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Mo Salah, a Moral Somebody?

Amro Ali

THE ASTONISHING RISE, impact, and reception in Egypt and around the world of Egyptian football player Mohamed Salah has largely transpired amid a moral crisis in sports. Comedian James Corden captured this demise in 2010 when he addressed the British sport elites at the BBC Sports Personality of the Year award: “I don’t see a room full of sporting legends here, I see a room full of people looking for their next sponsorship deal, book deal, TV series.... You lot need to get back to basics, remember who you are, what you are, what you stand for.”¹ Six years later, at the funeral of boxing legend Muhammad Ali in 2016, reverend Dr. Kevin Cosby of Louisville drew on African-American theological discourse to crystalize an athlete’s quest for dignity: “Before James Brown said ‘I am black and I am proud,’ Ali said ‘I am black and I am pretty.’ Black and pretty were an oxymoron. Blacks did not say pretty... but Muhammad Ali said, I am proud, I am pretty, I am glad of who I am. And when he said that, that infused in Africans, a sense of somebodiness.”² It was Martin Luther King Jr. who initially coined the term “somebodiness.” He believed that “without a deep sense of somebodiness, a person would be incapable of rising to full maturity.”³ Comparisons between Salah and Ali are not unusual, and may at first appear disingenuous. Some would say that it is unfair to compare Ali’s fifty-five years of public life to Salah’s public beginning. Ali rose to fame in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, an age of political change and disruptions. He had a wider space for political articulation to flourish. Salah heralds from a despotic environment in which he has to carefully calculate his every word and move as well as navigate the treacherous digital terrain of hypervisibility, instant gratification, and mass reactions.

However, if Salah is yet to be on par with Ali, he is certainly already evinc-

ing social effects comparable to Ali. Salah has risen as a sports figure who internalizes this somebodiness and delivers a model for Arabs and Muslims to feel a sense of self-determination, self-acceptance, self-definition, and to be a person of worth on an equal footing with others. For Egypt, Salah is the hero that unsettles the authoritarian system and acts as an antidote to unhappiness. For the Arab and Muslim world he is a redemption of something lost, a substitute in an era devoid of real Muslim leaders. For the rest of the world, particularly Europe, he is the disrupter of the secular realm and obstacle to bigotry who can jam the wires of Islamophobia. Salah encodes the somebodiness that restores a sense of dignity to the Egyptian at home, and to Arabs and Muslims abroad, while delivering a reckoning for which the West has to deal.

To witness the motion of Salah's body is to witness the creation of empirical data. The concealed lightness in his chest, fast pulse, dry mouth, heightened senses, breathlessness, and laser focus swirl into his formidable goals. Each one unleashes the spirit—everything expressive in-between his upward glance to the heavens and prostration to the earth. The smiles, cries, inner glow, holding his arms out wide as if to hug the arena, the world, among the chorus of squealing, screaming, shouting, whooping, and hollering—all entering a vortex that makes the man mythic. It is from here that the ordinary becomes inscribed with deeper meanings. On any given day, the most stunning of athletes elicit common tropes of success, fame, riches, and gossip. Salah goes further because people take him further with their projections. Salah invokes hope, justice, kindness, dignity, and faith, among other attributes.

The risk that accompanies such exaltation means the actual human Salah will inevitably violate the public-constructed Salah. This was seen in February 2019, when following a train crash in Cairo that left twenty-five dead and more than forty injured, Salah tweeted a smiling selfie, raising the ire of Egyptian social media for his bad timing. In addition, in June 2019, Salah ignited anger when he defended his teammate Amr Warda after he had been expelled from the Egyptian soccer team during the Africa Cup because of accusations, with some damning screenshots, of online sexual harassment cases. In defense of his teammate Salah tweeted: "We need to believe in second chances... we need to guide and educate. Shunning is not the answer." This provoked a furious backlash, especially on social media from many who argued with good reason that Warda had been given numerous chances and yet continued to harass women online and had yet to apologize to his victims.

Salah was viewed as complicit in exonerating Warda and of being insensitive to the problem of sexual harassment in Egypt (although that was clearly not Salah's intention). These social media storms showed just how consequential the figure of Salah, the "fourth pyramid," had become. Why does he mean so much for so many?

YEARNING FOR ANOTHER EGYPT

While Salah may have risen to national fame when he helped defeat Congo in October 2017, propelling Egypt into the World Cup, his astonishing football talent alone cannot explain his rising star. Nor did his story of humble beginnings take hold in that moment. Rather, it happened barely two weeks after this victory when Salah was offered a luxury villa by entrepreneur Mamdouh Abbas. Salah politely declined the gift and suggested that a donation to his village Nagrig in the district of Gharbia would make him happier. His refusal of the villa was a significant breach in the business-as-usual patronage and wheeling-and-dealing circles. If Salah was loved for his victory over Congo, he was now respected more for this move and his many acts of charity, including the building of a school in his home village and donating or upgrading new facilities at Basioun hospital. Salah embodied a sudden assertion of human values within a dehumanizing system. His rejection of the villa pierced a culture that celebrates material wealth, consumer culture, and individual advancement.

At the same time, Salah has not shunned commercial opportunity. His appearances in Vodafone and Uber commercials, among other lucrative contracts that are symbols of global capitalist consumption, are usually treated as a sideshow or accepted as the norm that comes with football stardom. People would rather associate him more with refusing the villa and his other charitable acts, and for good reason. Egyptians have long missed looking up to someone who commands respect, at least someone who is not in exile, in prison, or long dead, and Salah has helped restore meaning to terms that had become scrambled: dignity became dignity again; principles became principles; kindness became kindness; and happiness became happiness.

There is an epidemic of unhappiness in Egypt. Young people often express a pervasive sense of hopelessness and an extreme desire to leave the country. A male body builder tells me of a new prayer in his social circles: "We say to each other: 'I pray that you leave this country.'" A young female health

worker laments she wants to leave Egypt because “to give birth to a baby here feels morally wrong.” A juice seller sarcastically quips, “We no longer have time to think of anything else but survival, we don’t even have time to contemplate suicide.” It has become commonplace to argue that such unhappiness in Egypt is caused by high unemployment, poverty, dysfunctional education, or crackdowns on independent voices. But there is something worse and pathological: the grim reality that new possibilities no longer emerge on the horizon.

The January 25, 2011, revolution in Egypt generated a political language of binaries that polarized Egyptians: revolutionary versus counterrevolutionary; secular versus Islamist; civilian versus military; pro- and anti-Brotherhood, among others. Such binaries still contained an element of the possible, yet many of them have diminished under the shadow of the generals, who launched a coup in 2013 under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, dealing a blow to regenerative politics. The unity that has come in its place is a negative unity; it is almost always against something, such as terrorism. And when it stands for something, let us say Egypt, it is a nationalist straitjacket that is imposed, with no room for plurality of voices. Salah might just be the first figure in a while behind which pro- and anti-regime supporters can unite. The young Egyptian footballer has galvanized a number of his country’s youth to abandon drugs. Salah was able to inspire calls to a drug user helpline to shoot up by 400 percent. Salah posters, cardboard cutouts, graffiti, and sculptures greet people at countless Egyptian social spaces, making him akin to the patron saint of coffeehouses, schools, and walls. Something interrupted the despotic drive to stamp out the uniqueness from the flow of Egyptian life and partially reversed the Arab and Muslim world’s despondence with Egypt after the 2013 coup.

Salah’s stance to steer away from politics, or from inadvertently disclosing his political leanings, has given him an amplified united base. Nevertheless, during the presidential elections in Egypt in 2018, people wrote in Salah’s name on their ballots as a form of protest, raising the unwitting candidate to third place.⁴ Salah touched on another existential question within Egyptian state and society: the strong desire for international recognition. This phenomenon weaves its way through Egypt’s modern history.⁵ There have been concerted efforts to export el-Sisi’s branded Egypt, for example, with the new Suez Canal project billboards dotting New York’s Times Square with the slogan “Egypt’s gift to the world.”

Salah, instead, lived up to fulfilling that slogan in a much more dramatic



FIGURE 7.1 Graffiti of Mohamed Salah at a Cairo cafe. Photo by Ibrahim, 2018. Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Salah_Graffiti_in_Cairo.jpg.

and compelling way. In fact, the “King of Egypt” has arguably had more impact on the world’s positive views of Egypt than all the post-2013 tourist campaigns, international conferences, and mega projects combined. As English comedian and television host John Oliver wrote on Salah for *Time* magazine’s 100-most-influential people: “Mo Salah is a better human being

than he is a football player. And he's one of the best football players in the world.... You'd be hard-pressed to find a professional athlete in any sport less affected by their success or status than Mo."⁶ It is no wonder that mentioning Salah in conversation can give many Egyptians a feeling of tingling hands and weightlessness. It is not unusual to hear someone say they hate celebrity-worship, football, famous figures, "but I make an exception only for Salah" is the usual conditional clause.

The regime believes it can commodify happiness, order Egyptians to comply with being the world's happiest people. It has held discussions with the Ministry of Happiness of the United Arab Emirates to "export" some of their cool psychedelic juice to Egypt. Happiness is a question that spans a history of philosophical musings, from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, to al-Ghazali's *Alchemy of Happiness*, to Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*. All of them would shun the Anglo-inspired utilitarianism of John Stuart Mills that speaks of happiness as the ultimate net objective and has been largely repackaged for neoliberal modernity, rather than a meaningful higher life that produces happiness as a by-product. In other words, you cannot separate the attainment of happiness from respect for justice, dignity, and honor. It does not seem to faze the authorities that happiness is meaningless without rescuing vibrant citizenship, opening public spaces, providing fair trials, and preventing overall existential meaning from being fragmented.

Salah offers glimpses into the voids spawned by such fractures as he communicates not only on the instrumental level of football success but with meaningful and empathic qualities that come with an honorable character. As the sport historian Mike Cronin has written: "Followers want superb athletic performance, the hard-won victory, and the demonstration of the aesthetic beauty of the body in motion. But they want all this competition, even though it is now firmly allied with the force of global capitalism, to be fair, to mean something, and to offer them life lessons."⁷

THE SALAH EFFECT AND EUROPE

Salah falls into a long controversial tradition of athletes mixing religion with sports. Although the two are generally seen to be separate, particularly in the West, historically the opposite held true. In ancient Greece, the Olympic Games were performed in honor of Zeus.⁸ In Christianity and Islam, sport-

ing activities were seen as strengthening the believer in the service of God. Yet in the modern era “the bond between the secular and the sacred has been broken, the attachment to the realm of the transcendent has been severed. Modern sports are activities partly pursued for their own sake, partly for other ends which are equally secular.”⁹ So sports are played to honor our cities, countries, universities, ourselves, and global capitalism.

Not only has the link been broken, but the secular has long appropriated qualities of the sacred, and we see this with the extent that sport has become the world’s so-called secular religion. As the philosopher and theologian Michael Novak has noted: “To have a religion, you need to have a way to exhilarate the human body, and desire, and will, and the sense of beauty, and a sense of oneness with the universe and other humans. You need chants and songs, the rhythm of bodies in unison, the indescribable feeling of many who together ‘will one thing’ as if they were each members of a single body. All these things you have in sports..., sports are a form of religion.”¹⁰ Hence, it is not unusual that an unease runs through believers when stadiums become the rival to houses of worship. Islamic jurists continue to be torn between viewing sports as a spearhead of moral corruption and one of elevation of the soul. A seminal book published in Riyadh in 1981 linked football zealotry of young Muslims to “a moral vacuum and degradation.” Even if Muslims are unaware of the scholarly debates, there is often a quiet anxiety of seeing the hero-worship of football overtake the mosque.

In the West, a player like Salah makes a noticeable dent in this anxiety. Salah patches up the sacred with the secular and in fact “blasphemes” against the secular religion with deeds of the most arresting nature. From the forehead to the grass and the index finger toward the skies, hundreds of millions of Muslims are drawn to this well-understood language of piety, and suddenly something feels redeemed. Like a spiritual wholesomeness was restored to the sport. Salah saw no need to dismiss or distill his Muslim identity, even after he achieved a turbo-charged social mobility and stardom—a point that is not lost on many. The sight of his veiled wife, Maggie, by his side on a green oval in a European city before the eyes of millions, is a hypnotic sight to Muslims (and the rest of the world) precisely because it is unusual, particularly because it occurs at a time of heightened anxieties toward Muslims in the West. In Europe, where Islamophobia is rife, imams entreat young Muslims to emulate Salah, and they return to the mosques with their heads held up high.

The stellar Muslim athlete in the West has long represented a sort of redemption of the Muslim world. At times it can feel that all the corruption, dysfunction, and poverty that characterizes much of the Muslim world can be offered a temporary reprieve by a sporting event. But a Muslim one in a former colonial power or country loathed for its foreign policy can invoke a sense of vindication. A compelling comparison can be made with Zinedine Zidane, the professional French football player who led France to victory in the 1998 FIFA World Cup and the 2000 European Football Championship, who is the current manager of the Real Madrid football club. The French footballer of Algerian descent was accepted by Arabs and Muslims but with much difficulty, let alone credibility. Zidane's ambiguous relationship to his heritage never made it any easier.

In an interview with *Esquire* in 2015, Zidane stated: "I have an affinity with the Arabic world. I have it in my blood, via my parents. I'm very proud of being French, but also very proud of having these roots and this diversity." The Muslim angle was of little use when the wine-drinking athlete states he is a non-practicing Muslim. Nor was the cultural ownership of Zidane straightforward. His Berber roots complicated the pan-Arabist appeal that does not offer much room for plurality or minority voices. In the end, Arabs and Muslims outside France had to settle for a superficial acceptance of Zidane's profile in order to be associated with the great Zizou.

Salah, however, came with little of the haziness that characterized Zidane. He was a village boy who was "truly" Arab from the Nile delta. Consequently, the Arab world's traditional idea of a leading, strong, vibrant, noble, and outward-looking Egypt—one that spearheads the arts, preserves the seat of intellectual Sunnism, champions pan-Arabism, and stands up for the Palestinian cause—was projected onto Salah with deafening force. An idea that was seen to be long perverted by successive Egyptian regimes was redeemed through Salah, the "pride of the Arabs" as he has been nicknamed from Casablanca to Baghdad. The Salah effect has been enough to rile up Moroccans to rally behind their departing team for the World Cup, demanding they avenge Spanish player Sergio Ramos's arm grab that injured Salah, impacting his performance in the World Cup in Russia. This sparked an unusual international outrage that crossed boundaries, including a bizarre peaceful protest that was later aborted outside the Spanish embassy in Jakarta, and the Lebanese, similar to Egypt, writing Salah's name on ballots during Lebanon's 2018 parliamentary elections.

One of the most circulated videos regarding Salah was a chant sung by English fans in the Liverpool stadium.

Mo Sa-la-la-la-lah,
Mo Sa-la-la-la-lah!

If he's good enough for you,
he's good enough for me.
If he scores another few,
then I'll be Muslim too.

If he's good enough for you,
he's good enough for me.
Sitting in the mosque,
that's where I wanna be!

Mo Sa-la-la-la-lah,
Mo Sa-la-la-*lah!*

This song has been much interpreted along mainly two main views. On the one hand, Salah has been praised for his role in combating Islamophobia, and on the other, he has been derided as having no impact on the scourge of Islamophobia. Football writer Andi Thomas has nicely diffused the moral impasse: "Islamophobia...ends not with the valorization of exceptional Muslims—who are, by definition, exceptions—but in the acceptance of ordinary Muslims."¹¹

This is not to dismiss the Salah effect. A Stanford University study highlighted that the football star has caused Islamophobic hate crimes to drop by 18.9 percent and anti-Muslim tweets to fall by half. "Positive exposure to out-group role models can reveal new information that humanizes the outgroup writ large," the study noted. While the study was limited to Merseyside, the county that Liverpool is in, it is a curiosity of whether Salah can replicate such comparable effects beyond the county. The answer is not so simple. There is another space that needs some illumination, the gray areas where Salah operates. A hurricane is not simply viewed as favorable or unfavorable. Its impending arrival alone stirs up a mixture of fear, hope, wonder, and the sensation of things moving too quickly to process. Once it has passed, it leaves an indelible mark, more than just the trail of devastation. The residents start rebuilding, gain an appreciation for the importance of communal bonding, they become more conscious of the forces of nature, not to men-

tion the gratitude felt for the lives and homes spared, prayers for the dead, and so forth.

Similarly, when the Muslim athlete in the West projects an athletic artistry and cultural firepower, she or he dislocates the arrangements that make the current state of merciless racism possible. In Salah's case, this could open up new conceptual pathways to dealing with Muslims and people of color, enable a young child to get exposed to an alternative Islam away from his or her parent's dogmatic views, or collapse sectarian divisions to allow Sunnis and Shiites to bond. Even if Salah falls out of favor down the track, the spectators' positions on Muslims may have long matured and predisposed them to sympathetic stances. This does not mean that none will return to former held prejudices, but just as many will be pushed along the track of reflection and reconsideration of previously held views. At the very least, it can be said that Salah makes the Islamophobia field more complicated to engender and triggers pores for alternative views to arise.

These pores are widened by global media and Salah's followers who pick up on some of his obscure noble acts. For example, when Salah went to greet his old Italian team in the Liverpool changerooms, he refused to celebrate his goals out of respect to his former comrades. He warmly welcomed a blind man for a private session who was filmed in the stadium cheering his goal. He affectionately hugged a boy who ran onto the field to reach him. These acts, while contingent on his goals, transcend culture and religion. The multilayered Salah—the intimately relatable footballer and loving father who kicks a ball with his daughter Makka—stands out like a moment of truth and living universality. A mammoth mural that went up in Times Square in the summer of 2018 reflects his larger than life image. Maybe Islamophobia is not the problem here, but that people forgot what it is like to be human. Throwing Salah into the equation makes xenophobic populism less appealing. Salah does not come with solutions but pries people to ask better questions.

The Salah effect has trickled down even to British children imitating Salah's prostration after scoring a goal in their backyard. We are no longer talking about another successful Muslim athlete, the likes of which are present in Liverpool and the other football's big leagues, but an extraordinary Muslim athlete who broke out of the sports arena and shook up the public sphere. Something happened that short-circuited a sport that is often treated by governments of all persuasions as a distracting bread and circus for the masses. Something torpedoed, even if temporarily, the xenophobic drive to tarnish Muslims in the West.

Salah, a heroic figure in contemporary culture, is armed with a moral code. He is seen to bring hope to many and is an unsettling specter that silently haunts the establishment. Football glory alone cannot make a compelling claim to heroism. Salah is a different sort of hero. He is a hero of disruption, a living paradox of a political voice without talking politics. Though his voice is rarely used to issue higher calls, Salah operates in a politics of juxtaposition in which his perceived immaculate persona is implicitly contrasted with the familiar polluted forces of high politics or scandal-ridden European athletes.

In his collection of essays and letters, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, Albert Camus wrote to an estranged German friend in 1943: “I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice. I don’t want any greatness for it, particularly a greatness born of blood and falsehood. I want to keep it alive by keeping justice alive.” Overall, Salah perhaps embodies this ideal. That love of country does not require drums and chest-beating, but grace, sincerity, modesty, and charity. He is a reminder that there exists a better human nature in a landscape barren of prominent reverential role models. To Egypt and even the rest of the world, Salah is the outlier that proclaims the alternative to nationalism is not treachery but civic responsibility, the alternative to stifling religious conservatism does not always have to be apathy or mockery of the sacred, but breathing faith into a sound value system, and the alternative to injustice can be forgiveness. Ultimately, people had almost forgotten what humility among those with renown looks like.

This is not to say Salah will not disappoint—the Warda case clearly shows that Salah has yet to reach the golden threshold where global audiences can overlook his faults and see his myth solidified. Similar to the way Muhammad Ali’s biographer described the boxer: “We forgive Muhammad Ali his excesses, because we see in him the child in us, and if he is foolish or cruel, if he is arrogant, if he is outrageously in love with his reflection, we forgive him because we no more can condemn him than condemn a rainbow for dissolving into the dark. Rainbows are born of thunderstorms, and Muhammad Ali is both.” That level of mythological immunity is immensely difficult for most players to attain and perhaps for the better if it means an inability to escape from one’s responsibility and accountability. Yet, as it stands, it could be said Salah is treated as the rare homecoming party for which Egyptians have long awaited. His face on dangling lanterns lights up dark alleyways, and his colorful posters germinate over the debris of fad-

ing election posters in a country that sees official and media-manufactured heroes reckon with publicly anointed heroes.

When Ali was still transitioning out of the Cassius Clay incarnation, he made a high-profile trip to Egypt in June 1964. Despite being well received, the *New York Times* reported, Egyptians at times could not understand Ali's confusing display of both humility and boastfulness. One office worker who met the boxer said: "A king would not say he is king of the world about himself—he'd leave it for others to say about him." Ali's religious practices confused them, like shouting "Allah Akbar" or raising his hands in prayer at inappropriate moments. Or when his piousness would suddenly take a break for a flirtation or two with Cairo's waitresses and young women in the host group, even during official processions. Nevertheless, Egyptians were forgiving of the young Ali and concluded that he may not always know what he is doing, but they admired his effort and fervor. Salah presents himself as a blank canvass to be painted on by everyone's politics, faith, and hopes. Where one's appropriation of Salah can help deflate the sense of nobodiness; he is declared "King of Egypt" by many except Salah himself.

NOTES

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8. Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 21.
9. Guttman, *From Ritual to Record*, 26.
10. Novak, *Joy of Sports, Revised*, 31.

11. Thomas, “Soccer Star Mo Salah’s Massive Popularity Is Changing Perceptions.”

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