



## In Mideast Protests, Ultras Are Down but Not Out

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Middle East soccer fans played an important role in the 2011 popular revolts. Regimes across the region are determined to ensure that they will not have another such opportunity.**

Ali Issa Ahmad, a British soccer fan, [lingered in jail in the United Arab Emirates earlier this year for wearing a Qatari soccer jersey](#) during the 2019 Asian Cup (which Qatar State won). Ahmad, who could have been sentenced to years in prison for supporting the wrong team in the eyes of the UAE, was released after several days as the UAE sought to avoid the reputational damage his prosecution would have entailed.

The UAE's stopping Qatari fans from attending recent Asian Cup matches and banning expressions of support for its nemesis because of the rift in the Gulf that has pitted the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia against Qatar is about more than political rivalries between states determined to shape the region in their mold.

Ahmad's plight is part of a region-wide effort to ensure that soccer fans who played major roles in recent Middle East history don't get another opportunity.

Soccer fans were central to the 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. They constituted the backbone of initial resistance to the military regime that in 2013 overthrew Muhammad Morsi, Egypt's first and only democratically elected leader. Fans led the 2013 Gezi Park anti-government protests in Turkey, and, beyond the Middle East, the 2014 anti-government demonstrations in Ukraine.

The effort to control soccer fans takes on added relevance with mass protests in the greater Middle East occurring in [Sudan](#), [Algeria](#) and [Jordan](#). [Kazakh](#)

[president Nursultan Nazarbayev recently replaced his cabinet](#) in a bid to halt mounting social unrest.

The effort takes various forms, ranging from banning support in the Gulf for a particular team; to brutal repression and the closure of most domestic matches in Egypt to the public ever since the 2011 revolt; to attempts in Turkey to politically control all fan activity. As in Turkey, all fans admitted to Egyptian stadia (in very limited numbers) are first politically vetted to ensure that they won't turn the pitch into a protest venue.

The effort has succeeded to some extent, even if legal measures to ban militant fan groups in Egypt and Turkey have failed. The return to stadia of some fans in Egypt suggests that the government feels it has gained the upper hand.

"The Egyptian regime has specific issues with fans organizing collectively for football. So [if these fans can be depoliticized, they can return to stadiums](#). This is the real political motivation for allowing fans back into the stadium: the belief that they have successfully depoliticized the game," said Ziad Akl, an analyst with the Cairo-based Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies.

The proof is in the pudding. Indications are that it hasn't persuaded militant fans, who, though a minority, were the heartbeat of Egyptian fandom.

"I haven't been to matches for years, and I'm certainly not going to start now. [I'm not stupid enough to give the security services my address, where I work, and my full name](#). I don't mind doing this to vote or to get a national ID, but I won't do this for a football match," said a member of a Cairo Ultras group.

He was echoing [the response of Turkish fans to government efforts to force identification of fans](#) through an electronic ticket system.

The Ultras' message is that militant soccer fans may be down but are not out, and that Egyptian general-turned president Abdel Sisi will have to get a grip on simmering discontent by addressing widespread social and economic discontent rather than relying primarily on brutal repression.

To be sure, the differences between 2011 and 2019 could not be starker. Sisi presides over the worst repression in recent Egyptian history. It has targeted even the slightest forms of dissent, making toppled leader Hosni Mubarak's rule look relatively benign.

Nonetheless, militant soccer fans pose enough of a continued threat to prevent the government from fully lifting the ban on spectators attending soccer

matches that has been in place for much of the past eight years. The government recently agreed to admit a meager 5,000 fans per match.

The ban was initially imposed when the popular revolt erupted in 2011 but was lifted once Mubarak was forced to resign after 30 years in office. It was reintroduced and has been in force without interruption since February 2012, when 72 supporters of the storied Cairo club Al Ahli were killed in stampede in a Port Said stadium. Many believe this was an attempt that got out of hand by the military and law enforcement to cut the Ultras down to size.

“No one is excited that the fans are back. People went to the stadiums because of the atmosphere created by Ultras – [Egyptian football has died with the banning of Ultras](#),” said one of the founding members of Ultras White Nights, the militant support group of Al Ahli arch rival Al Zamalek.

[Among Egypt’s estimated 60,000 political prisoners are scores of militant supporters of soccer clubs](#) who were prominent not only in the 2011 uprising but also in subsequent anti-government demonstrations.

The student protests against Sisi’s coup, which turned the country’s universities into security fortresses, were brutally quashed by law enforcement forces abetted by the adoption of a draconian anti-protest law, tight control of the media, and a crackdown on non-governmental organizations.

The Ultras White Nights and their Al Ahli counterpart, Ultras Ahlawi, officially dissolved themselves in 2018 in a bid to ensure the safety of their members. As Ultras White Knights activity has continued on social media, where both groups have or used to have huge followings, the dissolution was widely seen as tactical and a sign of goodwill.

“We are tired of going around police stations and prisons looking for our comrades. We want things to quieten down with the government, see the detainees go free and the crackdown end,” said former Ultras leader Muhammad Saheel.

“[The Ultras are desperate and don’t see a bright future](#). They hope for a reconciliation with the regime to get their fellow members out of prison,” added journalist and soccer fan Mahmoud Mostafa.

The decision to dissolve came in the wake of a statement by the Ultras that [appealed to Sisi to initiate a dialogue](#) between the fans and police to iron out their differences. They called for a pardoning of detained militant fans.

The peace offering was a far cry from the Ultras' heyday. To the founders of various groups of Ultras in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, the battle for the stadia in the years prior to the 2011 revolts constituted a struggle for public space in a country governed by a regime that tolerated no uncontrolled public spaces.

The Ultras were the only group willing not only to challenge government control of public space but to put their lives on the line in staking their claim. They derived their title to the stadium from their analysis of the power structure of the sport, which positioned Ultras as the only true supporters of the club – as opposed to a corrupt management that was a pawn of the regime and players who were mercenaries who played for the highest bidder.

This is what attracted thousands of young, undereducated and un- or underemployed men. They joined the ranks of the Ultras because they were the only organized group that persistently and physically stood up to corrupt and brutal security forces who made their lives difficult, both inside the stadia and in the neighborhoods where they lived.

Members of the Ultras and people close to them caution that the Sisi government's apparent success in beating them into submission may be only temporary.

Many believe “nothing will happen. Standing up to the regime amounts to suicide. The question is how long that perception will last...Things will eventually burst. When and where nobody knows. But the writing is on the wall,” said a source close to the Ultras.

Added a founder of one of Egypt's original Ultras groups: “This is a new generation. It's a generation that can't be controlled. They don't read. They believe in action and experience. They have balls. When the opportunity arises, they will do something bigger than we ever did.”

*This article is an edited version of a German-language chapter in a book to be published in conjunction with the [Macht der Masse – 4e Halbzeit](#) (Power of the Mass – 4<sup>th</sup> Intermission at the Ludwig Forum Aachen in Germany.*

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