled in 2019, and one national championship for the entire country was adopted.

In the initial phase, there were no equipped playgrounds and facilities for women's football and the only available fields were dirt playgrounds. Players were not paid or financially supported, as they played without any contracts. Nadia Mekdi says that in 1998, women players received 100 dirhams, the equivalent of 10 euros only, as compensation from the teams they played for. Years later, the average wage was 500

1- عائشة بلحاج، «كرة القدم... للنساء أيضاً»، موقع «السفير العربي»، 25/04/2023.

2- سليمان بكباش، «المغرب: حان موعد إعطاء كرة القدم النسوية حقها من الاهتمام»، موقع «تاجة سبور»، 06/03/2021.

3- *Ibid.*

dirhams, around 50 euros, for first division players. Nadia, who had been qualified twice for the finals of the Africa Cup of Nations in the late 1990s, mentions that she and her teammates received a grant of 800 dirhams, around 80 euros only, when they qualified to the finals, while their male counterparts received tens or hundreds of thousands of dirhams. The average wages of male players in the national tournament is 5000 dirhams, ten times the wages of female players. After the men's team qualified for World Cup semi-finals in 2022, each player received a staggering reward of one million and four hundred thousand USD.

The greatest achievement of the Moroccan women's national team, known as the Atlas Lionesses, was its recent qualification for the 2023 World Cup finals. They achieved this milestone after reaching the semi-finals of the Women's Africa Cup of Nations. Prior to that, their most notable accomplishment was reaching the final of the Arab Women's Cup in 2006, which they lost to Algeria. Furthermore, the girls' school football team secured the African School Championship title in 2022. This continental championship is the first of its kind, and Morocco was the sole Arab country to qualify for it.

In Egypt, women's football emerged in the late 1990s. Women's football tournaments were launched in 1997, setting a groundbreaking precedent for Egyptian society at the time, and the following year, the first women's championship was held. By 2013, the number of female football players had seen substantial growth, with nearly 100,000 girls participating in amateur academies and leagues, as suggested by some sources in the Football Association.

The few successful cases that emerged in individual women's sports, such as athletics, were small miracles achieved by women who had taken the road less travelled. Conversely, it was more difficult for women to engage or excel in team sports that require comprehensive systems and institutions.

In 2022, Al-Ahly Club established the first-ever women's football academy, marking the beginning of a new era for women's football in Egypt. Other renowned football clubs followed suit, taking cues from international and Arab leagues. It is worth noting that currently, the Tigris Club hold the top position in the Egyptian League for Women's Football.

Egypt's first national team was eliminated from the semi-finals of the Arab Women's

Cup, which Egypt organized in 2021, after losing 0-5 to the Jordanian national team, although reaching the final was the team's best achievement to date. Another exit from the qualifiers for the Women's Africa Cup of Nations followed, with a heavy defeat of 0-6 against Tunisia in the home match in Cairo, and a 0-1 defeat in the away match in Tunisia.



Moroccan women footballers.

Around the same period, Algeria, too, was opening up to women's football. An Algerian women's football league was founded in 1998, and its regulations were amended in 2013. The Algerian women's national team won the Arab Women's Cup title in its first championship, held in 2006. The team also qualified for the Women's Africa Cup of Nations, but it never went beyond the first round.

In the initial phase, there were no equipped playgrounds and facilities for women's football and the only available fields were dirt playgrounds. Nadia Mekdi says that in 1998, women players received 100 dirhams (10 euros) as compensation from the teams they played for. Women have also been bullied all over the Arab region for their participation in football.

On the other hand, the Tunisian Women's Football League was established in 2004, under the name of the Tunisian Women's Championship. Notably, another tournament was launched by the name of Tunisian Women's Cup, which mirrors the format of the men's league, but with the Super Match featuring the league's titleholder and the

cup's winner. However, after only three tournaments of this cup, it was discontinued for undisclosed reasons. Meanwhile, the Tunisian women's national team came second in the Arab Cup in the first round, and third in the second round of qualifiers. Turning to Sudan, the first Sudanese women's tournament was launched in 2019. However, the newly founded national team has yet to achieve positive results.

Women's football in the Gulf and the Levant

Jordan's national team for women won the Women's Arab Cup in 2021, considered its highest achievement in women's football. Jordan's organization of the World Cup for Women under the age of 17 in 2020 contributed to the revival of popular interest, particularly women's interest, in the sport, predominantly among girls whose participation in football activities was gaining better acceptance in society

In 2002, Jordanian sports clubs started establishing women's football teams. Jordan's national football team for women was established in 2005, but the number of female footballer remains limited and has not yet reached 1,000. To promote girls' sports, the Jordan Football Association (JFA) organized girls' tournaments in public schools. "In a short period of time, we were able to break the social barriers that have long branded football a men's sport," said Rana al-Husseini, head of the women's committee in the JFA, adding that "to encourage girls' participation in the sport, even after their graduation from university, monthly bonuses have been allocated to the players. However, these bonuses only cover transportation and pocket money."

Furthermore, the Palestinian women's football team was established in 2004 and has garnered decent results in the Arab Cup. While the tournament faces difficulties in moving between the teams in the West Bank and Gaza, the West Bank team has represented Palestine as the Palestinian national team for women in the Arab Cup.

Saudi Arabia made a significant stride in 2018 when the authorities lifted the ban on women entering stadiums at sporting events. Three stadiums were designated to accommodate female fans, as well as families consisting of women and their male relatives. These sections were separated by glass barriers from the rest of the stadium, which remained reserved for male fans. Notably, Saudi officials announced launching the first women's football league in the country that same year. Presently, Saudi Arabia boasts over 15 women's football clubs, and the Saudi Football Association has two

women on its board⁴.

Qatar launched its first indoor football tournament in 2009. Just a year later, the Qatar national women's football team was established and participated in the Arab Cup in Bahrain. The unprepared team suffered a steep loss of 17-0 in its inaugural international participation. Two years later, in 2011, Qatar launched its first women's football league. The tournament, organized by the Qatar Women's Sports Committee in collaboration with the Qatar Football Association, spans a month on a one-round basis. This league focuses on mini-football, which differs from traditional football that requires a more structured institutional framework and a nurturing social environment.



The Jordanian women's national team playing against Uzbekistan's women's team.

Shifting our focus to Lebanon, the Lebanese Women's Football League kicked off in 2008, following the establishment of the women's national team in 2005, one of the first women's national teams in West Asia. The team made its finest achievements to date when it secured third place in the West Asian Football Federation Women's Championship (WAFF) in both 2007 and 2019.

Emirati football referee, Abrar al-Qassab, has shed light on the challenges faced by women footballers in Arab societies. These obstacles become even more pronounced when women aspire to work as coaches or referees. "The audience for women's

4- عائشة جعفري، «فيفا يشيد بانطلاق أول بطولة كرة قدم نسائية في السعودية»، صحيفة «الشرق الأوسط»، 05/10/2019.

matches is quite limited, primarily consisting of parents, clubs' management, and representatives from the Football Association, in addition to a few spectators who found out about the game from social media," Al-Qassab notes that the promotion of women's football events heavily relies on social media platforms. She also points to the scarcity of competing clubs in women's football. While the UAE Football Association focuses primarily on training and qualifying referees, Al-Qassab expresses her hope for future collaboration between Football Association officials and clubs' managements to implement a comprehensive plan for the advancement of women's football.

Women's football emerged in Egypt in 1997, setting a groundbreaking precedent for Egyptian society at the time. The following year, the first women's championship was held, and by 2013, the number of female football players had seen substantial growth, with nearly 100,000 girls participating in amateur academies and leagues.

According to the latest statistics released by the UAE Football Association, there are approximately 2,500 registered female national players affiliated with the federation. These players participate in various age groups and tournaments within women's football leagues. This number is quite significant, considering that women's football in the UAE began as recently as 2009. In the early stages, the number of national female players did not exceed 10, leading to the recruitment of foreign players to generate interest in the sport among girls⁵. The UAE women's national football team was established in 2010 and played its inaugural match against the Palestinian national team in the same year.

Social obstacles

The feminization of football has faced global societal resistance, becoming socially accepted only after World War II. In the Arab region, women's engagement in football and sports activities faces a mixed reception to this day, ranging from complete rejection to reluctant toleration. Despite varying degrees of difficulties in Arab countries, the obstacles faced by women footballers are strikingly similar, primarily consisting of the lack of encouragement or the outright prevention of their participation. In Saudi Arabia, many female players have voiced their concerns about facing criticism from conservative religious currents that exert pressure on families to prohibit their daughters from playing any sport, particularly prior to the FIFA's decision to allow players to don

5- إيهاب زهدي، «كرة القدم النسائية: العدالة الغائبة»، جريدة «البيان»، 03/02/2021.

their head covers on the playing field.

Arab women footballers are often bullied and belittled for their performances in matches. Moroccan player Naima Fadel shared that words like “shameful” and “indecent” were frequently used by her own family members to describe her engagement in football, before they had to come to terms with her choice. She says that players also faced frequent harassment and bullying, with some referring to them as “tomboys”. In addition to social rejection, Naima experienced challenging financial circumstances. At the beginning of her football journey, she worked at a sewing factory to sustain her football hobby after dropping out of her first year of university. However, she eventually dedicated herself entirely to football, which became her career after she was asked to play for the women’s national team in 2009⁶.

The social misconception that football is a violent game unsuitable for women continues to persist, largely due to the sport’s historical consecration as a male-dominated domain, both in practice and spectatorship. However, the reality is that football is no different from other sports that women can readily engage in and excel at.

Moroccan player Naima Fadel said that words like “shameful” and “indecent” were frequently used against her by her own family members before they had to come to terms with her choice. She says that players often faced harassment and bullying, with some referring to them as “tomboys”. In addition to social rejection, Naima experienced challenging financial circumstances.

With the growing popular interest in women’s football, social disapproval festered on social media as well. In Morocco, a self-proclaimed religious preacher published a video in which he says, “Football is permissible for men with certain restrictions which, if ignored, render the game ‘haram’ (forbidden). As for women’s participation in football, it is undoubtedly forbidden.” He concludes that “everyone who watches women’s matches is a sinner.” Whereas in Sudan, the launch of the first women’s football league in 2019 was accompanied by a fanatical fit from extremists, including the clergyman Abdul Hay Youssef’s statement that this league “aim to destroy religion,” while the head of the Sudanese Muslim Scholars Association, Muhammad Othman Salih, considered it evidence of the creeping secularism he vehemently rejects. “Men

6- زهور باقي، «لألعاب مغربيات محترفات: تحدينا للجميع للعب الكرة!»، موقع «أصوات مغربية»، 18/01/2018.

watching women play football is sinful,” he said.

Technical and logistic difficulties

With numerous obstacles in their way, it has been challenging for Arab women’s football teams to make it to the Women’s World Cup finals, with some rare exceptions, such as the notable qualification of the Moroccan national team to the World Cup in 2023. Participation of several teams from the Arab region in continental championships has often been limited to friendly or exhibition matches which do not have a real impact in advancing these teams’ journeys. Teams from Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, for instance, have participated in the Africa Cup of Nations without significant breakthroughs. Although the Jordanian national team was the only Arab team to take part in in the AFC Women’s Asian Cup in 2014, it was unable to accomplish any major achievements at the cup.



Women on the pitch: football against all societal odds.

Women’s football tournaments have not yet attained the same level of professionalism as their male counterparts. The game thus remains largely practiced as a hobby rather than a serious profession. This disparity often impedes the progress of many talented female players due to the pressures of pursuing higher education. As a result, some players are forced to either quit the sport altogether or compromise their commitment

by juggling other professions alongside football, which hinders their potential to become skilled professionals capable of competing in international and continental competitions, ultimately weakening the overall performance of women's football teams. Women footballers lack vital training camps that would enhance their skills and teamwork, and consequently, their teams' performances suffer. Even the women's national team assembles just a few days before a given tournament, which gives scant time for training.

Refereeing and professionalism

In terms of financial benefits and pay, there is equality between men and women referees, despite the disparity in the number of games assigned to women and men referees, which requires greater efforts in further encouraging women's involvement in the game in the Arab region.

Social disapproval of women's football festered on social media as well. In Morocco, a self-proclaimed religious preacher published a video in which he says, "Football is permissible for men with certain restrictions, while it is undoubtedly forbidden for women."

On the other hand, there have been some Arab women footballers who have achieved their dream of playing professionally. One notable example is the Egyptian player Sarah Essam, who joined the English club Stoke City following her departure from the Egyptian team Wadi Degla in 2017. The Moroccan player Rajaa Al-Ghazali has also played in a number of professional Spanish football teams, while her two colleagues, Rosella Ayan, who plays for the English Tottenham, and Nisreen Daoudi, who plays for the French Toulouse, are considered among the best professional players of Arab origins.

A dream come true

Women players and sports officials have unanimously emphasized the importance of rebuilding clubs to achieve robust levels of play across various teams. They have also highlighted the need for a professional women's championship that provides the same conditions as men's tournaments. Additionally, they have called for establishing a national tournament for girls under 17 years of age, along with football schools designed for girls and young women. These institutions should offer fair minimum wages and provide social and health insurance coverage to ensure the players' financial

and mental well-being. Furthermore, women players have stressed the essentiality of providing annual plans and scheduling teams' matches and trainings in a professional manner, taking into consideration training camps and friendly matches in a way that aligns with the regional and continental football competitions for all age groups.

On social and cultural levels, there is a pressing need for the media and civil society to promote women's football. This would not only support girls who aspire to pursue their dreams in this sport but also encourage sports institutions to invest in women's football more proactively, in a way that achieves gender equality. Undoubtedly, money plays a pivotal role in driving the sports industry worldwide, particularly when it comes to wages, and to advance women's football, it is essential to ensure that female players are offered fair pay. The increasing number of women in football underscores the urgency for such financial support.

It is worth noting that many European clubs have started to invest in women's football teams and some federations have even introduced regulations requiring clubs to form women's teams. This seems to be an essential step to promote, encourage, and propel women's football forward, by providing a natural incubator through professional football clubs.

لائحة دفاتر السفير العربي

2018

- الاقتصاد الموازي: ما الذي تنتجه هذه المنظومة ؟
- الهجرات: العالم يسيل - قصص العالقين في دول العبور
- الهجرات: العالم يسيل - قصص الحرّاقة
- اليسار في المنطقة العربية وسؤال مكامن العطب - دراسة حالات

2019

- مسألة الأرض - مصر، السودان، تونس، الجزائر والمغرب
- إدارة الموارد الطبيعية: نهب وتبديد وزبائنية وقلة كفاءة - مصر، الجزائر، تونس، المغرب، السودان وموريتانيا
- إشكاليات في مقارنة دراسة العشوائيات - مصر، الجزائر، السودان، اليمن، تونس، المغرب والعراق
- تأنيث العمل الهش - مصر، الجزائر، السودان، المغرب وتونس

2020

- 2019: انتفاضات مبتورة النتائج، السودان، العراق، الجزائر ولبنان
- انتفاضات 2019: ابداع تأسيسي

2021

- مجابهة كورونا في المنطقة العربية: الفصل الأول
- مواجهة كورونا وفداحة إصاباته ليست تقنية أو طبية فحسب
- اللقاحات ما بين التباهي الفج والظلم المعيب
- التفاوت: مكانة النساء بين الاعتقاد الشائع والسائد، وبين الواقع والوقائع

2022

- مبادرات النساء: قدرات وعازمات
- سيرورات معارك النساء الكبرى
- التغيّر المناخي: لقد آن الأوان!
- هل مخططات مواجهة التغير المناخي صحيحة وكافية؟

2023

- كرة القدم: لماذا تهّمنا؟

Assafir Al-Arabi Folders

2018

- Informal Economy: What Does this System Produce
- Migrations: The World is Flowing - Stories of those caught in the transit countries
- Migrations: The World is Flowing - Stories of the borders burners (Harraga)
- The Left in The Arab Region and The Questions of Deficiencies - Case Studies

2019

- The Question of Land in Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco
- Problematics in the Approach to Studying Informal Settlements
- Natural Resource Management: Looting, Waste, Clientelism, and Incompetence
- The Feminization of Precarious Labour

2020

- The 2019 Major Uprisings: Severed Outcomes
- The 2019 Uprisings: A Constituent Creativity

2021

- Confronting Corona in The Arab Region: Act one
- Covid-19 Response: More than just a technical-medical issue
- Vaccines: Between Blunt Ostentation and Shameful Injustice
- Disparity: The Status of Women Between Prevalent Beliefs and Reality

2022

- Capable and Determined: Women Take Initiative
- Women's Major Battles: And Still They Fight
- Climate Change: It's about time!
- Are Climate Action Plans Effective and Sufficient?

2023

- Why Does Football Matter to Us?

Football holds overlapping symbolisms relating to all kinds of fields. Since its inception, the sport has been a ground for practicing politics, which has led to the recent emergence of devoted brigades of football enthusiasts known as the “Ultras”. These individuals are not your typical fans, nor are they the infamous rioting “hooligans”. Instead, they are organized ultra-fan groups with robust internal rules and codes. They adhere to a strict set of practices, deliver coherent, grand performances, and possess the ability to mobilize public opinion. In this regard, they resemble social movements, with the distinction that they do not represent particular professional or factional sectors, but the football teams they support.

This completely new form of fandom within football culture is remarkable in its scope and characteristics, and its significance has been made more observable than ever since the Ultras began to express candid political opinions through their slogans and chants. Be it in the stadiums of Morocco, Algeria, or Egypt, their voices have tirelessly reflected the profound pains of their societies, voicing objections to neglect, poverty, and oppression, while standing in solidarity with the cause and people of Palestine at every match and in every way. The Ultras have consequently faced repression, persecution, and bans from the stadiums on multiple occasions.

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