

Soccer deaths and Egypt's security forces

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A stampede at a Cairo stadium in February¹, much like a deadly, politically-loaded soccer brawl in the Suez Canal city of Port Said three years ago, has cast a spotlight on Egypt's unreformed, unabashedly violent, and politically powerful police and security forces, a key player in government efforts to suppress dissent.

The most benign explanation for the deaths of at least 20 people in the stampede, which was likely the result of fans seeking to gain access to a match in the absence of available tickets² rather than a deliberate and planned assault by security forces, is Egyptian law enforcement's lack of training and experience in crowd control. At the very least, law enforcement was negligent and lacked foresight given that militant fans have consistently opposed the closing of stadia to the public for much of the last four years and have repeatedly sought to force their way in during matches.

The interior ministry, which controls the security forces, and the Egyptian Football Association (EFA) should have anticipated that the match between the storied Cairo club Al Zamalek SC and Engineering for the Petroleum and Process Industries Club (ENPPI) would likely be a flashpoint. It was to be the first match for which the ban on spectators had been partially lifted and against the backdrop of manipulative distribution of 10,000 tickets. Fans seeking entry to the match were driven into a narrow alley surrounded by barbed wire into which security forces fired tear gas and shotgun pellets.³

Reducing the problem to a lack of crowd control experience ignores the security forces' track record of brutality over many years. Calls for reform have repeatedly been disregarded. Non-commissioned thugs were routinely employed

¹ James M. Dorsey, "[Soccer deaths raise stakes for Egypt's general-turned-president Al Sisi](#)," *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, February 9, 2015.

² "[Fan riot in Egypt kills at least 25 people, security officials say](#)," *Associated Press*, February 8, 2015,

³ "[Egypt: Shocking deaths at football match lay bare security forces' failures](#)," *Amnesty International*, February 13, 2015.

to do the security forces' dirty work, played a key role in 2013 in persuading the military to remove elected President Mohammed Morsi from office, and have killed more than 1,400 protesters since.

Fan suspicion that they were being targeted⁴ stems from long-standing hostility towards security forces rooted in persistent confrontations since the emergence in 2007 of groups of 'ultras' – militant soccer fans who view themselves as their clubs' only loyal supporters.⁵ Ultras played a key role in removing President Husni Mubarak from power in 2011 and in protests against subsequent governments, including that of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Tension peaked in 2012 when 74 supporters of Zamalek rival Al Ahli SC were killed in a soccer brawl that had all the trappings of a planned incident gone awry.

Assertions by Ultras White Knights (UWK), the Zamalek support group whose members died in the Cairo incident, that they were being targeted were fueled by a campaign organized by the club's president, Mortada Mansour, a larger-than-life associate of Mubarak and Sisi, to criminalize the group as a terrorist organization.⁶ Mansour has accused UWK of trying to assassinate him and has petitioned the courts to ban the group; some 20 UWK members were sentenced in January to several years in prison on charges of inciting violence, assaulting security forces, and damaging private property.

The stampede, coupled with the controversial and well-documented killing days earlier of a 31-year old female protester, Shayma' al-Sabbagh, appears to have persuaded Sisi that security force brutality may have gotten out of hand. In a televised speech 10 days after the stadium incident, Sisi, in an apparent reference to security officials, vowed that "whoever (official) is responsible will be held accountable."⁷ He said that the killing of Sabbagh by masked policemen, after they attacked a small procession aiming to lay flowers on Tahrir Square in memory of the derailed 2011 revolution, was "in front of the general prosecution. We do not want these issues, despite their importance, to make us sceptical of each other...we have no benefit in neglecting or stepping over people's rights."⁸

Sisi's remarks followed an editorial in *Al Ahram*, Egypt's foremost state-owned newspaper, that, in an unusual break with its towing of the government line,

⁴ Ultras White Knights, Facebook, February 9, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/whiteknights2007?fref=nf>

⁵ James M. Dorsey, "[Soccer: Moulding the Middle East and North Africa](#)," RSIS Working Paper 286, February, 2015.

⁶ Al-Youm Al-Sabi', "[President of Zamalek Club: Police did not fire bullets, bullying caused deaths](#)," February 9, 2015.

⁷ "[Sisi says culprits will be punished in killings of activist, football fans](#)," *Ahram Online*, February 22, 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

condemned al-Sabbagh's killing as cold-blooded murder for which it held the police responsible. The editorial was believed to signal differences within the government and a realization among some senior officials that excessive security force violence was fueling anti-government sentiment and damaging Egypt's image. They also came in the wake of Egyptian media reports that unlike Zamalek, with its confrontational approach to its militant fan base, Al Ahli had succeeded in reducing tensions by engaging with Ultras Ahlawy, the club's hard line support group.⁹ The reports appeared to suggest that Sisi might be backing away from earlier tacit support for Mortada's war on the UWK. Two Egyptian courts recently refused to accept his petition to ban the group, arguing that they were not the competent authority for doing so.

"There is a major difference between the approach of Ahli and Zamalek. Taher was smart; he knew that it's unnecessary to create any rifts with that section of the supporters as long as the channel of communication operates perfectly," said sports journalist Sherif Hassan.¹⁰ Hassan was referring to Al Ahli president Mahmoud Taher, who in December persuaded Ahlawy ultras to voluntarily leave an empty stadium they had stormed hours before an African Confederation Cup final.

The stakes for Sisi are high, given that police brutality was one driver for the mass protests in 2011 that forced Mubarak to resign. Stadia were a key arena where security force violence contributed to the build-up of resistance to the Mubarak regime in the four years prior to the president's ouster. The post-Mubarak closures of stadia to the public did little to stymie soccer-related violence.

Sisi's remarks notwithstanding, there is little indication that he is looking beyond the potential deterrent effect of holding accountable a few officers for recent incidents and considering a fundamental reform of the security forces.

An Amnesty International (AI) report¹¹ issued in 2012 described various incidents of excessive force by security forces in clashes with soccer fans following the fall of Mubarak. Amnesty said security forces had employed force "on a scale not seen" since the uprising against Mubarak during six days of vicious running battles on Cairo's Mohammed Mahmoud Street in November 2011, in which 51 people were killed. AI's report said that security forces used live ammunition, shotgun pellets, tear gas, and beatings.

"In all the cases documented by Amnesty International, live ammunition and shotgun pellets were used in circumstances where those killed or injured posed

⁹ Hatem Maher, "[Taming the shrew: Ahly outdo Zamalek in managing Ultras group](#)," *Ahram Online*, February 20, 2015.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Maher

¹¹ Amnesty International, "[Agents of Repression, Egypt's Police and the Case For Reform](#)," October 2, 2012.

no imminent risk to the life of the security forces or others. Many people told Amnesty International that shotgun pellets were fired towards protesters from a distance of just a few metres. This caused many injuries to the eyes, leading to loss of sight in many cases,” the report said. It said only one security officer, Mahmoud Sobhi Shannawi, who was nicknamed the eye-hunter for targeting protesters’ eyes, was the only officer to have been charged with the killing and injuring of protesters on Mohamed Mahmoud Street and that his trial was still ongoing.

In February 2012, police and security forces stood aside as 74 people died in a stampede in a stadium in Port Said sparked by an attack on Al Ahli supporters by fans of Al Masri SC and allegedly unknown armed elements. The incident is widely viewed as an effort by security forces and the military to cut the ultras down to size. Some two months later, security forces killed another 16 fans and injured hundreds of others in four days of protests over the Port Said incident. Fans accused the interior ministry of, at the very least, failing to protect the Al Ahli fans in Port Said, if not having orchestrated the incident. Nine security officials were among 75 people charged with responsibility for the incident. Only two of the security officials were sentenced to prison sentences, while 21 Al Masri fans were given a death sentence. The case is currently winding its way through the appeal process.

Like in Port Said, the interior ministry has rejected any responsibility for the recent deaths in Cairo, highlighting Egypt’s unabated polarization that erupted in the summer of 2013 with military and security-force backed mass protests and tiresulting coup. That polarization has spilled into soccer, with supporters of Al Ahli and Al Zamalek playing a key role in expanding anti-Sisi protests from the stadia to university campuses across Egypt, in which scores have been killed.

The stark dividing lines in soccer between management, players, and fans have been reinforced by Zamalek’s firing of center-right Omar Gaber after he became the only Zamalek player to refuse to play the match while fans were being attacked by security forces outside the Cairo stadium. The UWK has already sworn revenge for the deaths of their supporters. “We have no confidence in the justice system or the government’s willingness to ensure that justice is served. We now have martyrs. We have no choice: Soccer will not be played in Egypt until justice has been served and the rights of our martyrs have been secured,” said one UWK member.¹²

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¹² As told to the author .

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