

## Of Pride and Pyramids: The Precarious Nationalism of Mohamed Salah (<https://thepolitic.org/>) Mohamed Salah



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([https://thepolitic.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/aee64a05543e42df8b1a1c495893a7eb\\_18-e1531880852559.jpg](https://thepolitic.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/aee64a05543e42df8b1a1c495893a7eb_18-e1531880852559.jpg))

The Champions League semi-final had just entered its 35th minute, still scoreless late into the night of April 24, when Mohamed Salah rammed the ball into the net. No one quite saw it coming from his spot, at the outer edge of the penalty box, his bright-red Liverpool FC shirt adrift in a sea of Roma white. A goal from

his position, at this moment, would be, if not impossible, highly implausible.

Then again, Salah was nothing if not implausible. He was a decent but uninspiring soccer player at his previous two English Premier clubs, Chelsea and Roma. But the curly-haired Egyptian—once dismissed by British commentators as a “brainless winger”—had, in less than a year at Liverpool, trampled off a record-breaking (<http://www.espn.com/soccer/liverpool/story/3495573/liverpools-mohamed-salah-breaks-premier-league-goals-records-wins-golden-boot>) season so high up into the soccer world’s stratosphere that commentators un-ironically began to mention (<http://www.goal.com/en/news/salah-im-proud-to-be-compared-to-messi-and-ronaldo/ffsyd81wmrqt1toxoi0hvpelmi>) him in the same breath as living legends like Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. That night, like so many others before, showed why. Salah curled the ball into the upper left-corner of the goal, far beyond the outstretched arms of the azure-blue goalkeeper, slamming it off the underside of the crossbar and into the net.

The ball settled in the corner of the goal, oblivious to the pandemonium sweeping the stadium. But Salah, a former player for Roma, simply raised his arms and walked away, a gesture of respect for his old team.

Raouf BenKhelif, an Arabic commentator at BeIN Sports, more than compensated

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5bLidWUIT0>) for Salah’s muted reaction:

“What is this?!” he screamed (<http://sport360.com/article/football/mohamed-salah/278767/epic-arabic-commentary-of-mohamed-salah-wonder-goal-against-roma-causes-online-frenzy>), his throat scorched with euphoria. “What is this, O Salah? What is this, Salah? The star of Egyptian soccer! The pride of the Arab game! Perfect! Perfect! [Salah has] charmed all the Arabs, with his feet [made] of gold!..O pride of the Arabs!”

There was the refrain throughout the Middle East: “the pride of the Arabs.” It had been repeated ad nauseum for the better part of nine months, ever since the dreamy November night (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD-481GMsB4>) when Salah scored a late penalty against Congo to qualify Egypt for the World Cup for the first time in 28 years. He has since enjoyed near-universal (<https://www.dreamteamfc.com/c/news-gossip/374561/mohamed-salah-egypt-fans-egyptian-king/>) reverence—even beyond what he already enjoyed before (<https://weaintgotnohistory.sbnation.com/2014/1/26/5342388/mohamed-salah-an-egyptian-perspective>). He’s been plastered on merchandise (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/299563.aspx>) and painted on walls (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/sports/world-cup/mo-salah-egypt.html>), even featured in anti-drug campaigns (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180409-400-rise-in-calls-to-egypts-rehab-hotline-after-mohamed-salah-anti-drugs-campaign/>).

Like his abrupt conversion from nobody to superstar, Salah's popularity is highly implausible. He has become a saint amongst the jaded, an adored icon amongst a politically polarized and socially fractured people. Fans typically ascribe this to his political irrelevance ([https://twitter.com/BoodyQenawy1/status/1010969713709633538?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1010969713709633538&ref\\_url=https%3Asalah-quit-egypt-national-team-reaction-spt-intl%2Findex.html](https://twitter.com/BoodyQenawy1/status/1010969713709633538?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1010969713709633538&ref_url=https%3Asalah-quit-egypt-national-team-reaction-spt-intl%2Findex.html)). Salah, they say, transcends (<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/jun/14/mohamed-salah-brought-happiness-and-pride-to-egypt-world-cup-liverpool>) politics. And indeed, Salah has avoided (<https://twitter.com/hahellyer/status/990284278050287616>) making overtly political statements. His public persona appears custom-made to avoid controversy—even his historical lack of membership in either of Egypt's major soccer clubs, Al-Ahly and Az-Zamalek, has kept his image untainted by their bitter rivalry. Salah appears to be the perfect unifying figure because he is symbolically rich and politically empty. He can be everything for everyone.

Salah, of course, is nothing if not political. He is not just a figure that enjoys nationwide popularity, but a figure that embodies an aspirational national vision. In a country smothered by self-loathing, Salah's distinction on the pitch and decency off of it is nothing less than oxygen. He offers Egyptians a better way of conceptualizing themselves—a brand of nationalism distinguished from the soulless variety foisted upon them by the state's machinery. Salah, then, is not just a national hero but a nationalistic one, and therein lies his political power. It's the potent political symbolism crystallized in Salah's personhood that makes him such a potential threat to the powers that be.

## **Playing Politics**

Before there was Mohamed Salah, there was Mohamed Aboutrika. A former soccer player, Mohamed Aboutrika is almost as beloved (<https://thesefootballtimes.co/2017/08/21/mohamed-aboutrika-the-greatest-african-to-never-star-in-europe/>) in Egypt as Mohamed Salah is now. As it turned out, Aboutrika's nationwide popularity (<https://thesefootballtimes.co/2017/05/19/mohamed-aboutrika-national-icon-activist-and-one-of-africas-greatest-players/>) meant little (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/shackles-egyptian-politics-case-mohamed-salah-and-mohamed-aboutrika-1027218115>) in the face of a totalitarian regime intent on exterminating the very thought of resistance. Aboutrika, a politically outspoken figure who had publicly supported the deposed Mohammed Morsi in the 2012 elections and denounced the military's August 2013 Rabaa massacre of nearly a thousand peaceful pro-Morsi protestors, was placed (<http://www.goal.com/en-us/news/five-more-years-on-terror-list-for-egypt-great-aboutrika/1sfdpekeh24e1xrbo0hdjz92y>) on the government's official terrorist watchlist and exiled to Qatar, where he remains to this day.

Aboutrika is hardly (<https://www.thenation.com/article/egyptian-athletes-take-stand-and-pay-price/>) the first Egyptian athlete to fall afoul of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's regime, though he is certainly the most famous. Sisi's relentless crackdown on "political" athletes foreshadowed his eventual weaponization of Egyptian soccer as a propagandistic arm of the state. On January 14, following months of the regime systematically eliminating five potential presidential candidates, the Egyptian Football Association held (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180123-egyptian-football-association-faces-suspension-for-pro-sisi-conference/>) a press conference to endorse Sisi's re-election bid. Not just the head of the EFA, but the heads of every major Egyptian soccer club and numerous athletes announced their unwavering devotion to Sisi's cause.

Sisi's manipulation (<https://deadspin.com/how-egypts-strongman-is-turning-sports-into-propaganda-1823075979>) of Egypt's soccer culture, however, must be understood not as a politicization of the sport so much as an inversion of its preexisting political function. Soccer in Egypt had already been political under President Hosni Mubarak—not as an extension of the state, but as a vehicle of resistance to it. Faced with no legal means of political expression, frustrated youth resorted to soccer. By 2007, the Egyptian Ultras were born (<https://thesefootballtimes.co/2014/05/10/the-chaotic-world-of-al-ahly/>): hardcore soccer fans that used stadium matches to mobilize their network, effectively sidestepping laws that prohibited unauthorized gatherings. Unsurprisingly, the Ultras played a key role in the 2011 revolution. Sisi's government has since declared the group a "terrorist organization," thus criminalizing their activities and effectively terminating their existence.

This is the fractured political landscape from which Salah emerged. It's easy to see why Salah's ostensible apolitical stature would endear him to so many—after the incessant politicization of everything in recent years, soccer included, the rise of a soccer star who proclaimed himself above it all is not just refreshing but comforting. It is Salah's apparent freedom from the suffocating dross of Egyptian politics that lends his story its escapist appeal. Hence, too, his fans' insistence on his apolitical public persona: as long as Salah avoids politics, he can be everything to everyone. The fantasy continues, unchallenged and undisturbed.

But one cannot play on the politicized field of Egyptian soccer without being political. More so, Salah has already politicized himself by actively inviting national identification. He has repeatedly affirmed that carrying the hopes of 100 million people (Egypt's population) does not burden but rather fuel (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BkK2B5RFXp3/?hl=en&taken-by=mosalah>)s him. After winning the CAF African Player of the Year award in 2017—the first time any Egyptian has done it since 1983—Salah was quick (<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/jan/05/mo-salah-african-award-step-in-quest-place-history>) to characterize his personal victory as "huge for the people of Egypt, because even psychologically

it gives everyone hope that we don't just produce players but great ones that can win important awards.”

Salah's rhetorical conflation of his identity with that of his entire nation is not accidental—if anything, it's a succinct demonstration of his career mission.

In an interview (<http://nilesports.com/2018/05/12/mo-salah-full-interview-with-amr-adeeb-on-e-tv-egypt/#psfbmodal>) with Amr Adib, Salah explained (<https://slate.com/culture/2018/05/liverpools-mohamed-salah-is-a-soccer-legend-now-the-egyptian-star-is-ready-to-change-the-world.html>) that since he came to Europe, he “wanted to be a public figure whom everyone admires... People are watching me as I was watching other superstars on TV long ago. Imagine that there are kids just like you were, but they have a superstar from their country. They see their superstar capable of reaching that high, therefore they feel like they can do it too. That is the most pleasing feeling to me. That people feel someone from their country can do something—so why not them?”

Salah has strengthened the bond between him and his countrymen by playing with his body in Europe but living with his heart in Egypt. After the 2012 Port Said massacre (<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/middleeast/scores-killed-in-egyptian-soccer-mayhem.html>), while playing on loan for Italian soccer club ACF Fiorentina, he changed his shirt number to “74” in remembrance of the number of victims. He refused to celebrate after scoring against Chelsea in a November 25 match—perhaps because he had briefly played with the club in prior years, but more likely because the worst terrorist attack (<https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/25/africa/egypt-sinai-mosque-massacre/index.html>) on Egyptian soil had taken place the day before. That, at least, was how Arab commentators admirably interpreted his actions. And the list goes on: funding (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/mohammed-salah-builds-hospitals-feeds-the-poor-boosts-egypts-economy-qtx65dkkx>) hospitals, rejecting an offered luxury villa (<https://www.si.com/soccer/2017/10/20/liverpool-star-mohamed-salah-makes-classy-gesture-after-rejecting-luxury-villa-world-cup-success>) in favor of a donation to his poor home village Nagrig, even boosting (<https://www.dreamteamfc.com/c/news-gossip/366432/mohamed-salah-egypt-economy/>) Egypt's economy. Again and again Salah has publicly sanctified his origins, affirming his enduring loyalty to his people and in turn earning their fidelity.

Salah, then, has consciously fashioned himself into a national symbol. By any metric, he has succeeded in rendering himself a proxy for an entire people's sense of self. “When Mohamed Salah won the [Professional Footballers' Association player of the year award], Egyptians were celebrating like we won a war,” journalist Youssef Wael told ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auV9yMmT\\_I4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auV9yMmT_I4))Onefootball. “Egypt won, not Salah won.”

Salah does not seem to conceive of this project in political terms. To him and many others, the universal nature of his symbolism is precisely what renders him apolitical, and in any case his actions are plainly motivated by simple decency rather than any sophisticated socio-political vision. But just as Salah's visible religiosity—like his prostration (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/mo-salah-football-uk/563249/>) to God after every goal—takes on a political dimension in an Islamophobic (<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/champions-league-final-liverpool-star-mohamed-salah-s-unapologetic-muslim-ncna877736>) European context, so too does his popularity in an Egyptian one. Soccer has historically

([http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/foreigners/2002/06/flag\\_on\\_the\\_field.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2002/06/flag_on_the_field.html)) been a repository (<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/world-cup-nationalism-endures>) of nationalist sentiment, and in Egypt, its latent nationalistic potential has been explosively realized since the World Cup qualification. That, coupled with Egyptian soccer's aforementioned politicization by both repressors and revolutionaries, means that Salah's celebrity is not just national but nationalistic.

## **The Egyptian King**

That Salah has become a nationalistic icon akin (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/01/sport/mohamed-salah-liverpool-egypt-intl/index.html>) to the pharaoh and the pyramids, a stand-in for Egypt itself, is evident in how Arabic commentators extol his exploits. Consider Arabic sports commentator Essam El-Shawaly's praise ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJZvu4vfp\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJZvu4vfp_E)) of Salah after his unlikely goal against Tottenham Hotspur FC in injury time.

“Oh God! Oh God oh God!” he gushed. “You are better than Ramses! You are bigger than Neferpiti! You are better than Khufu and Khafra and Menkaure! You are in a word Mohamed and your name is Salah! It's not possible, it's not possible, it's not possible! Look at him, he learned from the valley of the Nile!”

El-Shawaly compares Salah not just to important figures of ancient Egyptian history, but to the monarchs who built the three Great Pyramids of Giza—the most monumental cultural achievements of Egyptian civilization and the most potent nationalistic symbols of modern-day Egypt. But El-Shawaly does not only compare Salah to Egypt's grandest rulers and loftiest landmarks: he affirms Salah's supremacy over them. In doing so, the commentator both positions Salah as a descendent of a prestigious, primordial Egyptian tradition spanning millennia and casts him as a refinement of that tradition.

Salah is declared to be nothing less than the pupil of the Nile—a nationalistic symbol matched in prominence only by the sphinx and the pyramids (and sure enough, fan artwork typically portrays Salah alongside them, sometimes in the guise of a pharaoh). It's important to El-Shawaly that Salah not just be a

great Egyptian, but that his greatness be credited to his Egyptian upbringing—and not, for example, Liverpool’s training regimen. By linking Salah to the Giza pyramids and the Nile valley, El-Shawaly geographically essentializes him, so that he is as eternal an element of the physical Egyptian landscape as the water that flows through the Nile and the bricks that support the pyramids. Salah is thus lauded to the skies even as he is grounded in that most nationalistic of symbols: the land, the soil of which is married to the people who till it, who together grow what political scientist Benedict Andersen famously termed an “imagined community”: the nation. Invested in Salah is the symbolic weight and emotional resonance of an entire nation’s sense of identity.

Perhaps most importantly, El-Shawaly’s eagerness to lionize Salah by associating him with the most towering legacies of an idealized Egyptian past reflects Salah’s redemptive power. Crystallized in Salah’s person is a resurrection and restoration of a desecrated cultural legacy. He is an echo, unheard for decades if not centuries, of Egypt’s civilizational splendor. Salah, then, is living, breathing, breathless proof that Egypt can still produce and export a world-class product and thereby substantiate its claims to majesty (<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-mother-of-the-world>)—a product that, in this case, happens to be a curly-haired 25-year-old who knows how to chase a ball. Salah personifies a glorious Egyptian past even as he reflects and remedies Arab insecurity.

This is how much of the Arab world discusses Salah: with a sort of unbelieving glee that a brown-skinned Arab-Muslim can enjoy such ubiquitous acclaim in the West, all without assimilating into it. Salah appears otherworldly, literally, because he has won the blind devotion of non-Muslim Westerners without sacrificing a single aspect of his ethnic or religious identity—both of which are subsumed into his national one.

Liverpool fans don’t ignore Salah’s religion but rather celebrate it, chanting (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-icmPutQDk>) “if he scores another few, then I’ll be Muslim too!” (though even this embrace of his religiosity is not without its complexities (<http://theconversation.com/liverpool-fcs-mohamed-salahs-goal-celebrations-a-guide-to-british-muslimness-93084>)). More importantly, they have bestowed upon him a nickname that prioritizes—and thereby glorifies—the national component of his identity: “The Egyptian King. (<https://www.vox.com/today-explained/2018/6/14/17464926/mohamed-mo-salah-world-cup-egypt-liverpool-today-explained>)” It’s not any wonder, then, that so many videos (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkSoHOsLDeI>) about Salah on YouTube have been subtitled (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9SA4nqqdoQ>) in Arabic, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3Wza6q6xvY>) so that Salah’s fans in the Middle East can see (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfk0qHIUD44>) for themselves the power (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPLAXPIniM4>) that their hero commands

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmi62wiX49w>)over the West. In the comments on these videos, just as in the Arabic commentary on Salah's game, is the refrain: "The pride of the Arabs." Salah generates this pride both because he arose from among them, and because he's revered beyond them.

## **Nurturing (Better) Nationalism**

Salah's ability to induce this pride—this nationalist fervor—highlights Sisi's failure to do so. After all, Sisi has dedicated (<http://thepolitic.org/militaristic-egyptian-nationalism-from-nasser-to-el-sisi-part-1/>) much of his presidential career to resurrecting (<http://thepolitic.org/militaristic-egyptian-nationalism-from-nasser-to-el-sisi-part-2/>) the nationalist fervor so effortlessly mustered by former President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Egyptians remember the Nasserite era, whether accurately or not, as one of Egyptian strength and Arab unity—as a time when Egypt could rebel against its former colonial masters with impunity, assert itself confidently on the international stage, and prove itself a cultural powerhouse in its own right. Sisi's expansion of the Suez Canal and his glorification of the military are all attempts to legitimize his own rule by co-opting the nationalistic power of Nasser's.

Considering the deep societal malaise in which Egypt presently drowns, Sisi's strategy has failed. Mired in economic depression, political polarization, and cultural stagnation, Egyptians have little reason to hope for a better future, let alone believe in their country's supposed greatness. Sisi's declarations of Egyptian exceptionalism, no matter how grandiose (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/07/sisi-dredges-the-depth-egypt-suez-canal-boondoggle/>), are but hollow attempts to mask the country's staggering decline.

Salah—even if he is only one man, only an athlete—has fulfilled the promise of Sisi's rhetoric. He has rekindled an entire nation's faith in itself, awakening its people from a slumber of political passivity and spiritual death. Salah, in achieving what Sisi could not—proving that the Egyptian people "can still accomplish something," in Sisi's words—poses an implicit threat to his legitimacy.

Salah's brand of nationalism represents an almost systematic repudiation of that peddled by Sisi. It's humanistic rather than militaristic, finding its expression in the personal dreams of children rather than the impersonal machinations of bureaucracy. It's dynamic rather than stagnant, sprinting towards an ever-expanding horizon rather than slaving to revive the nostalgia-cloaked corpse of a bygone era. It's basic rather than baroque, embodying a purified religious morality unchained by the spiritually barren "moderate Islam" imposed by the lumbering state apparatus.

Most importantly of all, Salah's nationalism is authentic: actualized in the mannerisms of a single man whose thick beard, heavy accent, religious devotion, humble demeanor, and national loyalty render him at once relatable and aspirational, a commoner and a superman. Sisi's nationalism—embodied in a brigade of



glitzy projects and jingoistic propaganda—somehow manages to be too heavy-handed and too lightweight; too ubiquitous to ignore, too vapid to internalize. For all that Sisi has expended millions of dollars and ruined thousands of lives to realize his nationalist vision, it is ultimately too abstract and too calculated to inspire real feeling. It lacks humanity.

Of course, Sisi does not need the fealty of his people, only their fear, and his armory of jets and tanks provides that in ample supply. As such, the 2018 Egyptian elections ended with Sisi winning 97 percent of the popular vote. Yet the runner-up to Sisi was not his “opponent,” the regime-backed Moussa Mustafa Moussa, but a candidate supposedly beyond politics: Mohamed Salah. More than one million Egyptians had crossed out the two options given to them, rejected the false dichotomy parading as actual choice, and scribbled in Salah’s name instead.

It was a symbolic gesture that meant nothing and meant everything. Sisi remained in power, yes, but in manufacturing and choosing a third option where the regime insisted none existed, Egyptians had temporarily transcended the totalitarian regulation of their lives. They had subverted a rigged election by partaking in it. They had exercised agency. And they had done it by invoking the name of Mohamed Salah.

How can an outside observer read this as anything but an act of political defiance?

Egypt is not Sisi. Egypt is Salah. With that new understanding of themselves, Egyptians felt invincible. After qualifying for the World Cup for the first time in nearly three decades, Egypt felt certain it could go far in the tournament—even though Egypt had never won a single World Cup match in its history. The implausibility of such success mattered little. Egypt is Salah, and Salah is nothing if not implausible.

## **Slaying Salah**

If the Champions League semi-final was the fantasy, the World Cup was the nightmare. If a season in the Premier League established Salah as Egypt’s fourth (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/egypt-has-now-new-pyramid-mohamed-salah-1103981319>) pyramid, a week in Russia deconstructed that symbol, brick by brick. All it took was three matches to demolish the founding myths of the Salah legend: that he could be apolitical, and that he could redeem Egypt.

The fate of Egypt’s short-lived trip to Russia was sealed weeks before the tournament began. It ended on the night of May 26, at the Champion League’s final, when a scuffle (<https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/44267756>) over the ball between Real Madrid player Sergio Ramos and Salah ended with both on the ground. Ramos rose again. Salah did not. The Egyptian King was walked off the field in tears, the pain in his shoulder eclipsed only by that of his fans’ broken hearts.

The Egyptian Football Association was quick to assure fans that Salah would recover in time for the World Cup. He didn't. Egypt's first match against Uruguay saw Salah on the bench but didn't see victory, ending in a 1-0 loss. Salah started in the next match against Russia, but his uncharacteristically timid play betrayed his lack of fitness. Egypt lost 3-1, its one consolation point coming from a late-match penalty kick. Salah was responsible for the goal, of course, but whereas a similar penalty kick nine months earlier had propelled Egyptians into joyful ecstasy, this one only served as a pitiful consolation prize. After two games, Egypt was eliminated from the World Cup. Salah, it turned out, was mortal.

Around the same time, the superstar found himself engulfed in a storm of controversy after Ramzan Kadyrov, the autocratic leader of Chechnya notorious for his human rights' abuse in general and torture of gay men in particular, hosted Salah at a lavish dinner during which he granted him honorary Chechen citizenship. Ramzan's motives (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/22/russias-muslim-strongman-is-winning-the-world-cup-kadyrov-putin-salah/>) were obvious: as the leader of a Muslim-majority region, he potentially bolstered his legitimacy by associating himself with arguably the most famous Muslim athlete in the world. The EFA—now little more than an arm of the state—had, in defiance of all practical considerations, chosen to base the national team in Chechnya's capital, Grozny, where Ramzan enjoyed extensive access to Salah. Even before the dinner, the Chechen strongman had gone so far as to rouse (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/11/sports/mo-salah-egypt-chechnya.html>) Salah from his slumber at the hotel and drive him to practice, where they held an impromptu photo-op.

Salah suddenly found himself a political pawn (<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/how-football-s-most-famous-muslim-became-a-political-pawn>) in an outlandish spectacle of Egyptian sports diplomacy. Media outlets widely reported on the event, broadcasting images of Salah standing besides the smiling autocrat across the Internet and around the world. The ensuing outrage (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-5831753/Mohamed-Salah-unknowingly-centre-controversy-Chechen-leader-Ramzan-Kadyrov.html>) forced Salah into a position where exculpatory claims of being apolitical would simply not suffice (<https://www.newschamps.com/mohamed-salah-cannot-be-apolitical/>). If Salah remained silent, he appeared to condone Ramzan's manipulation of his image and therefore of Ramzan himself. If Salah denounced the autocrat, he risked the wrath of Sisi's regime, which had not hesitated to dispatch Aboutrika before him. Salah, it turned out, could not be apolitical.

Egypt, disturbed by the sight of its hero defeated and politicized, looked towards its last battle, against its neighbor Saudi Arabia, as a chance to salvage a modicum of its dignity. Here was Egypt's first chance in 28 years to win its first ever World Cup match. Its last opponent was the lowest-ranked team in the tournament. The conditions for a redemptive Egyptian exit had been set.

The match ended 2-1. Saudi Arabia's players gathered at the edge of field in celebration, elated that they would return home with some spoils of battle after all. Egypt's shell-shocked players could only stare, their exhausted bodies glistening with sweat and shame. Salah, the pride of the Arabs, simply hid his face in his hand.

And so Egyptians found themselves the punchline of an ironic joke. The the one man who had restored Egypt's pride was made to be the protagonist of the most humiliating farce in the nation's living memory. Like a child eager to impress, Egypt had plopped its vulnerable self on the world stage and was punished for its naiveté. The intoxicating joy that had marked the country's qualification into the World Cup nine months earlier evaporated as though it had never been.

"We thought God was with Egypt," a Cairo accountant told

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/world/middleeast/world-cup-mohamed-salah-egypt.html>)the *New York Times*. "But no." That a sports defeat could induce such a depth of despondence evidences the desert that is Egyptian life. For a moment Salah, and the lush-green fields on which he played, could not serve as the oases they once were, the escape from the abyss of existential despair on whose edge so many Egyptians teetered. More often than not, they fell.

### **Entertaining a Revolution**

And yet, out of the rubble of dignity and dreams, Salah emerged unscathed. The rout in Russia had not diminished his towering stature. Salah's injury provided a convenient (and not necessarily inaccurate) excuse for his underperformance, and the scapegoats besides him were many. The Chechen debacle, for all the backlash it generated, barely chipped the paint off Salah's saintly image. After media outlets reported that Salah was considering resigning from the national team in response to the Chechnya controversy, Egyptians took to social media to assure (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/25/football/mo-salah-quit-egypt-national-team-reaction-spt-intl/index.html>)their idol that "#I'mWithSalah." Salah's supporters, witnessing their untouchable idol touched and ensnared by politics, did not concede their hero's mortality but rather insisted on restoring him to his apolitical pedestal. It was an article of belief among fans that, like water and oil, Salah and politics were an unnatural match. And so ironically, the clearest demonstration yet of Salah's inherently political nature, and the unavoidable tension between his and the regime's competing national identities, only served to further entrench the myth of the apolitical athlete.

Yet the tenacity of the myth only testifies to the triumph of Salah's nationalism—a political vision so ubiquitous among Egyptians that, like fish in water, they cannot perceive its politics. For all the sorrow engendered by Egypt's miserable World Cup campaign, Egyptians still breathe Salah. Shortly after the

superstar returned home from Russia, his address was leaked on social media. Hordes of fans flocked (<http://www.espn.com/soccer/egypt/story/3550478/mohamed-salah-welcomes-fans-after-home-address-leaked-on-facebook>) to Salah's residence. Instead of turning them away, he came out to sign autographs.

Despite the tears and the tribulations, then, Salah is still the pride of the Arabs. He has become too big, too powerful, to be felled by a humiliating World Cup or a corrupt FA, even if he sat at the center of both affairs. The legend has eclipsed the person.

It's the apparent invincibility of Salah's persona, however, that foreshadows a perhaps inevitable clash (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/mo-salah-egyptian-king-imminent-faceoff-tyranny-180501112610101.html>) with the regime. How far, and for how long, can Sisi tolerate him? Salah represents an Egypt at odds with that of Sisi's. To allow Salah's celebrity is to allow a display of dissent on the global stage. There's no guarantee, of course, that Salah's political symbolism will catalyze political action, let alone political action that upsets the status quo. But the one million votes he received in the last election hint at precisely that possibility. The apolitical veneer of Salah's politics has only magnified its influence.

Sisi must know this. The question is whether he believes Salah can be tamed, his popularity converted to propaganda. The bigger question is if Salah cannot be tamed, if Salah is not Aboutrika—if indeed his state-orchestrated downfall would make him not a warning but a martyr. In destroying Salah, Sisi might unlock the revolutionary potential already implicit in his national influence.

Egypt will eventually know if Salah is Aboutrika or not. Until then, the fantasy of Mohamed Salah lives on, because it is grounded in emotions that blaze with painful reality—faith, hope, love, and every other fragile feeling that makes Sisi's intolerable rule tolerable. It is these emotions which form the foundation upon which Salah's pedestal was erected, and it is they that have both granted and received his nationalistic power.

“When I spoke with many people after that penalty against Congo in the World Cup qualifications, they said if Salah had missed it, we'd be okay with it,” Wael told Onefootball, his face settled in a serene smile. “We won't be mad. The guy's done so much for us. The guy's done so much for his country. For our national team.”

“We'd forgive him.”

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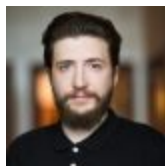
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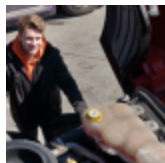
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