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**SOCCER: MOULDING THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

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**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
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## Abstract

Nowhere in the world has sports in general and soccer in particular played such a key role in the development of a region than in the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, the nexus of sports, politics and society is one area that Middle East studies with few exceptions have ignored. Similarly, sports studies have focused on all parts of the world with one exception: the Middle East and North Africa. Nonetheless, sports and particularly soccer has been in various parts of the Middle East key to nation formation, nation building, regime formation, regime survival and the struggles for human, gender and labour rights. This working paper is an attempt to fill a gap in the literature and contribute to the development of theory on the role of sports in the Middle East and North Africa.

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## Introduction

No study, analysis or history of modern society is complete without a focus on the nexus of sport, society, culture, politics and development, and the power of this nexus is nowhere more evident than in soccer – the world’s most global cultural practice. Through their involvement in soccer, governments, NGOs, players, managers and fans define who they are as well as who they think others are. This is particularly true in the Middle East and North Africa where soccer has played a key role in the struggle against colonialism and for independence, national identity formation, assertion of power and resistance to autocracy. Yet, research into the role of soccer in the development of the Middle East and North Africa since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most recently in this decade’s popular uprisings, is nascent at best.<sup>1</sup>

“The study of sports, and football in particular, arguably the most popular form of cultural performance in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East, has much to add to our current understanding of the social, political and cultural history of the region,” said historian Shaun Lopez in a journal article lamenting the failure of Middle East scholars to include sports in their research.<sup>2</sup> That gap in scholarship is all the more stunning given “the seminal importance of football and other sports in the region or the central role athletics plays in the formation of national identity in most Middle Eastern and North African countries.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In an incomplete summary, John Bale, Adam Brown, Paul Dietschy, David Head, Pierre Lanfranchi, Richard Giulianotti, John Williams, Matthias Marschik, Doris Sottopietra, Les Black and J. William Baker have published on Europe. Alan Chong, Jana Valencic, Dave Russell, Wray Vamplew, Claudentr Boli, Yves Gastaut, Stephane Mourlane, J. M. Bradley, Daniel Burdsey, Robert Chappell, Peter Byrne, Timothy J. L. Chandler, Chas Critcher, Mike Cronin, Patrick Murphy, John Williams, Norbert Elias, Eric Dunning, G.P.T. Finn, John Goulstone, George G. Graham, Simon Inglis, Charles Korr, Herbert F. Moorhouse and Steven Tischler have written about Britain; Peter J. Beck, Bernd M. Beyer, Roland Binz, Juergen Bitter, Alexander Brand, Arne Niemann, Rene Wiese, Jutta Braun, Franz-Josef Brueggemeire, Juerg Steiner, Ulrich Borsdorf, Christopher Young, Diethelm Knauf, Ian Watson, Christoph Dieckmann, Felix Linnemann, Erik Eggert, Christiane Eisenberg, Guenter Gebauer, Markus Hesselmann, Robert Ide, Alan Tomlinson, Christopher Young about Germany; Marianne Amar, Pierre Arnaud, Jean Camy, Loic Ravenel, Didier Reey, Alfred Wahl, Jean-Marc Silvain, Noureddine Seoudi about France. Latin America has been tackled by Joseph L. Arbena, Jorge Barraza, Ernesto Escobar Bavio, Richard Giulianotti, Tony Mason, Pablo Alabarces, Maria Graciela Rodriguez, Fernando Alonso, P. Eduardo Archetti, Christiane Eisenberg, Amilcar Romero, Osvaldo Bayer, Jimmy Burns, Beto Devoto, Roberto Fontanarosa, Julio Frydenberg, Alex Bellos, Waldenyr Caldas, Gaston Julian Gil, N. Larsen, Victor F. Lupo, Florian Mildenerger, Ulrich Pradmann, Peter Fuchs, Hejo Heussen, Klaus Humann, Pablo A. Ramirez, Cesar Gordon, Ronaldo Helal, Mario Filho, Alain Fontain, Leite Lopes, Jose Sergio and Anonio J. Guzman; Africa by Paul Darby, Bernadette Deville-Danthu, Michael Fanizadeh, Markus Peter, Ulf Engel, Peter Koerner, Patrick E. Igbinovia, Boyar Ly, Peter C. Alegi, Terence Monnington, Ossie Stuart, Kurt Wachter, R. Clignet, M. Stark, Andre Ntonfo, Bea Vidacs, I.O. Akindurtire, Philip Vasili. Robert Archer, Antoine Buillon, Belinda Bozzoli, Grant Javie, Irene Reid, G. A. Gabe, Ken Bediako, L. Fair, Phyllis M. Martin, N. A. Scott and Patrice Yengo; and Asia by Ben Weinberg, Ossie Stuart, P. Dimeo, J. Mill, Boria Majumdar, James A. Mangan, Fan Hong, Wolfgang Manzenreiter, John Horne, Jonathan Birchall, Derke Bleakley, Bill Murray, Sebastian Moffett, Haruo Nogowa, Maeda Hiroko, Jun Takahshi, Suzuki Kazane, Yoshio Takahashi, Paul Dimeo, Novy Kapadia, Tony Mason, Alex McKay, Dutta Ray, B. B. Pendleton, Ian Andrews, John Nauright, R. Hay, W. F. Mandle, Mohit and Prasad

<sup>2</sup> Shaun Lopez, *On Race, Sports and Identity: Picking Up the Ball in Middle East Studies*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 41, 2009, p. 359-361

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*Lopez

Political scientist Victor D. Cha put Lopez's assertion into a far broader context; the failure of international relations research to recognise the importance of sports in the relations between nation states and the way people interact on the international stage. "The study of international relations purports to explain how nation-states and individuals interact around the globe. Yet one major area of such interaction – international sport – remains exceedingly understudied. This in spite of the fact that countries have gone to war over sport, fought for sovereign recognition through sport, and that citizens around the world have it as a daily part of their lives. Indeed it is astounding that a phenomenon that matters so much has been so little studied by a field that purports to explain relations between states and humans around the world... If the operative question is: How does sport 'fit' into our understanding of world politics? The bottom line is that the existing literature offers no clear or consistent answers," Cha wrote in an effort to develop a theory of sports and politics.<sup>4</sup>

This study is a baby step effort to start filling the gap. It builds on the work of scholars who positioned soccer as a pillar of popular culture that makes it a focal point of politics<sup>5</sup>, a social construct shaped by those involved in the game<sup>6</sup>, and a reflection of how a society models existential, political and moral issues.<sup>7</sup>

### **Maintaining a fiction**

Sport and politics have intersected globally throughout history. Yet, politicians and sport officials insist on maintaining the fiction that the two are separate despite the fact that nations employ sport to project themselves, while fans display deep-seated passion and play sometimes an independent political role and sometimes a partisan one in association with political factions. Sport expresses national identity as well as that of different groups in society. It reflects how a nation, people or group sees itself and how it wants to be seen. Success in sport validates a group's place in society, a nation's place in the world and a country's ability to wield soft power in an era of globalisation.<sup>8</sup>

Sport also has the potential of becoming an engine for social and political change. When world soccer governing body FIFA awarded to Qatar the right to host the 2022 World Cup, this has already forced improvement of the material living and working conditions of foreign workers who constituted a majority of the population. Potentially, it could transform the political structure of a country whose politics are dictated by the fact that Qatar's citizenry accounts for less than 15 per cent of the

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<sup>4</sup> Victor D. Cha, A Theory of Sports and Politics, *The International Journal of History of Sport*, Vol. 26: 11, p. 1581 - 1610

<sup>5</sup> Gary Whannel, *Culture, Politics and Sport: Blowing the Whistle Revisited*. London: Routledge, 2008, p. 237

<sup>6</sup> John Sugden, *Critical Left Realism and Sport Interventions in Divided Societies*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, (45)3, 2010:258-72

<sup>7</sup> Eduardo P. Archetti and Amilcar G. Romero, *Death and Violence in Argentinian football* in *Football, Violence and Social Identity*, Richard Giulianotti, Norman Bonney and Mike Hepworth (eds), Abingdon OX: Routledge, 1991

<sup>8</sup> Soft power is the concept developed by Harvard professor Joseph Nye in his book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), involving the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, use force or give money as a means of persuasion.

population. Sport-driven change in the Gulf state would follow in the footsteps of (the 1988 Olympics that helped fuel) South Korea's transition from an autocracy to a democracy after the 1988 Olympics, and environmental change in China as a result of the 2008 games.

By the same token, sport as a venue for protest and a domestic policy tool populates human history. Already in 5<sup>th</sup> century Rome, support groups identified as the Blues, Greens, Reds and Whites, in the absence of alternative channels for public expression, acclaimed a candidate slated to be installed as Rome's emperor in games dominated by chariot racing.<sup>9</sup> Much like modern day militant soccer fans or ultras, they frequently shouted political demands in between races in a bid to influence policy. By allowing them to do so, Roman emperors recognised the sports arena as a platform for the public venting of pent-up frustration and anger as well as a listening post that allowed them to take early note of public sentiment and grievances.

In doing so, they set a trend that has since proven its value. In today's modern world, soccer pitches are frequently viewed as barometers of the public mood and indicators of political and social trends. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency routinely attends Middle Eastern and North African matches to glean clues as to where a country is headed.<sup>10</sup>

Rome serves further as an early example of the impact of fan power. That was most evident in the 532 AD Nika revolt, the most violent in Constantinople's history, when the then dominant Blues and Greens rioted for a week, destroyed much of the city, sacked the Hagia Sophia and almost succeeded in forcing Byzantine emperor Justinian I to vacate his throne.<sup>11</sup>

The identification through patronage and micromanagement of modern day Arab autocrats with soccer emulates the Romans' use of games and sports to solidify their power. Arab autocrats, however unlike their Roman predecessors, were determined to prevent soccer clubs from becoming arbiters of political power. The Greens and the Blues and their fans in 5<sup>th</sup> century games were the Roman predecessors of today's Middle Eastern and North African soccer fans who expressed similarly deep-seated passions.

However, in contrast to the Romans, giving fans and the public a say in the choice of a leader, would have been unthinkable in contemporary autocratic Arabia. It would have given the public a degree of sovereignty and undermined the position of the ruler as the neo-patriarchic, autocratic father in the mould of Palestinian-American scholar Hisham Sharabi's who characterised autocracies in the Middle East and North Africa as expressions of neo-patriarchy.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Cameron *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, 225-226

<sup>10</sup> Josh Meyer, To locate the next Arab Spring revolution, look to the soccer stands, Quartz, 22 May 2013, <http://qz.com/87105/to-locate-the-next-arab-spring-revolution-look-to-the-soccer-stands/>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*.Cameron; B. Bury, *History of the Late Roman Empire*, Chapter XV, 1923, New York; Macmillan & Co., Ltd [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/BURLAT/15B\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/BURLAT/15B*.html)

<sup>12</sup> Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy, A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, Oxford University Press, 1992

A neo-patriarchic autocrat, according to Sharabi, projects himself as a father figure who franchises his authority at different levels of society. The leader is in effect the father of all fathers at the top of the pyramid. Arab society, according to Sharabi, was built around the “dominance of the father (patriarch), the centre around which the national as well as the natural family are organised. Between ruler and ruled, between father and child, there exist only vertical relations: in both settings the paternal will is absolute will, mediated in both the society and the family by a forced consensus based on ritual and coercion.”<sup>13</sup>

In other words, Arab regimes, irrespective of whether they were revolutionary or monarchies, frequently run as a family business franchised repression so that society, the oppressed, participated in their repression and denial of rights. Lebanon, a conglomerate of delicately balanced ethnic and religious rivalries, was the exception that confirmed the rule. In the words of Egyptian journalist Khaled Diab quoted by journalist Brian Whitacker in a book exploring the nature of Arab society, Egypt's problem prior to 2011 was not simply an aging President Hosni Mubarak with little to show for himself after almost 30 years in power, but the fact that “Egypt has a million Mubaraks” including many soccer players who saw the ruler or the power behind the throne as a father figure.<sup>14</sup>

Going back more than half a century, Egyptian journalist, writer and activist Salam Moussa recalls that the handlers of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the military officer who replaced Egypt’s monarchy with an Arab nationalist regime in 1952, would order students at schools he visited to address the leader as ‘baba’ or father. “It was an overt and expensive act of defiance for a boy to use the more traditional “Saidat El Rais (Mr. President)” as a greeting, even if (he) was beaming while shaking the (father’s) nicotine-stained fingers.” Moussa reminisces.<sup>15</sup>

Sharabi’s concept of the neo-patriarchic father figure is rooted in the idea of the mother and father of a nation that harks back to the Arab struggle for independence in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Leaders then as now projected themselves as parents obliged to raise their children.<sup>16</sup> Saad Zaghloul, the leader of Egypt’s nationalist Wafd party, and a founder of crowned Cairo soccer club Al Ahli SC as a bastion of anti-monarchical republicanism, was at the time his country’s father. His wife Safiyya was Egypt’s mother in the years that Saad was exiled by the British. Al Ahli was the launch pad for the 1919 revolution sparked by Saad’s exile. It forced Britain to grant Egypt independence three years later.

Soccer was the perfect tool for neo-patriarchal autocrats. Their values were values widely projected onto soccer: assertion of male superiority in most aspects of life, control or harnessing of female lust and a belief in a masculine God. The game’s popularity, moreover, made it the perfect soft power tool

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Sharabi, p. 7

<sup>14</sup> Brian Whitacker, *What’s Really Wrong with the Middle East*, London, 2009

<sup>15</sup> Salam Moussa, *My Nasser*, 28 September 2013, salamamoussa, <http://salamamoussa.com/2013/09/28/my-nasser/>

<sup>16</sup> Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics*, Berkley, University of California Press, p. 145

to wield transnational sporting influence in an era of decolonisation followed by a Cold War in which sporting powers like the United States and the Soviet Union were focussed on the Olympics rather than the World Cup and subsequent globalisation.

Sharabi's assertion that Arab regimes exploited cultural patrimonial values to replicate authoritarianism throughout society and ensure that the oppressed participated in their repression and denial of rights builds on French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's notion that institutions of power make revolt inconceivable by turning the public into active participants in their own subjugation.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, neo-patriarchy framed the environment in which militant soccer fans turned the pitch into a battlefield. Arab autocrats like toppled Egyptian and Tunisian presidents Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had no intention of risking a repeat of Justinian I's experience. There was a world where there could be no uncontrolled public space, no opportunity for the public to express itself, voice grievances and vent pent-up anger and frustration. They could suppress most expressions of dissent like underground music. Musicians were intimidated, imprisoned or barred entry with by and large no public response. Labour activism was brutally repressed. The soccer pitch, however, like the mosque, were venues that could not simply be repressed or shut down given the deep-seated emotions they evoked among a majority of the population. The mosque proved easier to control. The pulpit was subjected to government supervision, and clerics were often state employees. Security forces successfully confronted more militant, politicised Islamists.

### **A threat and an opportunity**

Soccer pitches were not that simple. Fans, particularly militants, who described themselves as ultras and viewed club executives as representatives or corrupt pawns of a repressive regime and players as mercenaries who played for the highest bidder, were cut from a different cloth. They understood themselves as their club's only true supporters and as a result believed that they were the real owners of the stadium. In staking their claim, the fans often emerged in countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco as the only organised force willing and able to figuratively and literally challenge the regime's effort to control all public space. "The protests were in a very fundamental sense a contestation between protesters and state authorities over the use and meaning of public space," said lecturers Jeroen Gunning and Ilan Zvi Baron in their analysis of the 2011 revolt in Egypt.<sup>18</sup>

The fans' claim positioned soccer as both a threat and an opportunity for Middle Eastern and North African autocrats. The threat was an increasingly fearless, well-organised, highly politicised and street battle-hardened force that attracted thousands of young men who were willing and able to stand their ground against the security forces. In doing so, they were publicly challenging the state's authority. Deprived of the option to simply close down the contested public space, autocrats like Mubarak were forced to respond with a combination of co-optation and repression. Alongside heavy-handed use of

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage, 1995

<sup>18</sup> Jeroen Gunning and Ilan Zvi Baron, *Why Occupy a Square? People, Protests and Movements in the Egyptian Revolution*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 2013, p. 13

security forces, they sought to identify themselves with the game, the region's most popular form of popular culture, by basking in the success of national teams and major clubs and exploiting neo-patriarchal attitudes by showering players with expensive gifts and the ruler's attention while at the same time denouncing the ultras as criminals and thugs.

Co-optation potentially created significant opportunity for the autocrat. Identification with one of the country's most popular and emotive past times offered the autocrat the prospect of harnessing it to polish his often tarnished image. For Mubarak, a soccer team's success became an expression of the success of his nationalist leadership that he used to counter the growing popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood, the country's main Islamist opposition. Mubarak would congratulate players and place medallions around their necks after each of Egypt's triumphs in the African Cup of Nations. Victorious players elsewhere in the region were showered with expensive gifts: large amounts of cash and expensive real estate and cars. As a result, they became by and large typical products of Sharabi's concept of neo-patriarchy enamoured by the high status accorded to them. Many players initially viewed the toppling in 2011 of their country's leader as patricide or the death of the father.<sup>19</sup>

Co-optation also provided an autocrat with an additional peg for favourable media attention that could help distract attention away from or overshadow criticism. Egyptian state-controlled media sought, for example, with limited success, in February 2006 to sideline public outrage at the poor state of public transport and fuelled allegations of corruption. State-owned media focussed on Egypt's defeat of Congo in a crucial Africa Cup of Nations match to distract attention from the death of more than 1,000 people in the sinking of a poorly maintained ferry that came on the heels of two major train crashes.<sup>20</sup>

Co-optation further enabled autocrats to manipulate public emotions at given moments and rally the nation around them. That is where the Mubarak regime was most successful in exploiting opportunity created by the ultras' challenge on the soccer pitch. The president and his two sons fanned the flames of nationalism in late 2009 after Egypt lost its chance to qualify for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. The nationalist fervour they whipped up brought the world to the brink of a soccer-inspired conflict for the first time since the 1969 football war between Honduras and El Salvador<sup>21</sup> with violent clashes erupting between Egyptian and Algerian fans on three continents.<sup>22</sup> It was a dispute that exploited the two countries' soccer rivalry to distract attention from mounting domestic discontent and enhance Mubarak's prestige as a nationalist leader. It also constituted a battle about which country – Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country and traditional leader, or Algeria wearing a revolutionary badge earned in its brutal war of independence - had the historic and cultural credentials to represent the Arab world on the global pitch.

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<sup>19</sup> Zina Sawaf. 2013. Youth and the revolution in Egypt: what kinship tells us, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 6:1, 1-16

<sup>20</sup> Al Wafd. 2006. Surprise in Qaliub massacre, September 1, <http://www.mideastwire.com/topstory.php?id=10353>

<sup>21</sup> Pascal Boniface,. *Geopolitique du Football*, Brussels: Editions complexe. 2008:15-19

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Egyptian soccer analyst Hani Mokhtar, January 5, 2011

Egypt recalled its ambassador to Algeria while Algeria slapped then Egyptian-owned Orascom Telecom's Algerian operation with a tax bill of more than half a billion dollars. Libyan leader Qaddafi intervened to prevent the dispute from escalating. Algiers was draped in the colours and flag of its national team, traffic turned into a choir of honking cars whose passengers cheered their country and its soccer squad. Soap operas from Egypt, the region's Bollywood, were boycotted. Egypt Air and signs of Djezzy, the Orascom-owned telecom operator that sponsored major Algerian soccer clubs, were torn down. Material damage to businesses was estimated at \$64 million. Egyptian international striker Amr Zaki refused to move to English Premier League team Portsmouth, owned at the time by Saudi businessman Ali al-Faraj and UAE real estate investor Sulaiman Al-Fahim, because there was "no way I could play for Portsmouth with an Algerian in their ranks," a reference to Portsmouth defender Nader Belhadj, an Algerian national.<sup>23</sup> "The violence expressed years of depression of a population that constantly witnesses social, financial and political failure. Soccer is their only ray of light," said Ahmed Al Aqabawi, a psychology professor at Al Azhar University, the world's most prestigious institution of Muslim learning, and member of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>24</sup>

The crisis was a ray of light that cut two ways for Mubarak. On the one hand, frustrated and humiliated Egyptians forgot Arab and Muslim solidarity and their hatred of U.S. support for Israel and the Mubarak regime for a brief moment when they cheered the American infidels in their 2010 World Cup match against Algeria. Yet, on the other hand, Egyptians and Algerians were ultimately angry about the same issues despite their longstanding soccer rivalry: they begrudged their lack of freedom and economic prospects and resented the repression and brutal, omnipresent security services that kept their power-hungry, long-serving presidents in office.

### **Unusual suspects**

The key role of soccer fans in in Egypt as well as Algeria in expressing that dissatisfaction and resentment in 2011 serves as evidence of scholars Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta's notion that the "real protagonists of the Arab Spring did not come from the usual suspects within established and formal civil society but from sectors of society that have been largely under-explored."<sup>25</sup> They noted that the post 9/11 trend in academic literature to view the region through the prism of the resilience of autocratic regimes meant that research focussed on "the mechanisms of state domination and co-optation, ignoring informal and unofficial loci of dissent and activism, presenting therefore a picture of a stability that did not exist."<sup>26</sup> It also meant that new civil society actors such as the ultras<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The Daily Mail, Amr Zaki cites Israeli and Algerian presence at Portsmouth as reason for shun, November 23, 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-1230101/Zaki-cites-Israeli-presence-Fratton-Park-reason-shun.html>

<sup>24</sup> James M. Dorsey.2010, Soccer vs. Islam: Football and Militant Islam Compete For Hearts and Minds, InCoherent, July 29, <http://incoherenci.blogspot.com/2010/07/soccer-vs-islam-football-and-militant.html>

<sup>25</sup> Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta. 2013. Debating Civil Society Dynamics in Syrian and Iran' in Civil Society in Syria and Iran, Boulder, Co, Lynne Rienner, p.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*Aarts and Cavatorta, p. 3

<sup>27</sup> While scholars agree that the phenomenon of ultras or hard core soccer fans traces its roots to Italy of the 1950s when groups of men aged 16 to 40 broke norms of behaviour with the use of more aggressive

represented new interests and modus operandi that did not necessarily conform to liberal democratic notions of activism. Their emergence reflected political, economic and social changes in the Middle East and North Africa as well as autocratic attempts to adapt to a more globalised, more interdependent world.

Sociologist Asef Bayat anticipated Aarts and Cavatorta's notion that the revolts in the Middle East and North Africa originated in under-researched sectors of society like soccer fans by developing the concept of 'social non-movements'<sup>28</sup> that "interlock activism with the practice of daily life."<sup>29</sup> These movements feature significant elements of what constitutes a social movement – an organised and sustained claim directed at the authorities, a repertoire of performances, and public representation of their cause – but operate separately. That was certainly true for rival groups of ultras who largely were as hostile to one another as they were towards security forces as the repressive face of the state. They defied however notions of classical social movements like those formulated by Cyrus Zirakzadeh given that that they lacked a clear idea of the alternative order they were seeking to achieve or the basic means to build it.<sup>30</sup> Instead in line with David Snow, Sarah Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi's observations they acted "outside of institutional or organisational channels."<sup>31</sup> The fans' protests broke with classical models of protest not only because of their definition of what support for a club entailed but also because they were dictated by the logic and the rhythm of the game.

Nevertheless, taken together, Bayat, Aarts and Cavatorta's insights refined concepts of non-social movements that scholars like Donnatella Porta, Mario Diani, David Snow, Sarah Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi initially described as informal networks with shared beliefs and a sense of solidarity that raise contentious issues through protest;<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Alain Touraine viewed social movements as "actors of central conflicts in society, embodying fundamental oppositions regarding the direction of the historical process;"<sup>33</sup> while John McCarthy and Mayer Zald's initial notion was that they were "little more than

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language and more aggressive physical postures. The scholars differ on when these groups who pride themselves on adopting a unique mindset that encourages extremism and criticism of managers and players turned violent. Some say violence first occurred during a match between Napoli and Bologna in 1959 in which 65 people were injured. Others argue that it was a decade later in the context of anti-authoritarianism in the 1960s and 1970s (Alberto Testa and Gary Armstrong, *Football Fascism and Fandom, The UltraS of Italian Football*, 2010: London, A&C Publishers Ltd, p. 71). Giancarlo Noris of the Rome Municipality dates the violence to the 1980s (Noris, *Ultras and Society: the Municipality as a Driving Force for Action in Prevention of Violence in Football Stadiums in Europe* edited by Manuel Comeron and Pierre VanBellingen, <http://orbi.ulg.ac.be/bitstream/2268/140825/1/Eurofan-book-english2003.pdf>).

<sup>28</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics, How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 2010, Stanford, Ca., Stanford University Press, p. 4

<sup>29</sup> *Idem.* Bayat, p. 11

<sup>30</sup> Cyrus Zirakzadeh, *Social Movements in Politics: A Comparative Study*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 6

<sup>31</sup> David Snow, Sarah Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi, *Mapping the Terrain* in David Snow, Sarah Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 11

<sup>32</sup> Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 16

<sup>33</sup> Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981

expressions of preferences that movement organisations are supposed to mobilise and turn into real action.”<sup>34</sup>

The role of soccer fans cast as new actors with new interests and modus operandi allows for an innovative application of social movement and asymmetric warfare theory to the understanding of the Middle East and North Africa, its nexus of sports, politics and society and the fans’ role in popular revolts. The world of the ultras is one of ‘transgressive contention’ that challenges an autocrat’s narrow, tightly controlled institutional framework as defined by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly in their seminal work, *Dynamics of Contention*.<sup>35</sup>

The ultras’ definition of success was akin to conclusions during and after the Vietnam war that asymmetric conflict could not be won by overwhelming forces only. A 1965 six volume, a never declassified study of the Vietnam war by the Rand Corporation entitled *Oregon Trail*, argued that the outcome of armed conflicts between a militarily powerful nation and a weak but persistent enemy was determined primarily by psychological rather than by military factors. It also concluded that rebels were likely to lose if the powerful nation focused on political and social grievances driving the rebellion rather than on its military defeat.<sup>36</sup>

New Yorker journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell came to a similar conclusion almost half a century later in his study of the advantages of weakness and disability and his criticism of *Rebellion and Authority* by Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Jr, a 1970 declassified Rand publication that became a bible for militaries fighting overseas to suppress revolts and insurgencies.<sup>37</sup> Gladwell argued that perceptions of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the stronger party was the decisive factor that determined the outcome of an asymmetric conflict.<sup>38</sup>

Stronger parties win when they are able to persuade their weaker opponent that they have legitimacy, they lose if their opponent is able to maintain that they lack legitimacy. The more a stronger party seeks to crush its opponent, the more it loses legitimacy and strengthens the weaker party’s resolve and determination to resist. In doing so, the stronger side enhances the likelihood that the weaker party will win. By contrast, a stronger party that seeks to redress the grievances of its weaker opponent gains legitimacy, allowing it to undermine the legitimacy of its distractor and improving its chances of victory. “Power has an important limitation. It has to be seen as legitimate, or else its use

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<sup>34</sup> John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, *Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 82;6, p. 1212-1241

<sup>35</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2001

<sup>36</sup> Freeman Dyson, ‘How to be an Underdog, and Win,’ 21 November 2013, *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LX:18

<sup>37</sup> Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Jr, *Rebellion and Authority*, 1970, The Rand Corporation, <http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2006/R0462.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*, New York: Little, Brown, 2013, Kindle Edition

has the opposite of its intended effect,” Gladwell argued.<sup>39</sup> “When the law is applied in the absence of legitimacy, it does not produce obedience. It produces the opposite. It leads to backlash.”<sup>40</sup>

These attributes go to the core of Gladwell’s criticism of the assertion by Leites and Wolf that “influencing popular behaviour requires neither sympathy nor mysticism.”<sup>41</sup> Interpreted as meaning that the power of the state was limitless, Gladwell read Leites and Wolf as asserting that “if you wanted to impose order, you didn’t have to worry about what those whom you are ordering about thought of you. You were above that.” They saw obeying the law as a rational, economic calculation of risks and benefits: riots erupt because the cost is not high enough. In Gladwell’s view, Leites and Wolf had it backwards. The contrary is true: defeating civic society opponents or insurgents is as dependent on legitimacy as getting children to behave in a classroom. Disobedience in a classroom frequently is the consequence of a teacher failing to properly assert his or her authority. “How you punish is as important as the act of punishing itself,” Gladwell argued.<sup>42</sup> He went on to say that “the powerful have to worry about how others think of them - ... those who give orders are acutely vulnerable to the opinions of those whom they are ordering about.”<sup>43</sup> Gladwell defines legitimacy as ensuring that the weaker party feels it has a voice, that the law is predictable, and that the authority is perceived as fair.<sup>44</sup>

Gladwell’s argument and the conclusions of the Oregon Trail are applicable to determined civic groups resisting brutal security forces. In the case of Egypt, militant, well-organised, street battle-hardened soccer fans emerged victorious from four years of confrontations with security forces representing a regime that failed to meet any of the criteria that create legitimacy by virtue of the fact that their organisation survived intact to play a decisive role in the toppling of Mubarak. Survival intact in the face of violent confrontation constituted victory in and of itself. It also displayed the vulnerability and fallibility of a regime that even when it was forced to resort to violence failed to achieve its goal of undisputed control of a key public space, the stadium.

In doing so, the fans with their emphasis on the fight against corruption and nepotism appeared to validate the assertion by anthropologist and geographer David Harvey that the struggle for improved and more egalitarian economic rights is fought as much in the work place as it is urban public spaces like stadia.<sup>45</sup> The fans embodied attributes Gladwell postulates as prerequisites for the success of weaker parties: to have the strength to resist against the odds weaker parties have to be disagreeable or insensitive to other people’s needs or feelings; they must be deceptive and tricky to compensate for

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* Gladwell, Loc 2659

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* Gladwell, Loc 2450

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* Leites and Wolf Jr, p. 30

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* Gladwell, Loc 2315

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Gladwell, Loc 2409

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* Gladwell, Loc 2308

<sup>45</sup> Hiba Bou Akar and Nada Moutaz, On Why Struggles over Urban Space Matter: An Interview with David Harvey, Jadaliyya, 15 November 2013, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15156/on-why-struggles-over-urban-space-matter\\_an-interv](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15156/on-why-struggles-over-urban-space-matter_an-interv)

their weaknesses; they must be willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause; and they must have discipline and self-control.

### **A dialectic relationship**

The fans' confrontation fit the template scholars Eduardo P. Archetti and Amilcar G. Romero applied to Argentina two decades earlier. The police and security forces' "use of physical force aided by arms of some kind....(was) exclusively destined to harm, wound, injure, or, in some cases, kill other persons, and not as an act intended to stop unlawful behaviour that is taking place or may take place.," they wrote. Official foot-dragging in holding security officers accountable added to that perception, giving "police power...the aura of omnipotence" that "at the same time lost all legitimacy both in moral and social terms," they argued— a development reinforced in post-revolt Arab societies such as Egypt by the failure to reform the security forces. "The police in the stadia, therefore, are perceived not as neutral and shallow actors but as central and active participants. To resist and to attack the police force is thus seen as morally justified," they wrote. For their part, the police defined "the fans as a political. Stadiums were converted into open political arenas."<sup>46</sup>

The Mubarak regime's violent response to the ultras was the logical follow-on to a decade of increasingly violent reaction to ever larger peaceful protests against the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and in support of the Palestinians and by professionals such as students, lawyers and judges. The regime's harsh response to violence used by Americans against Iraqis and Israelis against Palestinians produced an identification of that abuse in the minds of protesters with the mistreatment they were experiencing at the hands of Mubarak's security forces. Calls for an end to corruption and the fall of Mubarak informed the ultras as they emerged in the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's first decade. So did the fact that regime violence had failed to quell the protests. The ultras learnt from and developed techniques that emerged in the years of protest that preceded them while at the same time adapting them to the environment of the stadia and conceiving of new ones. These techniques included circumventing security cordons and blockades by melting away and regrouping elsewhere and surprising security forces with surges emanating from different directions. The tactics of the fans and other youth groups were facilitated by technological advance such as text messaging, email and social media.

The fans reflected a dialectic relationship between the dramaturgical<sup>47</sup> and the grievance<sup>48</sup> models of social and resource movement theory. Dramatic support of clubs through carefully choreographed

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<sup>46</sup> Eduardo P. Archetti and Amilcar G. Romero, *Death and Violence in Argentinian football in Football, Violence and Social Identity*, Richard Giulianotti, Norman Bonney and Mike Hepworth (eds), Abingdon OX: Routledge, 1991

<sup>47</sup> Robert D. Benford and Scott A. Hunt (*Dramaturgy and Social Movements: The Social Construction and Communication of Power*, *Sociological Inquiry* Vol. 62:1, p. 36-55, described social movements as dramas involving clashes in which the protagonists seek to influence perception of power in societal institutions.

<sup>48</sup> John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald. *The Enduring Vitality of the Resource Mobilization Theory of Social Movements* in Jonathan H. Turner (ed.), *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, New York, 2001:533-65); Ted Robert Gurr (*Why Men Rebel: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011);

manifestations with fireworks, flares, smoke guns and banners; graffiti; poetry; lyrics; and forms of chanting brought fans into confrontation with security forces that fuelled grievances of abuse and mistreatment. Those grievances resonated with their experience of security force mishandling and oppression in their daily lives in the popular neighbourhoods of major cities. Expressing a sentiment widely shared among Egyptians, the ultras taunted the police and security forces during soccer matches and on Tahrir Square with chants asserting that “we will no longer conduct ourselves in line with your whim; spare us your sight”<sup>49</sup> and celebrating their success during the mass protests that toppled Mubarak in giving the security forces and unprecedented thrashing:

"We haven't forgotten Tahrir, you sons of bitches!  
The revolution was your catastrophe.  
We'll tell anyone... Officers, pimps  
You took a beating like you haven't had in years"<sup>50</sup>

If the police and security forces sparked the ire of the ultras in the years preceding the toppling of Mubarak, they were joined by the military as it became evident in the months of military rule immediately after the departure of the president that the military had no intention of fulfilling the anti-Mubarak revolt's goals. The realisation that Egypt's first and only democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, also would not be the reformer the protesters had hoped for made him and his Muslim Brotherhood a target too.

Anger against the military peaked with a soccer brawl in February 2012 in the Suez Canal city of Port Said at a time in which the military was still in government in which 74 Al Ahli supporters ()died. Few doubt that the brawl constituted an attempt by the military and the security forces that got out of hand to teach the ultras a lesson and force them to tone down their anti-government protests. The effort backfired putting the government with the legal proceedings to punish those allegedly responsible for the incident between a rock and a hard place. A verdict acquitting those charged including ultras of Port Said's Al Masri FC was certain to spark a revolt by the Al Ahli ultras. In the end the court sentenced 21 Port Said ultras to death, provoking an uprising in Port Said that spread to other cities straddling the Suez Canal. The verdict failed to absolve the military from its alleged responsibility in the eyes of the Cairo ultras.

"Military police, you are dogs like the Interior Ministry. Write it on the prison's walls, down, down with military rule," ultras chanted in the stadia. "We want your head, you traitor Tantawi. You could have carved your name in history, but you were arrogant and you believed Egypt and its people could take

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Clifford Bob (Marketing Rebellion: Insurgents, Media and International Activism, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Sidney G. Tarrow (Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics. Revised and Updated Third Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) argued that social movements sustain protests when grievances prompt individuals to take action at a time that they are able to marshal sufficient material and symbolic resources, including the resonance of diagnostic and prescriptive frames; changes in political opportunity structures; and the international context.

<sup>49</sup> Ultras Ahlawy. 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4-kDd4sqeE>

<sup>50</sup> Ultras White Knights. 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9AaAEhbs-Y>

a step back and forget their revolution," said a group of ultras referring to Field Marshall Mohammed Hassan Tantawi, then top commander of the Egyptian armed forces.<sup>51</sup> "Today, the Marshal and the remnants of the regime send us a clear message. We either have our freedom or they punish us and execute us for participating in a revolution against tyranny," the group, Ultras Tahrir Square, asserted in a statement that went viral on the Internet.<sup>52</sup> "The people want the execution of the field marshal," ultras chanted in mass protests immediately after the Port Said incident.

Street art also served the ultras "as a powerful device of collective consciousness and as a pervasive continuous collective remembrance."<sup>53</sup> Graffiti on Cairo's Mohammed Mahmoud Street, the scene of bitter battles between the ultras and security forces in late 2011, depicted the victims of the Port Said incident as winged angels.

A poem near the gallery of portraits of the deceased read:

"I am the martyr  
I, whose blood was spilled on every inch here  
I, who gave up his life so that you live here  
You killed my dream and sold cheaply my blood  
And acquitted the killer and did not acquit me  
I am the martyr"<sup>54</sup>

The gelling point produced by drama and grievance lies in the fact that the militants survived their regular confrontations with the security forces to live another day. The intensity of the confrontation shaped the nature of their protest. Brutal repression in Egypt and Tunisia sparked non-negotiable demands for the autocratic ruler's demise. The fans' ability to weather the repression demonstrated the vulnerability of the security forces and with it the reduced efficiency of the regime's repression – a prerequisite for successful revolts according to sociologist, political scientist and historian Charles Tilly.<sup>55</sup> Their achievement enhanced in their view what Tilly and his fellow scholar Jack A. Goldstone termed the "probability that social protest action will lead to success in achieving desired outcome."<sup>56</sup> The ultras' were Tarrow's "early risers" who engage in actions that test and potentially expose a state's increased vulnerability to collective challenge.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dina Zayed and Edmund Blair. 2012. Egypt's "ultras" soccer fans target ruling generals, Reuters, February 2, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/02/us-egypt-soccer-ultras-idUSTRE8110K420120202>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* Zayed and Blair

<sup>53</sup> Mona Abaza. 2013. Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo's Graffiti, E-International Relations (E-IR), October 7, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/07/mourning-narratives-and-interactions-with-the-martyrs-through-cairos-graffiti/>

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* Abaza

<sup>55</sup> Charles Tilly, Does Modernization Breed Revolution?, *Comparative Politics*, 5, April, 1973

<sup>56</sup> Jack A. Goldstone and Charles Tilly, Threat (and Opportunity): Popular Action and State Response in the Dynamics of Contentious Action. In *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, R.R. Aminzade et al (eds). New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001:182

<sup>57</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994

The regime's repressive response in Egypt and Tunisia in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century hardened the dividing lines. Opponents of the regime, including the ultras, demanded regime change. By contrast, the rulers of Jordan and Morocco employed force more selectively and often saw protest in stadiums as release valves. As a result, protesters in Jordan and Morocco demanded reform rather than revolution. They wanted political, social and economic change to be managed by the incumbent ruler. By contrast, brute force in Bahrain and Syria turned initial demands for reform under the incumbent into demands for regime change. "Most revolutions are not caused by revolutionaries in the first place, but by the stupidity and brutality of governments," commented Sean MacStiofain, former chief of staff of the Irish Republican Army, in his memoirs.<sup>58</sup>

Reaffirmation of their identity meant for the ultras standing their ground in the stadia, and retaining their ability to express their choreographed support for their team by successfully resisting attempts by the security forces to stop them. While many ultras professed loftier goals such as fighting for an end to corruption, greater freedoms, and justice for the Palestinians, their lack of ideological and political cohesion beyond the soccer pitch made it unlikely that they would develop into a political force capable of achieving such targets.

Nevertheless, their role in breaking down the barrier of fear instilled in Egypt and elsewhere in the region by Sharabi's neo-patriarchic father figure that prevented them from publicly voicing their grievances and demanding change during the 18 days of protest in early 2011 that toppled Mubarak, calls into question political scientist Erica Chenoweth's theory that protest movements need to have three prerequisites to effect change.<sup>59</sup> Chenoweth argued that they had to be able to attract widespread and diverse participation, develop a strategy that allows them to manoeuvre around repression, and capable of provoking defections, loyalty shifts, or disobedience among regime elites and/or security forces. The ultras fulfilled the first two criteria but not the third.

Bayat's social non-movements<sup>60</sup> such as the ultras feature significant elements of what constitutes a social movement – an organised and sustained claim directed at the authorities, a repertoire of performances, and public representation of their cause – but operated separately. That was certainly true for rival groups of militant soccer fans who were largely as hostile to one another as they were towards security forces that they saw as the repressive face of the state. In breaking down the barrier of fear they were what Gunning and Baron termed "experienced 'facilitators,' many of whom had been honed by years of protests."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Sean MacStiofain, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 1979, Free Ireland Book Club, p. 115

<sup>59</sup> Erica Chenoweth, 'The Dissident's Toolkit,' 25 October 2013, Foreign Policy, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/24/the\\_dissidents\\_toolkit?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/10/24/the_dissidents_toolkit?page=full)

<sup>60</sup> Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics, How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, 2010, Stanford, Ca., Stanford University Press, p. 4

<sup>61</sup> *Idem.* Gunning and Baron, p. 30

Bayat's concept implicitly acknowledged Aarts and Cavatorta's proposition not to define civil society in normative terms that presupposes liberal democratic values such as human rights and democracy but in neutral terms as "the space between the state and the family, where citizens engage on a voluntary basis with issues of societal relevance" without necessarily establishing a formal organisation or defining themselves as political.<sup>62</sup> Based on research by scholars Sheri Berman<sup>63</sup> and Amaney A. Amal<sup>64</sup> that suggested that civil society activity can reinforce autocracy, Aarts and Cavatorta argued that dropping the assumption of liberal democratic values allowed research to include "non-traditional actors not usually thought to be part of civil society"<sup>65</sup> such as bloggers or, for that matter, soccer fans who stress that their organisation and activities are not political. While ultras created organisations, they insisted that these were not political in a bid to reduce their vulnerability and exposure to political repression.

Bayat, Aarts and Cavatorta further build on the fact that the past decades of Middle Eastern and North African history have various social and political revolts and transformations that involve what Robbert Woltering called 'unusual suspects.'<sup>66</sup> These include the 1985 protests by students, workers and unions that forced Sudanese President Jaafar Numeiri to resign, the first Palestinian intifada from 1987 to 1993 on the West Bank that was sustained by women, volunteers and medics, and protests in 2005 in Lebanon that cut across all ethnic and sectarian segments of society and forced the withdrawal of Syrian troops who had effectively occupied the country for 39 years. Similarly, the Kefaya (Enough) movement in Egypt, the precursor to the youth groups that toppled Mubarak which Bayat defined as a "post national and post ideological movement,"<sup>67</sup> successfully targeted students, teachers, judges, lawyers and journalist irrespective of their ideology, religion, gender or social status rather than the traditional opposition forces.

Militant soccer fans fit Bayat's category of urban subjects such as the unemployed, housewives and 'informal people,' whose only option to express discontent is to resort to a public space such as the street or the stadium because they "lack the institutional power of disruption" such as workers' ability to go on strike. "Here conflict originates from the active use of public space by subjects who, in the modern states, are allowed to use it only passively – through, walking driving, watching – or in other ways that the state dictates. Any active or participative use infuriates officials, who see themselves as the sole authority to establish and control public order,"<sup>68</sup> Bayat argued. The ultras' claim to ownership

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<sup>62</sup> *Idem.* Aarts and Cavatorta, p. 6-7

<sup>63</sup> Sheri Berman, Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society, June 2003, Carnegie Endowment for Peace, <http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/files/berman.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> Amaney A. Jamal, Barriers to Democracy: The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World, 2007, Princeton, Princeton University Press

<sup>65</sup> *Idem.* Aarts and Cavatorta, p. 6

<sup>66</sup> Robbert Woltering, 'Unusual Suspects: 'Ultras' as Political Actors in the Egyptian Revolution,' Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol 35:3, p. 290-305

<sup>67</sup> *Idem.* Bayat, p. 6

<sup>68</sup> *Idem.* Bayat, p. 11

of the stadium directly challenged the state's self-defined prerogative and officials' perception of their authority to which the regime instinctively responded with repression.

Similarly, the ultras conformed to Bayat's notion of youth non-movements that are about reclaiming youthfulness and the assertion of their "individuality, creativity, and lightness and free them from anxiety over the prospect of their future. Curbing and controlling youthfulness is likely to trigger youth dissent... The intensity of youth activism depends, first, on the degree of social control imposed on them by moral and political authorities and, second, on the degree of social cohesion among the young."<sup>69</sup> In the absence of structured networks, soccer constituted an important framework in which youth could spontaneously forge a collective identity. "Theirs was not a politics of protest, but of practice, a politics of redress through direct action," Bayat argued referring to informal networks that were stemmed from recognition of commonalities rather than deliberate solidarity whose preoccupation are narrow claims of youthfulness, not big picture political concepts.

Bayat's notion of social non-movements and Aarts and Cavatorta's assertion that civil society is defined by groups seeking to carve out public space that may not be formally organised and do not define themselves as explicitly political is rooted in what Melani Cammett and Ishac Diwan defined as the political economy of this decade's Arab revolts that undermined the social contract that had kept autocrats in power. That political economy links economic factors such as the region's shift towards market rather than planned economies marked by crony capitalism; corruption fuelled by the emergence of regime-bound new elites and low public sector wages; widening inequality and the state's declining ability to cater to the social and welfare needs of a majority of the population; social change involving segments of the population articulating political aspirations and the addressing of grievances; and a political watershed with segments of the middle class - small merchants and industrialists that frequently populated the informal sector who benefited from the transition to a market economy and private sector skilled labour – no longer willing to align themselves with the regime.<sup>70</sup>

Cammett and Diwan argue that their political economic framework explains why the revolts were sparked by secularist youth, a category to which the bulk of militant soccer fans belong in Tunisia and Egypt – two countries that had relatively high growth rates at the time.<sup>71</sup> They noted that on a regional basis, government expenditure in the Middle East and North Africa peaked in the 1970s in the wake of increased oil wealth at 50 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), but had dropped to 22 per cent by the early 1990s. Private investment failed to compensate for the shortfall while agricultural subsidies dropped significantly. The impact was felt primarily by the rural poor and the lower ranks of public sector workers and civil servants sparking protests in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Jordan against cutbacks in basic food subsidies. "In the mix of co-optation and repression—or carrots and sticks—changes in the former mattered more in explaining authoritarian breakdown than the

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* Bayat, p. 18

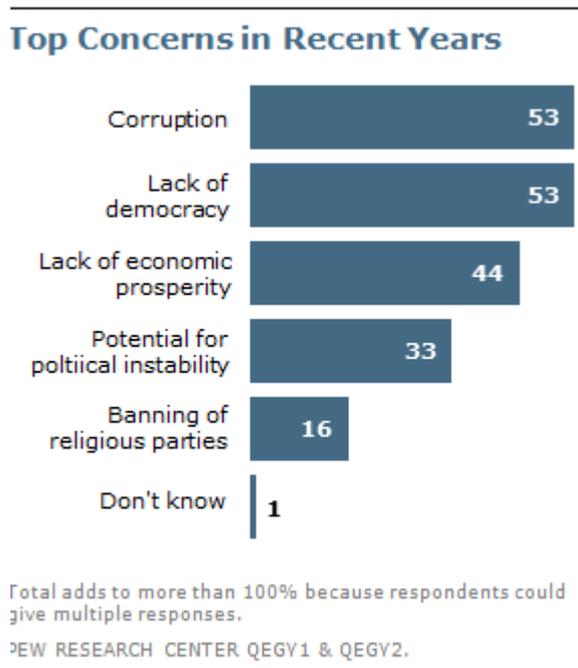
<sup>70</sup> Melani Cammett and Ishac Diwan, 'Toward a Political Economy of the Arab Uprisings (Part One),' *Jadaliyya*, 26 December 2013, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15754/toward-a-political-economy-of-the-arab-uprisings->

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* Cammett and Diwan

latter,” Cammet and Diwan wrote.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, in contrast to Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa where economic crisis sparked political liberalisation, Arab regimes responded with increased control. This trend was reinforced by U.S. and European policies that sought to ensure regional stability by maintaining the status quo rather than risky political and social change.

### The social contract ruptures

A Pew Research survey published two months after the fall of Mubarak concluded that corruption and lack of democracy topped Egyptians’ concerns ahead of economic prosperity and political stability.<sup>73</sup>



In a separate paper two years later, Diwan argued that analysis of opinion by social class in the years between 2000 and 2008 showed that both the lower and the middle class increasingly clamoured for more democracy as a result of complaints among the poor about increasing inequality and the middle classes’ sense of unfulfilled aspirations.<sup>74</sup> These dashed expectations were the product of some middle class segments joining the ranks of the poor as well as economic liberalisation policies producing small merchants and industrialists who, unlike civil servants employees of state-owned companies who accounted for the bulk of the middle class, were less dependent on the government and therefore less politically restrained.

This class demography matches that of soccer fans, whose tribal nature means that support for a club is passed from father to son. Diwan noted that the shift in parents becoming more supportive of their

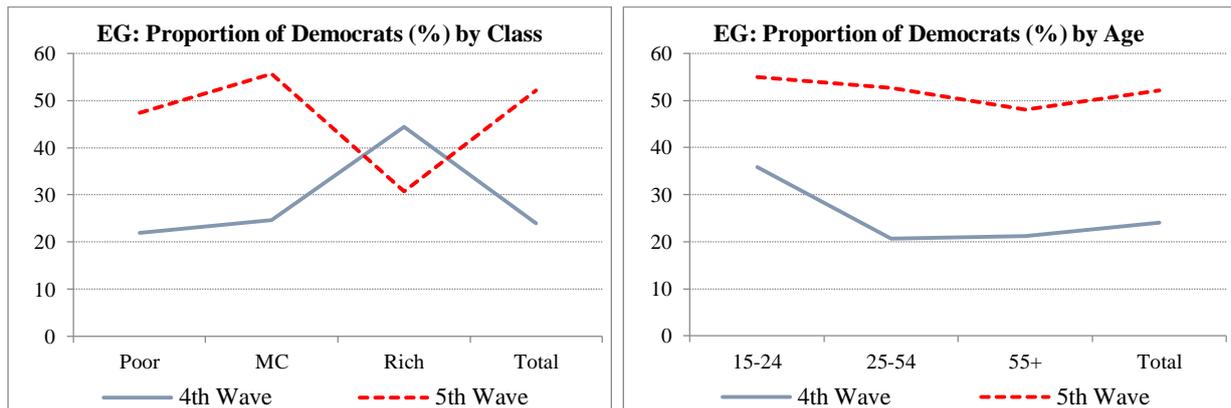
<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* Cammett and Diwan

<sup>73</sup> Pew Research, ‘Egyptians Embrace Revolt Leaders, Religious Parties and Military, As Well,’ 25 April 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/04/25/egyptians-embrace-revolt-leaders-religious-parties-and-military-as-well>

<sup>74</sup> Ishac Diwan, Who are the Democrats? Leading Opinions in the Wake of Egypt’s 2011 Popular Uprisings (unpublished). 2013, Cambridge, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

children’s demand for more democracy was notable in a comparison of the 2000 and 2008 results of the World Value Survey (WVS). This seems to suggest that their opinions may have paved the way for a catch-up by their parents. In this story, the closeness of the Arab family plays a positive role. To the extent that the underlying forces driving opinions are connected to skilled youth unemployment, a major phenomenon for the MC (middle class), it seems that Egyptian MC parents became as unhappy as their children about the lack of job opportunities – and this pushes them to favour regime change and democracy,” Diwan wrote.<sup>75</sup>

**Figure 1: Preference for Democracy, by Class and Age**



Source: *Ishac Diwan*<sup>76</sup>

The ultras’ willingness to assert their claim to ownership of the stadium was fuelled by the impact of the rupture in the social contract involving social and welfare cutbacks at the same time that increasingly close ties between the regime and its economic cronies became evident in heightened control of clubs by these elites and widespread corruption in the sport. Fan opposition to the effects of crony capitalism on a key tenant of their lives reflected broader popular concerns that cut across age groups. With other words, while youth, including soccer fans, emerged as the main actor in popular revolts, their concerns were shared by their parents and older members of their extended families.

The ultras’ claim to ownership was rooted in a fierce, tribal-like loyalty to the club expressed in an architectural environment that allows for strength in numbers and encourages solidarity and collective action compounded by a game that aims to conquer territory. It enabled the ultras to stand up to authorities’ attempts to halt them in their tracks. These attempts often followed a classic pattern as portrayed by Teresa Pires do Rio Caldeira in her study of urban segregation in Sao Paulo<sup>77</sup> and Jon Coaffee’s depiction of London’s territorial approach to reducing the post-9/11 terrorist threat:<sup>78</sup> criminalisation of the target group, in this case the ultras, as a threat to the existing political, social,

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* Diwan

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* Diwan

<sup>77</sup> Teresa Pires do Rio Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*, (2000) Berkley:University of California Press

<sup>78</sup> Jon Coaffee, ‘Rings of Steel, Rings of Concrete and Rings of Confidence: Designing Out Terrorism in Central London Pre and Post September 11<sup>th</sup>,’ *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*, Vol 28:11, pp. 201-211

urban and moral order in a bid to legitimise use of force to secure, fortify, control and restrict public space and depoliticise them.

In many ways, Middle Eastern and North African stadia served the same purpose as streets in major metropolitan centres in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America where the trek of millions of impoverished and dispossessed migrants from the countryside to the city forced them to effectively live in public spaces. Stadia like streets were venues where people forge or reinforce their identity and establish links and common ground with like-minded or those with whom they share circumstance and similar sentiments. They were what Hannah Arendt described as “a place where people could come together – the agora, the market-place, or the polis, the political space proper.”<sup>79</sup> The stadia, geographically far away from the symbols of state power, allowed the fans to produce Henri Lefebvre’s political spaces characterised by new symbols and practices that challenged existing representations of that space.<sup>80</sup>

The identity reasserted by mostly male soccer fans in stadia is tribal given that their allegiance to the club was more often than not instilled in them by their fathers. It is reinforced moreover by the large numbers in a confined environment and the nature of the sport, which involves the conquest of territory. It constitutes a modern day validation of the notion of Abd-ar-Rahman Aby Zayd ibn Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, the 14<sup>th</sup> century father of sociology, of tribal solidarity as a driver of change.<sup>81</sup>

The feeding ground for protest and confrontation with security forces was beyond the ultras’ ideological claim of ownership enhanced by the fact that the state’s options were limited. Soccer was too popular a form of popular culture for it to simply close all stadia or permanently ban the public from attending matches. Its only option was to make repressive law enforcement, involving intrusive security checks and violence, a fact of life. The nature of the stadium and the ultras’ artistic yet aggressive expressions of support for their club shaped the confrontation with the state, which in turn strengthened bonds among the fans. State reprisals instilled a deep-seated aversion to what they termed abuse and mistreatment among ultras, politicised them to varying degrees.

The soccer fans claim to ownership of the stadia enabled them to defy notions that a lack of vibrant, dynamic and interactive urban public spaces prevents collective action put forward by sociologist Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin,<sup>82</sup> anthropologist Setha Low and geographer Neil Smith,<sup>83</sup> geographer Don

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<sup>79</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 31

<sup>80</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991, pp. 33 and 38-39

<sup>81</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, N. J. Dawood, Franz Rosenthal and Bruce Lawrence, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 2004, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 97

<sup>82</sup> Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin (ed.), *‘Réinventer le sens de la ville: les espaces publics à l'heure globale,’* (2001) Paris: L'Harmattan

<sup>83</sup> Setha Low and Neil Smith (eds.), *The Politics of Public Space* (2006) London: Routledge

Mitchell,<sup>84</sup> and philosopher Henri Lefebvre.<sup>85</sup> These authors argued that loss of public space disconnects people and prompts them to abandon it and surrender their rights. Geographer Mustafa Dikec noted furthermore that authorities develop narratives, strategies and mechanisms to normalise their domination of public spaces that excludes ordinary residents.<sup>86</sup>

Sociologist Dingxin Zhao<sup>87</sup> employed historian and political scientist William Sewell Jr's theory of the impact of a built environment on contentious politics<sup>88</sup> to argue that the ecology of a venue together with organisation and network strengthens bonds within a group. He used student mobilisation during the 1989 protests on Beijing's Tiananmen Square, as well as mobilisation during the French revolution, as his examples. That ecology, defined as the impact of the architecture and layout of a venue on its population as well as on spatial distribution and activities that shape human interactions through passive encounters and active networking, produced an environment that sustained a high rate of participation. It also facilitated what Sewell described as "the formation of many ecology-dependent strategies" that shape a group's dynamics.<sup>89</sup>

Zhao focussed primarily on the ecology of university campuses. He built his argument on scattered references in social movement literature to the impact of infrastructure on mobilisation in student movements in the United States, Russia, and China as well as in the riots in the 1960s in the densely populated ghettos of American cities. To Zhao the impact on mobilisation of the ecology of infrastructure was more important than the response of government and the use of police and security forces by autocratic regimes to defeat challenges posed by protest movements. Zhao was influenced by the fact that law enforcement refrained from entering the walled campuses of Beijing universities to prevent further alienation of already restless students. Initially, the Chinese approach was part of a soft strategy that also involved public denunciation of the protesters. It was a strategy that backfired. It encouraged rather than dissuaded the student activists. In the end, the Chinese reverted to the way law enforcement in the Middle East and North Africa handled protest: the obstruction and prevention of protest by militant soccer fans by ensuring that police and security forces had an overwhelming presence in and around stadiums.

Control of stadiums was crucial for Middle Eastern and North African rulers. Stadiums offered the ruler an opportunity to unite with the public in the celebration of a team's victory. It was there that the ruler shared with the public the kind of deep-seated passion that was paralleled only by religion. That

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<sup>84</sup> Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, (2003) New York: The Guilford Press

<sup>85</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (1992) Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell

<sup>86</sup> Mustafa Dikec, 'Police, politics and the right of the city,' *GeoJournal* (58) p. 91-98

<sup>87</sup> Dingxin Zhao, *Ecologies of Social Movements: Student Mobilization during the 1989 Pro-democracy Movement in Beijing*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1998: 103: 1493-529

<sup>88</sup> William Sewell Jr, *Space in Contentious Politics*, in Ronald Aminzade, Jack Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth Perry, William Sewell Jr, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (authors), *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2001

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* Sewell Jr.

moment of unification was broadcast on television and magnified in state-run media. It was a tool to polish his image often tarnished by his regime's inability to solve the nation's national, economic and social problems and by its repressive nature. Soccer was important, said state-owned Al Ahram Weekly Online, because it is "one of the threads that comprises the social fabric of Egyptian culture."<sup>90</sup> Hassan Khater, a Muslim Brother, lamented that Israel would not have dared annex and populate predominantly Palestinian East Jerusalem if Arabs were as passionate about the fate of the Al Aqsa mosque, Islam's third most holy shrine, as they were about the beautiful game.<sup>91</sup>

Stadiums in the Middle East and North Africa like university campuses in Beijing have a layout that simplifies mobilisation. Yet, if the Beijing campuses facilitated the transmission of dissident ideas and information about movement activities by sparking the emergence of multiple small dormitory-based student networks, which sustained a high level of student participation and encouraged inter-university competition for activism, stadiums in the Middle East and North Africa offered protesters bound by a virtually all-consuming passion for the game strength in numbers because security forces could not detain thousands and soccer matches were often broadcast live on televisions, risking the regime's repression being put on public display. In contrast to Beijing where competition among universities encouraged cooperation among student groups, rivalry between Middle Eastern and North African soccer groups increased mutual animosity that was only overcome once protests spilled out of the stadiums into streets, neighbourhoods and public squares. Nevertheless, student demonstration on 27 April 1989 at Tiananmen Square, the first large-scale open defiance to the state since the Communists took power in China, equated the unprecedented and sustained challenge to autocratic rule that emerged some 15 years later in Middle Eastern and North African stadiums.

## Conclusion

The identification of non-traditional social groups that drive political change reinforces Tilley's suggestion that comparisons of social movements needs to take their specific historical contexts into account<sup>92</sup> or in other words recognise that straightforward comparisons can be misleading. It also harks back to Olivier Roy's warning against what he termed "comparativism," the taking of "one of the elements of the comparison as the norm for the other, finding that there is either a resemblance or the lack of one, but never questioning the original configuration."<sup>93</sup> In doing so, the emergence of non-traditional social groups refutes the persistent Orientalist notion rooted in 18<sup>th</sup> century that views the Middle East and North Africa as different from other regions in the world because it approaches it as monolithic and static. It was that notion that produced the suggestion of Middle Eastern and North

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<sup>90</sup> Al Ahram Weekly Ruled by the Game. March 11-17, 2004. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/681/sp11.htm>

<sup>91</sup> Ikhwanweb, Khater slams Arabs for not showing zeal for Aqsa as they do with football, November 23, 2009, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=21828&ref=search.php>

<sup>92</sup> Charles Tilly, *Social Movements 1768-2004*, 2004, Boulder, Co., Paradigm, p. 7

<sup>93</sup> Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, 1994, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 8-9. Roy argues that comparativism risks isolating entities that are being compared, ignoring their individual dynamics as well as the dialectic relationship between them, and obscuring their factual specificity.

African exceptionalism that prevented analysts and scholars from recognizing winds of change in the region.

“Many academics focused on explaining what they saw as the most interesting and anomalous aspect of Arab politics: the persistence of undemocratic rulers... These regimes survived over a period of decades in which democratic waves rolled through East Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa... For many Middle East specialists, this remarkable record of regime stability in the face of numerous challenges demanded their attention and an explanation... As a result, academics directed their attention toward explaining the mechanisms that Arab states had developed to weather popular dissent... We in the academic community made assumptions that, as valid as they might have been in the past, turned out to be wrong in 2011... Academic specialists on Arab politics, such as myself, have quite a bit of rethinking to do... Explaining the stability of Arab authoritarians was an important analytic task, but it led some of us to underestimate the forces for change that were bubbling below, and at times above, the surface of Arab politics,” wrote political scientist and Gulf scholar F. Gregory Gause III.<sup>94</sup>

The emergence of militant soccer fans as a social movement that fits some but not all of the boxes of various strands of social movement theory is one example of the underestimation of forces for change that Gause alludes to. More fundamentally, those forces can only be understood and explained by the kind of innovative multi-disciplinary approach adopted in this chapter that involves historical analysis, social movement theory, concepts of asymmetric warfare, notions of the impact of architectural environment on contentious politics, political economy, and critical area studies. Such an approach is needed to create a theoretical framework for researching the crucial nexus of sports, politics and society in the Middle East and North Africa. It also offers a basis to explain the role of soccer in shaping the modern Middle East and North Africa since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and for positioning militant soccer fans as forces of political and social change as well as of assertion of various forms of identity.

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<sup>94</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, ‘Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring, The Myth of Authoritarian Stability, Foreign Affairs, July/August 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/issues/2011/90/4>

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