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Football : An array of Egyptian and Tunisian lifeworlds in 2016

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Football

By CARL ROMMEL and JONAS ROELLIN

I really don't know what to say. Football just doesn't bother me the way it used to. I do watch AC Milan's matches, most of them actually, if I don't have anything else that is urgent. I enjoy it, even if the team is really bad these days. But al-Ahly... no, that is gone. It's been a long time now since I watched a whole match. (ROMMEL, *Notes*)

This is Bassām—a digital marketer, a husband, a father of two, and a devoted Ahly and Milan supporter since childhood. Half a decade ago, Bassām was spending a good portion of his spare time authoring an informative blog about Egyptian sports media. Today, he is instead running an increasingly popular YouTube channel where he reviews recently released movies. The shift is exemplary on multiple levels. Whereas blogs epitomized the late Mubarak era, video clips on social media platforms make the biggest buzz these days [[↗Social Media](#)]. Similarly, Egyptian football is by no means prioritized the way it used to be six or seven years ago. Indeed, as Bassām explains:

For people here in Egypt, football is just not what it used to be. I can't talk about everyone of course, but when I look at my friends... It's the same everywhere. People have moved on; they've picked up other interests, I guess. It's almost five years now since the Port Said massacre. You might say that that was the big break. After Port Said, we've not even had a proper league in Egypt. Football died a bit that day, and it has never really come back. (ROMMEL, *Notes*)

What does Bassām mean when he claims that Egyptian football “has never really come back” after Port Said, the stadium massacre on February 1, 2012, that claimed 72 young al-Ahly fans' lives and interrupted domestic football in Egypt for a full year? At first glimpse, after all, things do look rather normal. The local tournaments are all up and running and the results are as predictable as ever before. Egypt's biggest and most successful club, al-Ahly, is winning its 38th league title seven points ahead of its great Cairo rival, al-Zamalek. When the same two teams face off in the final of the Egyptian Cup, it is al-Zamalek that comes out on top, clinching the club's 25th title in that tournament. Furthermore, as so often in the past, the same two Cairo clubs' economic muscles render them among the very most powerful in Africa. In a spectacular move, al-Ahly buys the Tunisian national team left-back Ali Maâloul (‘Alī Ma‘lūl) from CS Sfaxien (al-NĀDĪ al-‘AHLĪ al-MĪṢRĪ). Both al-Ahly and Al-Zamalek also hire (and fire) high-profile coaches from Europe: the Dutchman Martin Jol is in charge of al-Ahly for six months; the Scot Alex McLeish's manages al-Zamalek for three. Consequently, it is fair to say that football continues to split in particular the male part of the Egyptian population into two distinct halves: red *Ahlawiyya* and white *Zamālkawiyya*. In coffee shops, work places and on social media, football rivalries constitute a well of inspiration for discussions, jokes and banter [[↗Social Media](#); [↗ʔAlsh](#)]. When the film *Ishtibāk* (“Clash”) depicts a microcosm of Egyptian society locked into a police van, the

antagonism between the two Cairo teams is, as one could predict, one part of the narrative [↗**Clash**].

Cairo's inter-city rivalry is similar to the one between the two Tunis clubs Espérance Sportive de Tunis (EST) and Club Africain (CA). Not only in the capital itself but also well beyond, everyone seems to have a preference for one or the other of the two main rivals. Fans on both sides, the *Espérantistes* as well as the *Clubistes*, claim that their club is loved by most Tunisians and thus represents “the people.” For instance, a well-known slogan of the *Clubistes* states that “ten million love the Club Africain” (*al-ifrīqī ‘ashara mlāyīn ḥabbīnāhā*) which is also the title of one of their most favorite football chants since the revolution (back then, Tunisia had about ten million inhabitants; ROELLIN, *Notes*). While the two Tunis teams, by far, hold the most league titles (26 for EST / 13 for CA) as well as the most cup titles (15 for EST / 11 for CA), they have two serious title contenders from the coastal region of the Sahel: the Club Sportif Sfaxien (CSS) and the Étoile Sportive du Sahel (ESS) from Sousse. In fact, since independence in 1956 Tunisian football has been dominated by these “big four”; together, they have won all but seven national championship titles, as well as 13 African trophies including 4 CAF Champions League titles. This dominance on the football pitch reflects the general economic and political disparity between the privileged coastal areas and the marginalized interior regions of the country [↗**Center vs. Periphery**]. Furthermore, like their counterparts in Cairo, the two football clubs from Tunis—and to a lesser extent those in the Sahel—possess sufficient financial resources to attract some of the best players of the continent. Thus, in July, Espérance signs the Tunisian FC Metz midfielder Ferjani Sassi (Farjānī Sāsī) for the transfer sum of approximately 3 million euros and a monthly salary of about 40 thousand euros (GHARIANI). That is about the same salary that Club Africain pays its new Tunisian forward Saber Khelifa (Ṣābir Khalīfa), formerly with Olympique Marseille (*ibid.*)—a horrendous amount of money in a country under severe economic hardship, where the average monthly salary stands at around 300 Euros (*African Manager*) [↗**Dollar Crisis**]. Even so, disproportionately high salaries of football players have become business as usual. And so is the fact that this season too, one of the “big four,” this time Étoile Sportive du Sahel, wins the national league.

And yet, despite this apparent ‘normality,’ especially in the case of Egypt, Bassām’s point about football not being “what it used to be” *does* resonate. Normal as the game might look, in terms of enthusiasm and buzz, today’s situation is a far cry from how football used to encapsulate the country. Especially in the last five years of the Mubārak era, when the Egyptian national team won three consecutive African Cups of Nations in 2006, 2008 and 2010 and al-Ahly dominated the continental club tournaments, the hype around the sport was immense (ROMMEL 2021: 29-58). Bilāl, a thirty-something, recently married man from ‘Ābdīn in central Cairo, puts it this way:

You can’t compare. Back then, football was everything we talked about. The teams were winning, people were happy, the media talked football, football and football. And Mubarak used it, of course. [...] What happened was that we began to lose. And then came the revolution. Things have changed. (ROMMEL, *Notes*)

Oh yes, things have changed! In the years that followed January 25, 2011 and the Port Said tragedy in early 2012, no league matches were played, several football television channels

went bust, and the national team failed to even qualify for three consecutive African Cups of Nations. In fact, references to the hype that the victorious national football team *used* to stitch together between 2006 and 2010 are used habitually today to demarcate difference to an era and a structure of feeling that belongs to a by now distant and distinct past. Tamer Said's autobiographical movie *'Ākhir 'ayyām al-madīna*, released only recently, is a good case in point. Portraying a young man struggling to finalize a film in and about Downtown Cairo five, six years ago, one way in which *'Ākhir 'ayyām...* conveys affective tones of the past (and difference to the present) is through radio reports of famous football victories [**↗Past vs. Present**]. Similarly, in the face of a re-established security state [**↗Security = Fear (Police State)**], economic misery [**↗Dollar Crisis**] and clampdowns on all kinds of opposition [**↗Kamīn; ↗Disappearances**], Egyptians sometimes point to football as proof that everything is *not* back to square one. “Many things are worse today than during Mubarak”—this is Bilāl again—

but the revolution did change some things. At least among the youth, it changed our mentality (*'aqliyya*); we are more critical now. Al-Sisi will never be able to use football the way it was exploited by Mubarak. (ROMMEL, *Notes*)

In Tunisia, results have taken a similar if somewhat less dramatic post-revolutionary tumble. The national team has not participated in a World Cup since 2006 and has failed to pass the quarter-finals of the Africa Cup of Nations since its victory in 2004. Tunisian clubs, for their part, have been less present in the final rounds of continental competitions, notably in the CAF Champions League. While in the period between 2004 and 2007, not one final was played without the participation of a Tunisian club, in the last four years, no Tunisian club has managed to reach the final [**↗Past vs. Present**]. What is more, local players struggle to assert themselves in European leagues and often end up being relegated to North African or Arab Gulf league teams at an early age. In a provocative article entitled “Tunisie...Thunes easy?,” two French football experts argue that most of today's Tunisian exports for several reasons fail to prevail in the top European leagues. They are described as “physically below European standards,” “mentally fragile” and, apparently, rather than ambition and achievement, it is “the cash and the fast money that motivates them” (MÜLLER & VINCHON).

Still, everything is not doom and gloom; in both countries there are signs of resurgence. In Tunisia, a new generation of binational players, such as Naïm Sliti (Na'im Slītī) and Wahbi Khazri (Wahbī Khazrī), is reinforcing the ranks of the national team. After winning the first crucial qualifiers against Guinea (2:0) and Libya (1:0), the Carthage Eagles are on the road to qualify for the 2018 World Cup. Likewise, as the Egyptian teams are playing better than in many years, a buzz is slowly picking up, if only from historically low levels. Under the new Argentinian Head Coach, Hector Cuper, the national team qualifies for the first African Cup of Nations in seven years. AS Roma's speedy winger Mohamed Salah (Muḥammad Ṣalāḥ) scores four of the team's seven goals during the campaign, among those a crucial last-minute equalizer against the group favorite Nigeria [**↗Celebrities**] (ZAMALEKFANS). What is more, the team's good run of form is sustained during a promising start to the World Cup qualifications. After consecutive wins over Congo, in Brazzaville, and Ghana, at a sold-out Burg el-Arab Stadium in Alexandria, Egypt finishes the year as number 36 of FIFA's World Ranking. It is the country's highest ranking since mid-2011: a 22-position climb compared

to 12 months earlier. Towards the end of the year, al-Zamalek also reaches its first African Champions League final since 2002 after an extraordinarily dramatic semi-final against Wydad from Casablanca (ELASSAL). In the end, the team loses the final to the South African team Mamelodi Sundowns. Nonetheless, thousands of Zamalek fans enjoy a memorable and atmospheric day out at the stadium (MUṢṬAFÀ).

The improving results on the pitch are one component of a quite comprehensive rebuilding. Within Egyptian football media, money is starting to flow again after a few barren years. Several of the country's most famous pundits—Medhat Shalaby (Midḥat Shalabī), Farouk Gaafar (Fārūq Ja'far) and Magdi Abdelghani (Majdī 'Abd al-Ghanī)—are joining forces at the newly launched *ON Sport* [↗ **Celebrities**]. As Bassām explains, the sudden rise of this new channel is part of an ongoing reconfiguration of Egypt's television industry.

ON TV used to be owned by [businessman Naguib] Sawiris. They were big on political talk shows and very popular during the revolution. But recently, you can't do political television here [...] And the Sawiris family isn't well connected to the new regime. So, this summer, this new guy took over. Abū Hashīma; very well-connected. He made his money in the steel industry or something like that. But he's most famous for being the former husband of Haifa Wehbe [Hayfā' Wahba, a hugely famous Lebanese singer and sex symbol]. He took over the *ON* network just before Ramadan. All politics was thrown out. Instead he re-launched it with really costly and popular Ramadan series. Now he wants to do the same thing with football. Getting all the most famous pundits. Let's see if it will work (ROMMEL, *Notes*).

As Bassām makes clear, the rebirth that football television experiences is part and parcel of the formation of a new generation of crony capitalists: not the Sawirises and the Aḥmed 'Azz-s, who flourished under Mubarak, but Abū Hashīma and a number of other millionaires, all closely connected to the military establishment. That these are actors in control of impressive resources is beyond question: *ON Sport*'s being able to buy the expensive broadcasting rights to Egypt's world cup qualifiers is one indication (Bassām ABŪ BAKR). In fact, as Aḥmad Sa'īd, the former editor-in-chief at the popular football website *FilGoal.com*, suggests, such monetary muscles might be precisely what is needed to reignite the slumbering national sport. "It will take some time, but I think they will make money eventually," Sa'īd explains when asked about *ON Sport*'s prospects for being profitable.

It's key that they're part of and backed up by a huge network. This gives them the necessary capital and advertisement. [...] In a way, everything is in place. The league is running, television is ready, people want to get distracted from problems and politics, there are millions of fans. The only thing that's missing is supporters at the stadiums. That is the final missing piece of the puzzle. (ROMMEL, *Notes*)

Aḥmad Sa'īd may well be right. Perhaps the Egyptian football puzzle is only missing one single piece. But what a crucial piece that is! Fans have not been allowed to watch domestic football live in Egypt since the Port Said disaster four years earlier, and Egypt's stadiums remain empty this year too. After pressure from the Confederation of African Football (CAF), a limited but increasing number of supporters are allowed at al-Zamalek's (DORSEY [a]) and al-Ahly's (DORSEY [b]) Champions League fixtures as well as the national team's different

qualifying matches (*AhramOnline* [c]). Yet, all plans for reintroducing fans at Egyptian League and Cup matches are either abolished or postponed. It does not matter that club officials are complaining about an ever-deepening economic crisis (ROMMEL, *Notes*), or that the parliament debates the issue during one of its sessions (*AhramOnline* [b]).

In Tunisia, the situation is similarly depressing. After being suspended for a period of three months in the wake of the 2011 revolution, Tunisia's top football league resumed behind closed doors for a full four years. Today, fans are allowed to enter stadiums again at domestic as well as international games but only in limited numbers. Furthermore, other restrictive measures stay in place, like a travel ban on opposing supporters and a prohibition on minors attending games. Without ticket sales, particularly small clubs in the league struggle financially, as they lack other sources of revenue like official fan shops. As a consequence, these clubs' training facilities are often in a deplorable state, they have difficulties ensuring the wages of their players, and they can barely finance trips to play abroad (GHARIANI). All of this obviously has negative effects on staff and player morale and leads to worsening results and subsequent tensions.

So why, then, have stadiums remained closed? The problem, *allegedly*, is "security." The Port Said massacre still haunts Egyptian football, and so does another tragic incident at the Air Defense stadium outside Cairo in February last year. At that time, twenty Zamalek fans were killed in a stampede as they tried to enter a severely undersized security gate and the police incomprehensibly decided to fire tear gas into the panicking crowds. The match that day was meant to be the first league game with supporters since the Port Said tragedy. These days, it is most often framed as a failed test: an awful lesson learned and a sign that supporters cannot watch football safely in Egypt for the time being (ROMMEL, *Notes*).

Similarly, the Tunisian behind-closed-doors policy is *meant* to reduce violence and tensions at the stadiums. In fact, however, it rather adds to them. Not only have confrontations between police and fans, who are frustrated both with the security restrictions and the bad results of their teams, increased in recent years. What is more, players, managers and other staff members engage in violent behaviour too. For instance, on May 23, at an eagerly awaited end-of-season game between the two Tunis suburb rivals Stade Tunisien and AS Marsa, tensions are boiling over during the match when players aggressively tackle each other and furiously protest every decision by the referee. At the end of the game, a mass brawl erupts between the two teams during which the goalkeeper of AS Marsa is violently attacked by three players of Stade Tunisien (*Afrik-Foot*, Ncib) [[↗Clash](#)].

It is in other words no real surprise that many Tunisians and Egyptians question that genuine care for spectators' safety is the main reason why the supporter bans are kept in place. As Aḥmad Sa'īd puts it, the problem is rather that the current Egyptian military-dominated government is "sadly" guided by an "exaggerated security mentality" (ROMMEL, *Notes*) [[↗Security vs. Fear](#)]. Their sole purpose, he claims, is to "prevent that what happened in 2011 [i.e., the Revolution] happens again" (*ibid.*). From this perspective, keeping Egypt's stadiums empty makes a whole lot of sense. Not only does it abolish one of very few spaces for spontaneous mass gatherings. More crucially, it helps to control and confine the young and unruly Egyptian Ultras movement [[↗Young vs. Settled](#)]. The Ultras constituted an important player during Egypt's revolutionary transition in 2011–2013. At the stadiums, as well as in protests and sit-ins elsewhere, Ultras Ahlawy (AU07; supporting al-Ahly) and

Ultras White Knights (UWK; al-Zamalek) were often at the forefront, using its experience of mass organization and street-fighting in clashes with the Egyptian security forces (ROMMEL 2021: 85-164). Being football fans first and foremost, the Ultras organizational base was always the stands at Cairo Stadium. By preventing fans from attending matches, the regime is thus effectively locking out a potentially dangerous antagonist from its traditional habitat.

The same strategy, it seems, lies behind the partial supporter ban that is kept in place in Tunisia. Here, in a country still heavily controlled by the police and lacking recreational opportunities for young people, the stadium has emerged as one of few spaces to gather collectively and express oneself freely. Especially for young people from poorer neighbourhoods who suffer unemployment and hardship, the stadium is a refuge where they can let off steam and feel as part of a strong group that defies power, be it only once a week for a couple of hours (ROELLIN, *Notes*) [↗*Ashwā'īyyāt*, ↗**Young vs. Settled**, ↗**Inferiority vs. Superiority**]. As is shown in the documentary film *Attitude* by Ines Ben Othman (Īnās Bin ʿUthmān), members of an Ultras group consider themselves united and loyal “brothers” (*akhwā*) who are bound together in a common struggle against “the system” [↗**“The System” vs. “The People”**]. Already their banners, mural paintings and tags contain numerous references to figures embodying resistance like Che Guevara, Yasser Arafat or Emiliano Zapata. In their chants, they do not merely sing about their passion for the club and its titles, but also often criticize and mock “them,” by which they mostly mean the political class, the security forces and/or the mainstream media (Roellin, *Notes*). In fact, as Tunisia’s Ultras groups consider their clubs as mainly representing the oppressed and disenfranchised, they understand encouraging their team as an act of defiance against the establishment which, as they feel, treats them unjustly and misrepresents them (*ibid.*). In this spirit, the Curva Nord Ultras of the Club Africain sing the following lines in one of their favorite chants of 2016, entitled “*Manifesto*”:

You wanted us to be puppets / Mere merchandise in this country / You want the fans to be naive / Singing only about titles / Never forget the derby match / With closed doors / Our message is very clear / It is the people who rule / It has the power in this country / [...] / I will never live as a slave / Laugh and say “everything is ok” / For me, with independence came freedom / I will never betray the cause / They despised our club / They said “dissolve the fan groups” / The press is happy / They applaud the “freedom” in this country / [...] / Football in Tunisia is destroyed / Theft and bullshit mentality / You want us to be corrupt just like you / With a useless passion / Casablanca, Algeria, from Cairo to Tripoli / We brought them civilization / And made them love freedom / And here in our country we are despised / Forbidden from stadiums / [...] / Everyday, our language is new / We are never outdated / Even when I am in handcuffs / I ask about my club / [...] / Football has become a [legal] case / Shame on you!

Indeed, these *are* difficult days to be an Ultra. Recurring tensions and clashes between police forces and Ultras groups mark the year in Tunisia. The police often accuse the Ultras of being thugs who intend to cause violence and commit crimes and thereby justifying the partially closed stadiums, as members of a Club Africain Ultras group explain at a café in the Tunis neighborhood of Bāb Jadīd—a bastion of the club’s supporters (ROELLIN, *Notes*). The young

men claim that, in reality, it is the other way around: the police forces are the ones who regularly provoke violence [↗**True vs. False**]. One of the security forces' strategies is to indiscriminately fire tear gas on the Ultras in the stadiums, then leave open only one exit gate in order to attack the fleeing fans there with truncheons and arrest a random group. The Ultras stress that they express their criticism and discontent mainly by non-violent means, with chants, banners, graffiti and tags in the streets. But the police do not even allow them these. Rather, they often confiscate banners and flags, sometimes even shirts and scarves with simple group logos on them [↗**The Policeman Criminal**]. This is why the African Winners, one of the Club Africain Ultras groups, feel that they are deprived of their freedom of expression and that almost six years after the revolution "nothing has changed," as the group states in a sarcastic communiqué in October:

Soon 6 years, nothing has changed. Still the same unjust and cruel policy of a state that continues to deprive us of our fundamental rights: to support, express ourselves or simply to be free. After the efforts and the time spent preparing 25 flags and 5 giant banners containing various slogans and drawings related to the club, the group, our beliefs and today's match, all the work has been confiscated by the police. From now on, we will glorify the democracy established by the state and salute the great concern of the police forces to preserve our freedoms and rights through our work so that it is present in the stands without the least difficulty...Long live the freedom of oppression! (AFRICAN WINNERS) [↗**Security = Fear (Police State), ↗Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)**].

And it is by no means any better in Egypt. Here, the groups have found themselves increasingly persecuted in the last few years: many leaders are in jail, all Ultras supporter groups are officially banned, and their social media platforms are heavily monitored [↗**Prison**]. Still, they do keep on fighting. UWK are involved in a prolonged and increasingly acrimonious struggle with al-Zamalek's Club President Murtaḍā Maṣṣūr. On the first anniversary of the Air Defense massacre, they organize a spectacular commemoration in Fustat Garden in southern Cairo, attended by thousands of Ultras members and the families of the stampede's victims [↗**Commemoration / Memorial Days**]. During the event, Ultras members raise a series of banners, accusing Maṣṣūr of having set up and later covered up the killings in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior, the media and the doctor responsible for the autopsies (UWK Facebook, February 10). In response, Maṣṣūr—an influential lawyer and a close regime ally—claims that members of UWK have attempted to murder him, and dozens of Ultras are imprisoned (*AhramOnline* [a]).

Simultaneously, on the other side of the Nile, similar tensions are growing between al-Ahly club and Ultras Ahlawy after a couple of years of relative calm and mutual understanding. During their fourth commemoration of the Port Said massacre—an event that takes place inside the club premises on Gezira Island—UA07 calls for the execution of former Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi (Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭaṇṭāwī), Egypt's de facto ruler at the time of the tragedy (ULTRASAHLAWY07MEDIA) [↗**Commemoration / Memorial Days**]. This, apparently, is more than al-Ahly's President Maḥmūd Ṭāhir can stomach. In a television interview, he condemns the fans' "insults" against "state institutions" and vows that the supporters will not be allowed to enter the club in the future (ABD EL RASOUL [a]).

In summer and early autumn, these troubles between fans, clubs and security escalate: UA07 storm their own team's training session as a protest against a series of poor results (FILGOAL); al-Zamalek's popular playmaker, Shikabala, is suspended after celebrating with the Ultras fans after a Champions League victory (ABD EL RASOUL [b]); at several instances, Ultras members are rounded up and jailed by the police (UA07 Facebook, September 26 and 29; UWK Facebook, October 6) [↗**Prison**].

It is, in other words, no real surprise that non-Ultras fans, like Bassām in Cairo and many fellow football supporters across Egypt and Tunisia, are struggling to stay in touch with the game they used to love (ROMMEL, *Notes*). The reasons for why they claim that the sport “has not come back” after its post-2011 slump are numerous: worsening results, stadium tragedies and constant fights between Ultras supporters, the sporting establishment and the security forces. Most crucial, though, is the absence of spectators at the stadiums, a fact that has rendered Egyptian and (until recently) Tunisian football much less attractive. Not only is a whole generation of young boys growing up in Egypt and Tunisia without having ever seen a match live; matches at eerily empty arenas simply do not make for appealing television broadcasts. Finally, as it is up to the security services to decide where and when matches are played, Egyptian league games are spread out across the week and teams shift home stadiums constantly. For Bassām, this arbitrariness of it all is the single biggest obstacle for re-invigorating his passions for al-Ahly. “It’s just impossible to keep up,” he complains and shakes his head in despair.

Football on Fridays used to be an almost religious thing. First the prayer, then a game. But now... Sometimes they play on Wednesday afternoon, then on Sunday night. The next week it's different again. And then there is an interruption due to some troubles. How can you set the rules of home and away if everyone is playing at the same stadium? Things like, al-Ismaily playing al-Muqawilun [a Cairo club] somewhere in Alexandria. How did that happen? Something important gets lost. It's all decided by security (ROMMEL, *Notes*).

Related Entries

ARRAYS – *ʔAlsh* ♦ *ʔAshwāʔiyyāt* ♦ **Celebrities** ♦ **Clash** ♦ **Commemoration / Memorial Days** ♦ **Disappearances** ♦ **Dollar Crisis** ♦ *Kamīn* ♦ **The Policeman Criminal** ♦ **Prison** ♦ **Social Media**

CODES – **Center vs. Periphery** ♦ **Past vs. Present** ♦ **Security vs. Fear** ♦ “**The System**” vs. “**The People**” ♦ **Inferiority vs. Superiority** ♦ **True vs. False** ♦ **Young vs. Settled**

CODES COLLAPSED – **Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)** ♦ **Security = Fear (Police State)**

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