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## Minarets and Muscle-Ups

At Cairo's lone CrossFit affiliate, athletes sweat out the stress of living through the Egyptian Revolution.

By Bryan Anderson

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All: Bryan Anderson

Adham Salloum, 26, is standing in the middle of a large glass and steel cube inside a health club on the edge of Cairo, Egypt. He grabs a pair of gymnastics rings hanging from the ceiling by black straps and heaves himself up. He pauses for a moment on top of the rings with arms extended, then lowers himself back to the floor.

A dozen of his comrades are standing around him. They clap and they shout, urging him on: "Yalla, Adham!" ("Yalla" means "come on" in Arabic.)

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He pulls on the rings and hoists himself up 13 more times. By the 14th rep, the veins in his neck are bulging. His every muscle is taut. He stares ahead.

"One more!" his comrades shout, pumping their fists in the air.

He lifts himself up again, then lowers himself down, collapsing on the floor, arms and legs spread-eagled. Another round of applause erupts.

The other athletes pull him to his feet, and minutes later he's resting on the grass outside, grinning. He's wearing a "muscle up" T-shirt, a headband, and electric blue and red calf-length socks.

"If that didn't happen," Salloum says of his collapse, "I'd know I was doing something wrong."

This is CrossFit in Cairo, where over three years of political turmoil and security chaos, a small group of athletes have forged a family-like bond based on their shared passion

for "going hard" in their training. Through daily protests, street violence and a military curfew, the athletes have committed intensely to CrossFit.

"It's almost like a civil war," says Ramy Saleh, a tennis coach who brought CrossFit to Egypt in 2011. "People are looking for an outlet from what's going on around them."

### **Fitness and the Revolution**

After three decades of authoritarian rule, in January 2011 Egyptians launched an 18-day uprising that ended the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. The revolution ejected Mubarak and his party from power but failed to reform the underlying structures of the authoritarian state, in particular the police and the military.

However, the uprising did produce the first free elections in decades, resulting in the election of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012. Over a year in power, Morsi advanced the Brotherhood's narrow agenda and failed to reform the authoritarian state. Corruption,



*Egypt has been far from stable since the 18-day uprising in January 2011, and protests and demonstrations are not uncommon.*



economic woes and police abuses continued, alienating much of the public. In July 2013, after Egyptians again launched massive protests against Morsi, the military stepped in to remove him. In the months that followed, a new military-backed government launched a violent crackdown on the Brotherhood that left more than 1,000 people dead.

I visited Cairo's only CrossFit box on a relatively quiet Friday in November. The nighttime curfew imposed by the military after a summer of violence had just been lifted a day earlier. The tension of the last three months was beginning to ease, but isolated protests against the military-led government were still roiling parts of the city.

I hailed a taxi from the city center and was soon zooming along the edge of the desert, passing a military tank parked on the massive Ring Road that circles Cairo and its 20 million inhabitants.

The CrossFit Stars facility is a sleek glass box tucked inside a serene, palm-dotted sports complex in a community called

Swan Lake, on the eastern end of Cairo. When I arrived, a dozen or so athletes, men and women, were chatting and stretching before starting their workout. Turnout was low. Even when the political situation was calm, lingering jitters sometimes kept people at home.

"Even if you don't have something going on in the streets, you have people worried that if they go out, something will happen," said Salloum. "If you're not committed 100 percent, you actually lose (motivation)."

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*The chaotic political situation outside the doors of the box makes CrossFit Stars a haven for those who need to work off the stress of living in uncertain times.*



*In December 2013, students clashed with police at a Cairo university, and several bombings rattled the city.*

Saleh, the godfather of Egyptian CrossFit, was born in Egypt in 1981. He began playing tennis at a young age and joined Egypt's national tennis team at the age of 12. As a teenager, he ranked in the top 70 youth players in the world. He continued playing while attending high school in New Braunfels, Texas, and at The American University in Cairo while completing his MBA in Egypt and at the Maastricht School of Management in the Netherlands.

After four years working corporate jobs, he realized his true passion was in sports and fitness, and he quit to start a tennis academy. He first heard about CrossFit while attending a high-intensity fitness workshop in Britain. He researched more about the program and decided to fly to Los Angeles, Calif., where he completed the Level 1 Certificate Course. In January 2011, he began running CrossFit sessions with a small group of people in an empty soccer field on the outskirts of Cairo, and he affiliated in March 2011.

Coincidentally, this core CrossFit group was born the same month as the popular uprising that forced Mubarak from

power. It was a chaotic time but also a moment of great optimism. For Saleh and other entrepreneurs, it was a moment of opportunity.

"With the chaos, it's a little counterintuitive—a lot of businesses did go down at that time, but in health and fitness the trend is quite the opposite," he said in a phone interview.

Saleh's first recruit was friend and fellow tennis player Karim Maamoun, now 34, who became instantly hooked on CrossFit.

"I know how important fitness is for me as a tennis player. I was doing some things similar to (CrossFit) but not as intense," he said. "I just loved the intensity of it, the new techniques. It's the challenge of it. It's not boring like going and working out in a gym."

Despite the disruptions in daily life that have gone along with the last three years of political unrest, Saleh found that the chaos actually made CrossFit's intense workouts even more appealing.



"Having that outlet, having that community, having like-minded people," he said, "it definitely helps get away from everything that's going on around you."

### **Building and Maintaining Momentum**

At first, CrossFit Stars grew slowly. After six months, there were only 50 participants, and they were still working out on the soccer pitch. A growth spurt occurred in early 2012 when the company started holding bootcamps in other parts of Cairo, including the Gezira Club, in the heart of the city, and the suburban neighborhood of Heliopolis. In February 2013, the affiliate moved into its current glass home, and the core CrossFit group at the Swan Lake compound became a sort of family.

"In the middle of all the chaos, you have something you're in control of, because nothing else was under control. I think it came (at) the right time for everyone involved," said Karim's wife, Ariana, also a CrossFit coach. "We don't get into politics here. We just work out."

Ariana had been working as a project manager in a construction company, but after her husband became obsessed with CrossFit, she also got pulled into the CrossFit orbit and became a coach.

"You start it, you realize, 'What have I been doing until now? That's not really fitness! You see results. You push yourself to a limit you never did before,'" she said. "I really felt if we spread this around, if I have the time to invest, we can change people's lives."

Everyone who joined the CrossFit group early on remembers the experience as one of transformation. The participants began to realize that working out could be not just a hobby or a means to losing weight but also a pathway to making positive changes in their lives as a whole. People came to realize that their bodies were capable of more than they ever thought.

"It's a renewal of your ambition. It's about being competitive. It's about your self-esteem," said Mostafa Wafik, who at 19 is the youngest member of the box.



*Salloum, a former swimmer and rugby player, has found a new outlet for his competitive spirit.*



*Despite protests and violence, the CrossFit community in Cairo has grown steadily and now includes around 400 people.*



*Members of CrossFit Stars realize they can't put their lives on hold, so they make the decision to train amid the chaos, using burpees and box jumps as a break from reality.*

But growing the community was not always easy. Bodybuilding, gymnastics, gym culture and team sports have a long history in Egypt. In the 1920s, physical fitness became important among young, upper-class Egyptian men attempting to project an image of strength and independence at a time when the country was still under British rule. But despite this history, CrossFit is something new.

"We're actually still in this phase of explaining what CrossFit is," Salloum said. "You find that people know nothing, and they ask what fitness is, so you have to go back and explain what fitness is."

Salloum played rugby and has been swimming competitively since childhood, and he now works at HSBC Bank in addition to coaching. He initially started CrossFit in 2012 in hopes of achieving his ideal body shape but now approaches it as a competitive sport.

"I see it as a strategic game," he said. "Part of CrossFit is actually knowing your body very well so you can assign tasks to it that you can handle and then still do something after."





***Undaunted by evening curfews and frequent unrest.***

But in spite of the barriers, the Cairo CrossFit community has grown steadily, spreading through word of mouth and traditional advertising. Today, some 400 people participate in CrossFit Stars training. A few Egyptian CrossFit athletes traveled to Europe and the U.S. to earn Level 1 Certificates, and Saleh has plans to take CrossFit to Alexandria, Egypt's second city, located on the Mediterranean coast.

There also is one other CrossFit affiliate in Egypt, CrossFit Engine 38 in Sheik Zayed, Giza, on the far Western edge of Cairo. While there are affiliates in Israel, Morocco is the only other country in Northern or Central Africa with a CrossFit affiliate.

Over the years, political turmoil has been a repeated challenge. In July 2013, the military coup against Morsi set off weeks of political violence. In August, the new military-led government crushed huge protest camps of Morsi's supporters, leaving more than a thousand people

dead over several days of fighting. The government also imposed a strict curfew starting at 7 every evening.

"We've had really difficult times during the curfew times and ... having a window of only one hour or two hours a day when you can call on people to come and train," Saleh said.

Even with the government intensifying its security clampdown, there is little hope of unrest subsiding anytime soon. In late December, a string of bombings took place at security installations, including a suicide bombing that killed 15 in the city of Mansoura, north of Cairo. At the Islamic Al-Azhar University, student protesters repeatedly clashed with police, leading to the burning of an administration building, exchanges of rocks and tear gas, arrests, and the deaths of four demonstrators.

But still, the hardcore of CrossFit in Cairo came to work out.

"The good part was people actually came," Saleh said. "They come. They worked out. They go hard, break some sweat, laugh it off and head back to reality."



#### **About the Author**

*Bryan Anderson is a freelance writer covering the Middle East.*

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