

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS: “ULTRAS” AS POLITICAL ACTORS IN THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

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Abstract: The Egyptian revolution that started on January 25 engaged many people who theretofore had not been considered political actors. Among them were the Ultras, a particular group of football fans who are widely credited to have played a part in the more physical aspects of the uprising. In this article the Ultras are studied by means of an analysis of their own written material, their internet presence, and fieldwork conducted in Cairo. It is argued that the Ultras have quite naturally developed into a revolutionary social movement.

Keywords: Egypt, Arab Spring, January 25 revolution, Ultras, social movement, street politics

Among the more surprising actors in Egypt’s January 25 revolution were the so-called Ultras or hard-core football-supporters. Apart from casual to elaborate recognition of the Ultras’ role in securing areas of protest¹ little analysis has been conducted thus far. More attention has been paid to the role of social media, “youth” and the Muslim Brothers, three factors that are—rightfully or not—more commonly identified as potential building blocks for political change. This article starts from the premise that in order to understand a revolution that came unexpectedly, and took an unprecedented shape,² it is useful to look at the role of “unusual suspects” in the unfolding of events. To my knowledge, this premise was first argued by Aarts and Cavatorta, who state that “the real protagonists of the Arab Spring do not come from the usual suspects within established and formal civil society, but from sectors of society that have been largely under-explored.”³

The role played by the Ultras may be seen as an example of the way in which political agency in Egypt was transformed in the early months of 2011. Until January 25 of 2011, conventional wisdom had it that the Egyptian population was politically apathetic. In the 18 days that followed, the political arena in Egypt was not dominated by politicians, be they regime or opposition, but by common Egyptians invading the public realm with a remarkable combination of discipline and volume. The Ultras were among those Egyptians, whose activism compels us to re-evaluate the assessment that this population was aloof from politics. After providing the international context of the “Ultras phenomenon,” this article sketches

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the emergence of Ultra groups in Egypt, and the role these groups played in the last revolution. Apart from these descriptive matters, this article offers a theoretical point of view. I try to understand the Egyptian Ultras from the perspective of Asef Bayat's notion of bottom-up politics by social movements.⁴ Much of the article is based on primary sources, such as the book *Kitāb al-Ultras* written by Muhammad Jamāl Bashīr, posts on Ultras' Facebook pages, and fieldwork conducted in Cairo in June 2012.

International Context

Judging from the literature, Ultras are overwhelmingly a (south-)European phenomenon that first emerged in the 1960s in the football stadiums of Italy.⁵ It appears however that this development may have been inspired by the Brazilian Torcidas, a particular kind of (informal) fan club the first of which was already established in the 1930s.⁶ Not much research has been done into the Ultra phenomenon. A recent Council of Europe study is the best starting point for an overview of Ultra culture in its European context.⁷ Although they form a diverse collection of fan groups, the groups that label themselves "Ultras" can be described as

particularly passionate, emotional, committed and—above all—very active fans who are fascinated by a south European culture of spurring on their team and have made it their job to organize a better, traditional atmosphere in the football stadium in order to be able to support their team creatively and to the best of their ability.⁸

Two aspects of this definition require clarification. Firstly, the "south European culture" in this case means the non-stop singing, drumming and chanting along with huge banners, flags, pyrotechnics and "terrace choreography." Secondly, the "better, traditional atmosphere" points to the Ultras' nostalgia for football matches as they were prior to the "excessive marketing of football and its commercialization."⁹ Ultra groups are typically made up of young males aged between 16 and 25 years. There appears to be no overall dominance of any particular socio-economic class.¹⁰ This is contrary to what is arguably the case with hooligans, among whom a significant majority in England, Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium is reportedly working class.¹¹ Ultras are sometimes confused with hooligans, which is something Ultras protest against. The Ultras cultivate a distinct sense of superiority when it comes to valuing the presence of various groups of football match attendees. "The majority of European Ultras...perceive themselves as the only 'true', the 'most loyal', the 'most active' and the 'best' football fans."¹²

Ultra groups may be organized formally or informally. Even in the more formally organized groups however, we're not talking about official fan clubs. "Membership" is a contested term in relation to Ultra affiliation; administration seems non-existent.

Despite this apparently loose web, Ultra groups manage to exercise control and to engage in (international) cooperation. Ultra groups have their own spaces in the stadiums, where they organize a range of supporting activities (as mentioned above) some of which require a lot of preparation, co-ordination and a significant degree of discipline. Their section in the stadium is their territory, which they will defend against police or rivaling supporters. The use of violence in such cases is not uncommon, and neither is violence uncommon in other cases where Ultras feel they are being “challenged.”¹³ Relations with the police are uniformly poor: “the image of the police as enemies has emerged almost everywhere.”¹⁴ Notably, also relations with the club’s official institutions are often sour. Ultras cultivate an unconditional love for their club, but lament the way in which managers have taken charge of the club, the stadium and the game. This includes the club’s managers all the way up to the UEFA, who are all seen to be lined up to milk the game until the last penny of advertisement money. The international dimension of the commercialization of football is what facilitates the international collaboration between Ultra groups, who are steadily developing a common language of protest against what is uniformly called “modern football.”¹⁵

If it is established that Ultras form energetic groups of young, idealistic people with the capacity to organize mass events, the question that arises is: Do they put their capacity to uses other than the glorification of their team, the game and themselves? Expressions of social concern beyond the world of football are apparently not unheard of: there has been an increase in charitable work over the past seven years among Ultras in Germany.¹⁶ Although this shows a certain willingness among Ultra groups to engage more broadly in the public arena, we cannot say that there is a general tendency for Ultra groups to carry a political affiliation. To the extent that Ultras do take political colors, we find that they are more often tending towards the (extreme) right wing.¹⁷

Egypt’s Ultras

There are to date no scholarly publications focused on the Ultras of Egypt, as far as I am aware. Reportedly the first and only book on Egypt’s Ultras is written by Muhammad Jamāl Bashīr a.k.a. Gemyhood.¹⁸ The book, the title of which translates as *The Ultras Book: When the Crowds Proceed Beyond the Boundaries of Custom*,¹⁹ was first published in November 2011 and has had numerous reprints since. Bashīr started writing the book some time before the revolution, and some parts of the book have been published on websites in years past. In fact only pages 69 to 75 deal directly with the January 25 revolution. The author has travelled around in order to learn about Ultra groups elsewhere in the Mediterranean region, which

may have influenced his views on Ultra culture. This should be taken into account when using Bashīr's book as a guide to the Ultra groups of Egypt.

Bashīr clearly intends to educate the reader about what Ultras really are, which means he has to address a number of stereotypes. In short, Ultras are not savages who fight and wreak havoc for the fun of it. They are proud individuals who demand respect for their club and their group. They are manly men who stand up for each other and are willing to sacrifice their time, effort and physical wellbeing to protect the reputation of their group. The sense of group cohesion is so strong that its effect is felt outside the context of the football stadium as well: "the Ultras are like a spirit (*rūḥ*) that takes possession of its owner and then becomes a way of life."²⁰

The first chapter provides a taxonomy or categorization of football supporters, in order to place the Ultras in their proper context. The first distinction is that there are those who come to support a team when it is winning, and there are those who support their team regardless of its success. Then there is the distinction between those who follow the game on television and those who attend the matches. Only the second kind of supporters are of relevance, though they are not all equally relevant. Among the loyal attending supporters there are those who are affiliated to official supporters' organizations which are normally established and controlled by a club's managerial board. According to Bashīr, "We can refer to its members as the 'white collar' gentlemen (*aṣḥāb al-yāqāt al-bayḍā'*) of the supporters' world, who have direct connections with the managerial boards, the institutions and the players, who may finance them in a manner that may or may not be legal, in exchange for [something or other]."²¹ Other groups that Bashīr discusses in this chapter are the English Hooligans, and the Latin American Bara Brava and Torcida. Subsequent chapters make it very clear that the Ultras are a group of supporters highly distinct from all the aforementioned. Bashīr stresses that the Ultras support their team regardless of the game's result or the overall ranking of the club.

Bashīr suggests that the Ultras emerged partly out of frustration with the official supporters' organizations: "The supporters' leagues gained media legitimacy as a result of their official character, even though they did not dominate, control or even play a mentionable role in the club stadiums."²² With the rise of the Ultras, this mistake would no longer be made so easily: "The entry of the Ultras to matches in North Africa changed the rules of the game... Everyone sees that the real representative of the supporters are the Ultras and nothing else."²³ After discussing how the first Ultra groups were formed in Libya (1989), Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, Bashīr informs us about the emergence of Egyptian Ultras. The story begins in the 1990s with al-Ahlī fans abroad, who set up a website in order to cultivate their club support while outside Egypt. These websites develop into a chat room and before long the group called Ahly Lovers Union (ALU) has a visible presence in the stadiums of Egypt, with banners and an entry show. After 2005,

other groups begin to form, and the term Ultra is adopted. The two most famous Ultra groups in Egypt are connected to the two main Cairo football clubs al-Ahli and al-Zamālik: respectively the Ultras Ahlawy and Ultras White Knights. It is not clear to what extent the websites and chat rooms have been of relevance in organizing the groups beyond being the initial online collecting point for kindred spirits. Bashīr indicates that the organization of the Ultra groups in Egypt is elaborate but with little to no hierarchy. There can be around a dozen or more committees, each responsible for a separate aspect: a committee for travelling arrangements, a committee for the design of the choreographic show, etc. A responsibility of particular importance is that of finance. The costs of placards or textiles, paint and flares, the musical instruments in addition to the travel costs during away matches, are beyond most individual supporters' budgets. Private donations from among the supporters are the Ultras' sole source of income, according to Bashīr: "The Ultras have chosen from the beginning to be independent in their finances so as to remain independent in their choices... [thereby] raising the banner that [says that] they're not for sale and that they don't belong to personalities but rather to only one entity: their club."²⁴ Contrary to what is the case with European Ultras, we have no reliable data concerning the socio-economic background of Egyptian Ultras, but it seems that they are perceived to be predominantly lower class.²⁵

Bashīr's account is highly reminiscent of the literature on European Ultras, particularly in its rendering of the Ultras' sense of purpose, their culture of anti-authoritarianism (against the media, police,²⁶ club managers, UEFA), and their critique of the commercialization of "modern football."²⁷ If Bashīr's account is an accurate description of the Egyptian Ultra culture, then it should be seen as part of a transnational phenomenon with a shared set of ideals and a shared language.

Politicization of Egyptian Ultras

In principle, Egyptian Ultras are not organized along political lines, and their existence serves no political purpose.²⁸ Nevertheless, a collective political consciousness among Egyptian Ultras has emerged. According to Muhammad Waked (an Egyptian activist for Revolutionary Socialists) it started in 2010, when Ultras joined protests against Khaled Said's death by torture.²⁹ There are however reports that say that already in 2008-09 the Gaza War drew in the Ultras' political engagement, expressed in banners in the stadiums.³⁰ Bashīr mentions neither Gaza nor Khaled Said, and suggests that the revolution was the first case of Ultras' engagement with political struggle. Contrary to what is stated by a Zamlakāwī informant to Mason (2012)—who claims that the supporters were first sent to Taḥrīr by "the club HQ" in order to attack the protesters, but only changed their intent

when they found the protesters to their liking³¹—Bashīr writes that the role of the Ultras was clear from the beginning:

On the 22nd of January 2011 to be precise, a video appeared on YouTube, posted anonymously, assuring those committed to going out [to demonstrate] on January 25th, as well as [assuring] those who were fearful of police brutality and its repression, that there would be an Egyptian squadron (faṣīl) capable of defending them on the streets, [while] showing images of clashes between Egyptian groups, in particular Al-Ahlī and al-Zamālik fans [in fights] with the police.³²

Adding to the credibility of the message was the inclusion of footage shot a few days earlier at a football match where the crowds were screaming “Tunis! Tunis!” incessantly, “thus indicating that the Egyptian police was soon going to face the same fate.”³³ In the remaining days leading up to January 25, other channels such as the Facebook page Kullinā Khālid Sa’īd, were used to spread the message that the Ultras would come out on the Day of Anger.³⁴

However, Bashīr does not mention that the message of the anonymous YouTube video which he refers to, was countered by a clear and official denial by both the Ultras Ahlawy and the Ultras White Knights some days prior to the start of the revolution.³⁵ The Ahlawy Facebook page said:

Ultras Ahlawy declares that it is a sports group only, which has no political inclinations or affiliations of whatever kind. Therefore the group is not participating in the demonstrations planned to take place on this Tuesday 25 of January...

Similarly, Ultras White Knights declared on 24 of January:

[The report saying that the Ultras White Knights are participating in the January 25 demonstrations] are without any truthful basis and are lacking in consideration of the role of the group and the fundamental reason for its establishment.³⁶

Both statements proceed to clarify that individual Ultras are free to do as they please. The evidence is confusing. In the end, it may not be possible to find out exactly what the Ultras intended in the days preceding January 25, because it is unlikely that there was such a thing as a collective intention in this regard. In any case, we know that Ultras came out in significant numbers several times during the days and nights of the Egyptian uprising. The accounts of their involvement are numerous, but scattered, often questionable and all too brief. We must in fact be careful when collecting stories about the role of the Ultras in the revolution, since such stories may be part of a secular discourse of the revolution that seeks to counter the narrative that says that the Muslim Brothers performed a key role in the street fighting. Nevertheless, the Ultras’ fighting presence on Tahrīr is not in doubt, as videos and the earliest reports testify. The most elaborate statement of Ultra

revolutionary engagement is to be found on pages 69 to 75 of Bashīr's book. Bashīr writes that Ultras were fighting in Cairo on January 25, and continued thereafter on a daily basis in (poorer) areas such as Bulāq, Shubrā and Gīza, as well as in cities elsewhere in the country (Alexandria, Suez). They were recognizable as Ultras in their appearance as well as in the way they worked together in confronting the police. Despite this teamwork, they were not officially present as a group, although Bashīr states that the Facebook pages of Ultras Ahlawy and Ultras White Knights contained messages with an indirect call upon their affiliates to come and protest on Friday January 28.³⁷

The Ultras as a Social Movement

Very little scholarly work has been done on Middle Eastern football fan cultures. Singapore-based James Dorsey is an exception.³⁸ He argues that over the past decades, the region's football stadiums have grown into alternative spaces of protest. He points out that regional elites put a lot of effort into controlling the vibrant energy of the stadium, by investing financially, socially or even on a personal athletic level (think of 'Alā and Gamāl Mubārak paying high profile visits to football matches; Sayf al-Islām al-Qadhdhāfi playing competition and later heading the Libyan Football Federation). Similarly, he stresses that there is an uneasy relationship between football fan culture on the one hand and ideas of Islamic conservatism on the other. However, Dorsey appears a bit too enthusiastic in his broad strokes that paint a decades-long development of regional politicization of a consciously activist football fan culture. Judging from the great variety in football fan cultures in Europe—which is the only region from which we have a reasonable amount of research data—there is little reason to assume a regional uniformity in the Middle East. Furthermore there is no evidence to prove that the region's Ultras were politicized prior to the Arab Spring, and it still remains to be seen if their politicization—to the extent that this exists—will last. Apart from Dorsey, brief reference should be made to Alberto Testa,³⁹ who has made the only study I know of that seeks to apply social movement theory to an Ultra group, in particular the Italian Ultras of an extreme right orientation. Testa however hardly defines what he means by a social movement, which diminishes the use of his study to the present article.

The literature on social movement or social movement theory (SMT) is a bit confusing. This is especially the case when it is to be applied to a Middle Eastern context; SMT was developed in a Western context, intended to explain Western realities. The encyclopedia definition holds that social movements are “sustained and intentional efforts to foster or retard social changes, primarily outside the normal institutional channels encouraged by authorities.”⁴⁰ These social change oriented collectives may further be defined as less formal than political parties, but with

more staying power than hypes or fashions. Examples from Western contexts are typically the environmentalist movement and the human rights movement, though social movements may also be a lot smaller, such as the Slow Food Movement.⁴¹ Bayat and Wiktorowicz have employed social movement theory in their analysis of Middle Eastern Islamism.⁴² Bayat moreover adds the specter of poor peoples' activism, which he sees engaging in "street politics." By street politics Bayat means the political relevance of peoples' presence in public space: street sellers occupying a part of the sidewalk or the road for their stalls; informal parking services involving the daily occupation of a section of the street; open air tea houses consisting of a tea cart amidst a dozen plastic chairs.⁴³ Their consistent occupation of a part of the public realm—always a part that is supposed to be set aside for the better off—is an affront to the authorities and a glaring display of the state's incompetence to keep every subject in his or her place. "[S]treet politics describes a set of conflicts, and the attendant implications, between an individual or a collective populace and the authorities, which are shaped and expressed in the physical and social space of the streets, from the back alleyways to the more visible streets and squares"⁴⁴ and football stadiums, one might add. Of course there is a difference between poor people occupying the sidewalks of Ṭal'at Ḥarb Street to sell their goods on the one hand, and on the other hand football fans occupying the stadium terraces, taunting and ridiculing the police. However, there is also an important similarity in that both occupations are transgressions of the norm and therefore harmful to the credibility of the authorities; both are risky endeavors that are being perpetrated nonetheless quite consistently, and apparently with success.

At first sight, neither the international Ultra movement in general nor the Egyptian Ultra groups in particular, qualify as a social movement. Yes, they are informal organizations, consistently pressuring the authorities in order to attain certain changes, but their organization is based on a shared group identity as Ultras of football club X, Y or Z; their key activities and ultimate concerns revolve not around society, but around their team. The question however, is whether the Ultra groups in Egypt should still be seen simply as independent hardcore supporters' organizations first and foremost. This is to some extent still how the groups will define themselves to this day. But what if their practices are consistently of a political nature? Since the bloodbath on February 1st in Port Said, when unknown assailants (presumably linked to the authorities) killed 73 Ahly fans, the football competition has been suspended. In theory, this should leave the Ultra groups more or less out of a job, if they are indeed first and foremost organized in order to bring "the twelfth man" to the stadium. In reality, the Ultras are still quite active, except now they can be found on Taḥrīr Square, in Muḥammad Maḥmūd Street, or at 'Abbāsiyya in front of the Ministry of Defense. Since the tragedy in Port Said there are even indications

that Ultras Ahlawy are starting to speak out in a politically partisan manner, such as taking a clear stand against the Muslim Brothers and presidential hopeful Abū al-Futūḥ.⁴⁵ An incident that is telling of how this dislike of the Muslim Brothers became more widespread, took place on June 5, 2012. The incident also reveals the impressive level of discipline exhibited by the Ultras in their public performances. The event took place a few days after Mubarak's conviction and the acquittal of most of the others who were accused. United Ultras had organized a march estimated at some 5,000 people which was as loud as could be with songs, drums and fireworks. However, the very moment the march arrived at Taḥrīr Square, where the Muslim Brothers were dominating, at a hand gesture, they fell silent: no one spoke. They did express themselves nonverbally when Muslim Brotherhood preacher Ṣafwat Hegāzī saluted the Ultras from the stage. At that point the Ultras again made use of hand gestures. They remained silent however as they marched through the square and into Muḥammad Maḥmūd Street, where they picked up where they had left off, shouting “ḥurriya! ḥurriya!”⁴⁶

Interviews with Ultras and observers of Egypt's new political activism in June 2012 confirmed that after the Port Said massacre, a general surge in Ultras' political activism has taken place. An indication of this development is the emergence of Ultras Tahrir Squares (Ultrās Miyādīn al-Taḥrīr) on the internet, who aim to unite the various Ultras into a single revolutionary activist front.⁴⁷ This new initiative, intentionally transcending the logic and boundaries of club-allegiance, may however also be seen as a sign that the pillar of Ultras culture, namely club allegiance, is in itself a hindrance for Ultras who want to engage in broad social protest.

Even if Bashīr insists that the Egyptian Ultras are apolitical, and even if there have been confirmations of this stance, for instance in the position taken by Ultras White Knights in March 2011, when they urged people to go out to vote in the constitutional referendum without advising Yes or No,⁴⁸ their actions speak louder than their “official” discourse. The answer to the question above is then “No”; the Ultras should at this point in time not be seen primarily as a hardcore football fan club, but rather as an informal collective that is part of a wider popular current of protest against the fulūl. This is not surprising, given that the potential for social protest is innate to the combined key components of the global Ultra movement: anti-authoritarianism; group dynamics; youthful energy; abstract idealism: against the debilitating effects of rampant commercialization. In hindsight, it appears as relevant that since their establishment in the course of the 1990s, the Ultras fought near-weekly battles with the police in and around the football stadiums, using all sorts of creative ways to ridicule authority. This experience and this spectacle gradually eroded the police's capacity for intimidation and gnawed away at the majesty of the regime.

Ḥasan and Islām: Two Ultras

Much of what is read in *Kitāb al-Ultrās* has been confirmed during fieldwork conducted in June 2012. I had an interview with two Ultras on the evening of June 19, 2012. During the interview we were with four people: my friend and Ultra aficionada Sarah Badī'a—who arranged the meeting—Ḥasan, Islām and myself. Ḥasan (20 years old) is from Ultras White Knights and Islām (19 years old) is from Ultras Ahlawy. They are both from the mostly lower-class district of Imbāba. They joined their respective Ultras teams five years ago. We are on the sidewalk of Muḥammad Maḥmūd Street about a hundred meters away from Taḥrīr Square. A few days before, the Military Council has disbanded Parliament. Egypt is awaiting the result of the final round of the presidential elections; Mursī or Shafīq. As we speak, a milyūniya is building up on Taḥrīr Square. It is dominated by the Muslim Brothers. We sit on chairs that belong to a coffee house across the street. The meeting was postponed several times and Ḥasan seems ill at ease. Sarah does most of the questioning, as Ḥasan clearly responds better to her. Although I make it clear that I'm not "press," but rather working on a scholarly article, he is not comfortable. Talking to (foreign) outsiders about one's activities as an Ultra can be frowned upon, especially if it involves boasting one's personal achievements and status. Ḥasan explains that self-denial (*inkār al-dhāt*) is very important in the Ultra scene. There is no room for personal glory.

They are familiar with Bashīr, but haven't read his book. They don't know the concept of *al-kura al-ḥadītha*, but Islām does express his dismay with the fact that clubs these days just sell players according to financial logic, even if it is a player who is really important to the team. If *al-kura al-ḥadītha* is not a familiar term, other terms are. *Tīfō* (*tifo*), *kōriyō* (*choreo*) and *kōrshēt* (presumably a mispronunciation of *kōrtēj*,⁴⁹ *cortège*) are terms used by Ḥasan when he talks about the activities of the Ultras. Ḥasan and Islām confirm what Bashīr says about relations with the clubs' official bodies; the Ultras are quite consciously not connected to these.

Ḥasan has just been made *kābō* (*capo*), which is visibly a source of pride. He lights up when I ask him about it. His new status is also underlined by the Ultra youths who come up to greet him in a submissive manner. He remains seated as they shake his hand, kiss him and hug him. I ask him who decides that he can be *capo*. He explains that over the years he had impressed people in his group, made up of about 300 people. He was clearly a hard worker (*fā'āl*) and he showed diligence in teaching the young Ultras; this made people in his group suggest him as *capo* to this group, which hails from Imbāba. The two leaders of the Imbāba group were thus approached, who consequently took this up with the leaders from other areas, Giza and Bulāq. When they agreed, Ḥasan could be made *capo*. As *capo*, Ḥasan is

in charge of a certain section (consisting of a few dozen individuals) of the Imbāba contingent, who are obliged to follow his instructions and directions in chants, songs and—when it so happens, fights. At this point it is useful to remember that Ḥasan and Islām have already been with the Ultras for five years. Only one of them has recently been trusted with a position of authority, which took a significant number of decisions and consultations. This principle of organic leadership in the organization may well explain the remarkable fact that the Ultras appear not to have been infiltrated.

Ḥasan and Islām say the financing of the activities is realized through private donations, in which rich members are supposed to donate around 100 or 150 pounds per month, whereas the poorer members pay what they can in the range of up to five or ten pounds. There is even a bank account.

For an Ahlawy and a White Knight to sit next to each other would have been unthinkable before the revolution. Now there is even collaboration, especially after what happened in Port Said. Ḥasan and Islām are familiar with Ultras Miyādīn al-Tahrīr, but more so with what they have established themselves after the massacre in Port Said: the Ultras Freedom, in which Ultras from various clubs work together in order “to protect the revolution and establish freedom.” One of the youths who come to greet Hassan wears an Ultras Freedom T-shirt (also bearing the acronym A.C.A.B.). Islām tells us that they are trying to activate youth politically by means of informing people at football matches played by the Egyptian national team. Football here has become a means to an end, rather than an end itself.

For Ultras like Ḥasan and Islām—who belong to a lower socio-economic class—the Facebook pages are irrelevant for communication. All communication is done, if not in person, by mobile phone. The issue of social class is remarkable because its relevance has reportedly changed drastically since the revolution, and particularly since the massacre of Port Said. Before the revolution there was a distinct animosity between Ultras of different classes. Cheering on the same team in the Ultra fashion did not override class differences; classes did not mingle in the stadium. Since the revolution this has changed; a certain sense of shared purpose and equality has come to replace some of the barriers that previously separated rich and poor. Bashīr does not write anything about class distinctions between Ultras or about socio-economic distinctions between the various groups, which clearly exist (even if their relevance may currently be diminished). Though hard evidence is lacking, Ḥasan and Islām agree with the suggestion that Ultras Ahlawy draws more people from higher classes than Ultras White Knights. The fact that Ahlawy has twice as many friends on Facebook than White Knights may be another indication of this difference, but this may also be simply a result of Ahlawy Ultras being more numerous.

Conclusions

In hindsight it is not strange that Egypt's hardcore football fans could play their revolutionary part. They were young, disciplined and experienced in physical confrontations. More importantly, the Ultras had cultivated a strong group cohesion in which a sense of self-worth could be experienced by means of participating in various forms of resistance against the powers that be. During the revolution this resistance suddenly transformed into an act of patriotism. The exact trajectory of Ultra politicization and in particular their entry into the revolution remains somewhat vague. It will not be easy to find clarity in this regard: not all renderings of Ultra contributions to the struggles that began on January 25, are entirely disinterested. Apart from the Ultras' own boastful nature, there is the factor that external liberal commentators may look upon the Ultras as a source for narrative counterweight against the stories that relate of the supposedly crucial support of the—similarly trained and disciplined—Muslim Brothers in the first weeks of the revolution.

While questions such as those mentioned above may continue to linger, other things are clear already. Bashīr's book may have its bias, but its portrayal of the Ultras as a transnational phenomenon is confirmed by recent reporting on Egyptian Ultras, in fieldwork and in the way Egyptian Ultras represent themselves on the internet. There is clearly a shared language and a highly distinct kind of football fan activism that connects youths in stadiums throughout the Mediterranean basin and beyond.

The Egyptian revolution was launched by a variety of forces that shared a broad non-partisan idealism. The Ultras became a part of that collective, and rather than splitting into various factions (as was the case with other parts of the collective, such as the April 6 Movement), the experience had the contrary, centripetal effect of bringing together the various factions into collaborations or even unified fronts (e.g. Ultras Freedom; Ultras Tahrir Squares). A key question is how long they will be able to sustain this position of non-partisan revolutionary idealism. For how long can the collective of Ultras sustain itself as a "quasi social movement" the ideals of which are not primarily related to the wellbeing of any football club; will their political outlook have to crystallize further? Would a further politicization bring together Ultras of the various clubs, or is a political diversification to be expected along team-lines?⁵⁰ Whatever may happen in the near future, the Ultras have already lasted as a politically relevant group for longer than anyone could have anticipated. Their bottom-up organization has resisted infiltration, their low level hierarchy has prevented the emergence of unique leaders and split-offs. Even if they are close to having run their course, which is doubtful, they have already done much to warrant the attention of scholars, and activists.

Notes

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4. Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
5. Gunter A. Pilz and Franciska Wölki-Schumacher, "Overview of the Ultra culture phenomenon in the Council of Europe member states in 2009," document drafted for International Conference on Ultras: Good Practices in Dealing with New Developments in Supporters' Culture, January 18, 2010, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/sport/Source/T-RV/T-RV_2010_03_EN_background_doc_Prof_PILZ.pdf (accessed May 1, 2012), 9. Alberto Testa, "The UltraS: An Emerging Social Movement?" *Review of European Studies* 1:2 (2009), 54-63 at 55.
6. Muhammad Jamāl Bashīr, *Kitāb al-Ultrās. 'indamā tata 'addā al-jamāhīr al-ṭabī'a* (Cairo: Dār Dawwīn, 2011), 28-29.
7. Pilz and Wölki-Schumacher, "Overview of the Ultra culture."
8. *Ibid.*, 5.
9. *Ibid.*, 7.
10. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
11. E. Dunning, P. Murphy, and I. Waddington, "Towards a Sociological Understanding of Football Hooliganism as a World Phenomenon," in *Fighting Fans: Football Hooliganism as a World Phenomenon*, ed. E. Dunning, P. Murphy, I. Waddington, and A. E. Astrinakis (Dublin: UCD Press, 2002), 17, 19.
12. Pilz and Wölki-Schumacher, "Overview of the Ultra culture," 8.
13. *Ibid.*, 17-19.
14. *Ibid.*, 20.
15. See the following websites from across Europe against this phenomenon: www.againstmodernfootball.com (England); www.tegenhetmodernevoetbal.nl (Netherlands); <http://mouvement-Ultra.forumactif.fr/t2747-platoche-contre-le-football-moderne> (France); <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Gegen-den-modernen-Fu%C3%9Fball/134359363314219> (Germany). Cf. "ḍid al-kura al-ḥadītha" (Bashīr, *Kitāb al-Ultrās*, 169-175).
16. Pilz and Wölki-Schumacher, "Overview of the Ultra culture," 15.
17. Pilz and Wölki-Schumacher are unclear at this point, arguing that Ultras are not particularly leftwing or rightwing, whereas their material shows clearly that the dominant trend is the rightist one. Testimony to this is for example, what they relate of leftist groups in Spain referring to themselves as *anti-Ultras* in order to disassociate themselves from the right-wing Ultras in the country. ("Overview of the Ultra culture," 19-20.) See also: Testa, "The UltraS."
18. Gemyhood is the pseudonym under which Bashīr authors a weblog: www.gemyhood.com. See also: www.facebook.com/gemyhoodblog.
19. The term *jamāhīr* may indicate the Ultra groups, but in these revolution-minded days it is perfectly possible to think that it recalls the Egyptian masses of late January.
20. Bashīr, *Kitāb al-Ultrās*, 10-13 and passim.

21. Ibid., 25.
22. Ibid., 38.
23. Ibid., 39.
24. Ibid., 165-166.
25. Socialisme.nu, "Revolutie radicaliseert voetbalsupporters Egypte, 'Tantawi, wij willen je hoofd!'" February 4, 2012, <http://socialisme.nu/blog/nieuws/23369/revolutie-radicaliseert-voetbalsupporters-egypte-%E2%80%98tantawi-wij-willen-je-hoofd%E2%80%99/> (accessed March 16, 2012). Khalil al-Anani (sic.), "Al-thawra al-misriyya fi mir'āh al-tārīkh," *Jadaliyya.com*, January 26, 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4171/خيبرانشال-آر-م-ي-ف-ة-ص-م-ل-ا-ق-ر-و-ن-ش-ل> (accessed May 1, 2012).
26. Bashīr, *Kitāb al-Ultrās*, see the chapter entitled "A.C.A.B. Kull riḡāl al-amn awghād," 95-103.
27. Ibid., see the chapter entitled "ḡid al-kura al-ḡadītha," 169-175.
28. Ibid., 74-75.
29. Socialisme.nu, "Tantawi."
30. Passant Rabie, "And the fans played on," *Egypt Today*, March 6, 2012, <http://egypttoday.com/news/display/article/artId:559/And-the-Fans-Play-On/secId:25> (accessed May 4, 2012).
31. Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 16-17.
32. Bashīr, *Kitāb al-Ultrās*, 70.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Some of these statements are collected in 'Amru Hāshim Rabī' (ed.), *Wathā'iq 100 yawm 'ala thawra 25 Yanāyir* (Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, July edition), 343-345; at least one is still accessible on the internet: http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=183770148312807&id=152436011448151 (accessed May 3, 2012).
36. Ibid.
37. I assume Bashīr means "facebookpages," when he writes "nasharat *al-safhāt* al-rasmiyya li-lmajmū'atayn al-kubār bi-l-'āshima." I have not been able to retrieve these messages.
38. James M. Dorsey, "Soccer: A Middle East and North African Battlefield," Social Science Research Network, November 6, 2012, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1955513> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1955513> (accessed March 16, 2012). Teresita Cruz-del Rosario and James M. Dorsey, "Street, Shrine, Square and Soccer Pitch: Comparative Protest Spaces in Asia and the Middle East," RSIS Working Paper No. 230 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2012), <http://hdl.handle.net/10220/7570> (accessed March 16, 2012). See also Dorsey's blog: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/>
39. Testa, "The UltraS."
40. James M. Jasper, "Social Movements," in *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 4443-4451.
41. I am leaving the distinction between SMT and *New SMT* for what it is. Neither will I elaborate on the distinction between social movements and social movement organizations (Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Tim Bartley, "Social Movement Organizations," in *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 4440-4443).
42. Asef Bayat, "Activism and Social Development in the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34:1 (2002), 1-28. Bayat, *Life as Politics*. Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).
43. These examples are taken from Cairo, where I witnessed these phenomena personally before and especially after the January 25 revolution.
44. Bayat, *Life as Politics*, 11.
45. On May 2 their Facebook site posted the following YouTube video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_8qSPonTIY (viewed June 28, 2012).
46. Interview with Sarah Badr'a on June 20, 2012. Sarah was present at this march. Her statement is largely confirmed by Cairo-based freelance journalist Dirk Wanrooij, who was also present at this march. While he confirms the Ultras' antipathy towards the Muslim Brothers, he did not connect

the Ultras' silence on this day as a protest against the Muslim Brothers on stage. Correspondence by mail with Wanrooij, July 22, 2012.

47. <http://www.facebook.com/ultras.tahrir.squares> (viewed June 28, 2012).
48. "ṣawtak muhimm yā fāris (.) ḥatqūl na'm ḥatqūl lā... ṣawtak da btā'ak wa bass," cited in Rabī' *Wathā'iq*, 344. In White Knights' parlance, a member of the group is referred to as *fāris*/"knight."
49. Bashīr, *Kitāb al-Ultrās*, 187.
50. See Sherif Tarek, "Egypt's Ultras: Politically involved but not politically driven, yet," *Ahram Online*, January 16, 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentPrint/1/0/31904/Egypt/0/Egypt's-Ultras-Politically-involved-but-not-politi.aspx> (accessed May 4, 2012) for an indication that some are working on a unified Ultras political movement, while others remain skeptical.