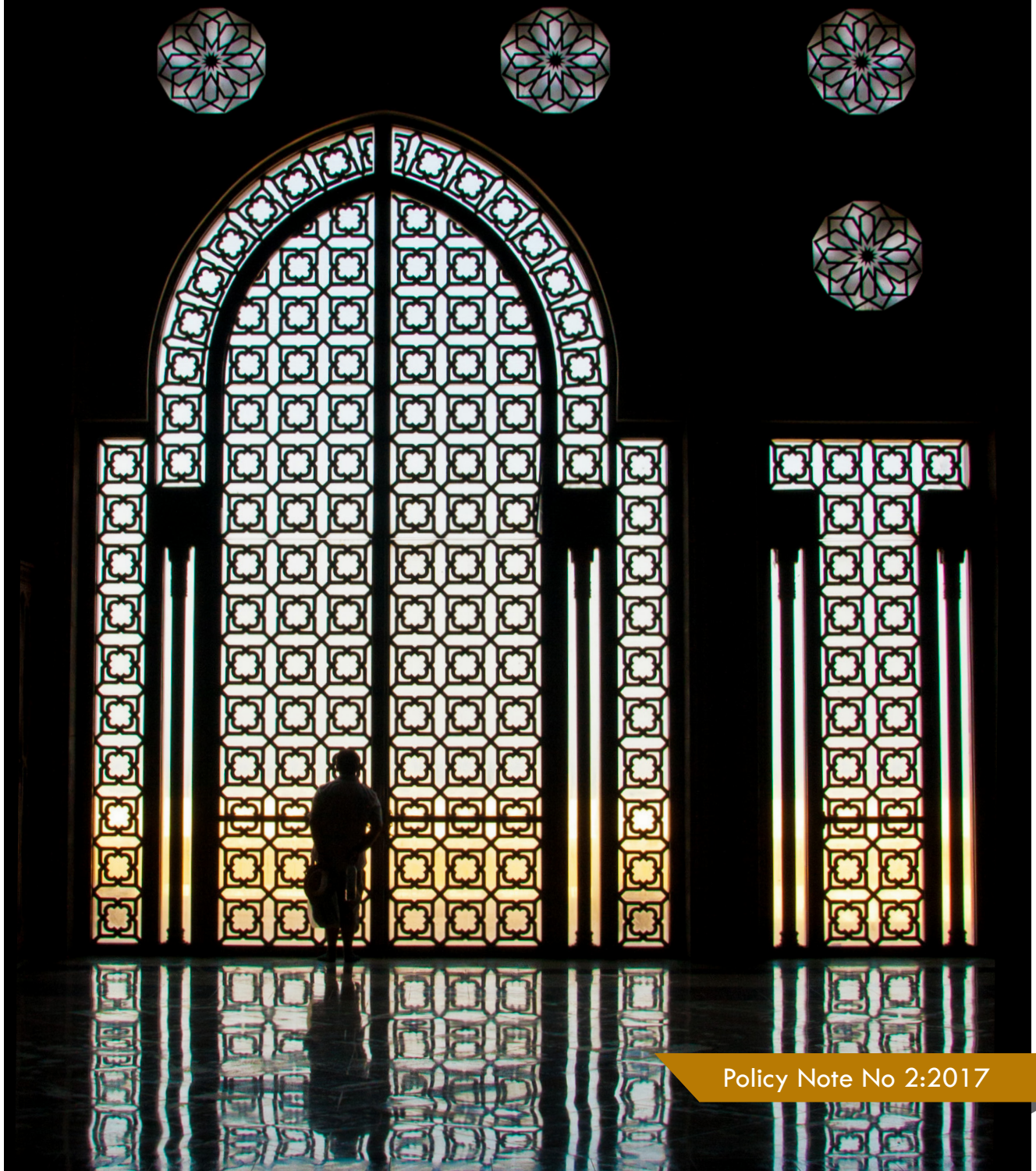


# WHO PUT THE 'POST' IN THE POST-ARAB SPRING? – TOWARDS A FRESH NARRATIVE FOR NORTH AFRICA



Who put the 'Post' in the Post-Arab Spring? – Towards a  
Fresh Narrative for North Africa

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Cover photo: Windows in the Mosque of Hassan II in Casa-  
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# WHO PUT THE 'POST' IN THE POST-ARAB SPRING? – TOWARDS A FRESH NARRATIVE FOR NORTH AFRICA

When will we see a regional UN headquarter for migration in Rabat, or a centre of excellence for ocean studies in Tripoli? In this policy note, NAI researcher Mikael Eriksson recommends outside-the-box thinking, in an effort to gain a fresh perspective on a region that may have lost its spring-time energy, but not the idea itself – or the people behind it.

MIKAEL ERIKSSON, Senior Researcher, the Nordic Africa Institute

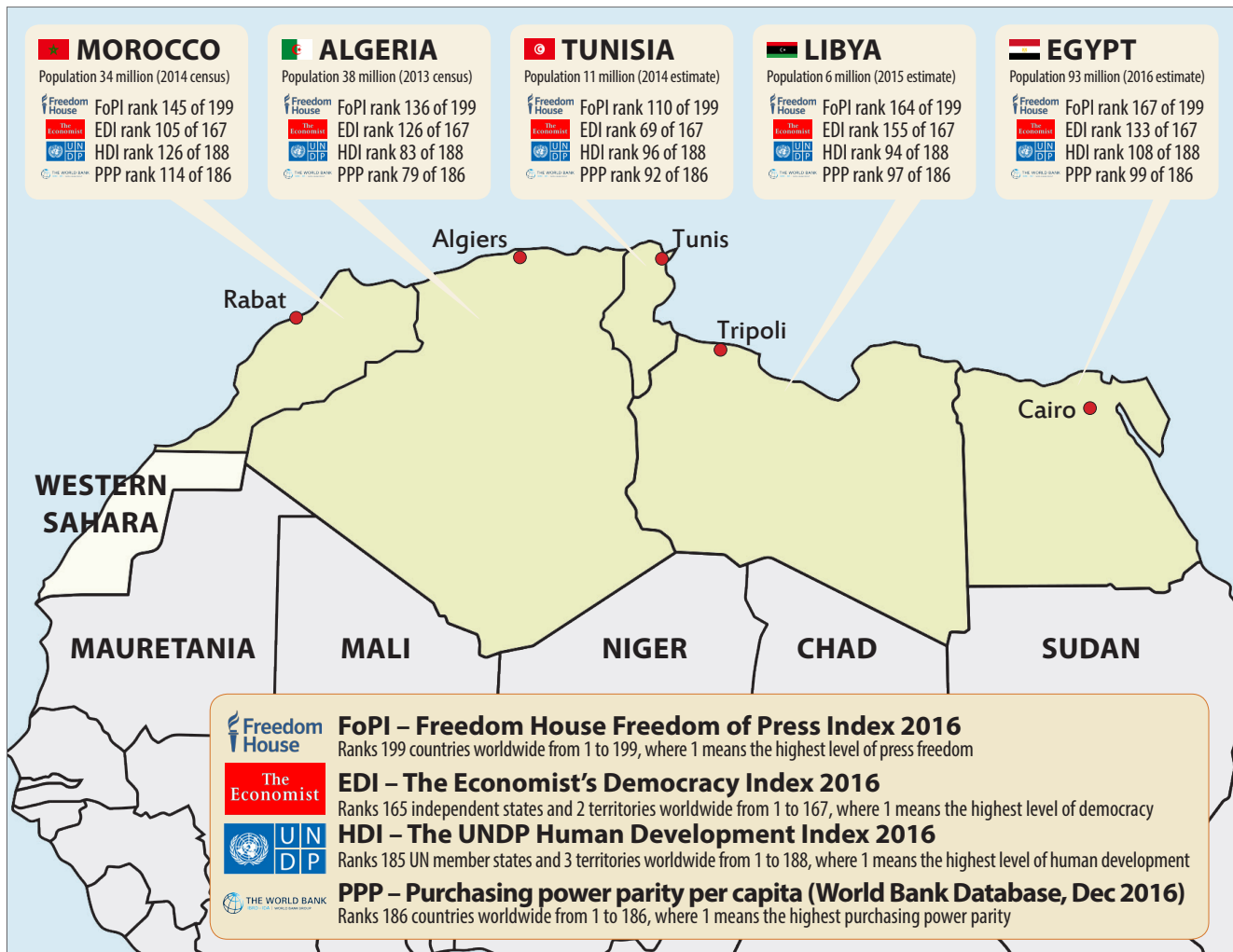
**T**he countries of North Africa have much to offer. All five states – Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia – have vibrant cultures, as well as dynamic social and economic sectors. Their vigorous and enterprising citizens possess rich social capital in

terms of their relationships with one another. They are also well placed to bring about constructive interaction with other states in continental Africa, the Middle East and Europe – a human asset that adds greatly to what the states in the region can offer. However, in the past few years one troubling feature has been that North



Adapted from The Kibster, Flickr, CC BY 2.0

Detail of Arab Spring Poster, February 2012. One of many images of the potential and energy released by people taking to the streets during the Jasmine Revolution.



Although having lost some positions in global ranking lists since the start of the Arab Spring, Tunisia still outperforms its North African neighbour countries in most indices of development.

Africa is increasingly being misrepresented. Ever more frequently, when discussing North Africa, political commentators have tended to turn a blind eye to the many positive developments in the region, and to focus rather on the negative and stereotypical.

### A simplistic and damaging narrative

Since the so-called Arab Spring nearly six years ago, the dominant image of North Africa has been one of turmoil, crisis and deteriorating human rights. Not only is the region routinely described as ‘incorrigible’, but also as ‘hazardous’ and ‘fragile’. Democracy, some commentators note, is unlikely to take root of its own accord. As we understand the social and political dynamics of the region, though, this depiction of North Africa reflects a negative narrative that is likely to do more harm than good in terms of social and political interaction. In fact, this negative narrative is currently fuelling mistrust about what the region and its citizens can contribute to international relations in general, and to human-to-hu-

man relationships in particular. It is also a view that affects the willingness of external actors to invest politically, economically and socially in the region. While the bleak narrative of North Africa may hold a grain of truth, it is by no means the correct way of understanding the region. One could even argue that there are shades of ‘re-orientalism’ about this perspective.

A key message of this policy note is that it is high time this simplistic and negative view of North Africa is overhauled. What is needed is a narrative that is representing the region and its people more positive. After all, in today’s world how one makes use of a narrative is important for the policy community. In this context it is also important to note that the use of “strategic narratives” (i.e. deliberate use of representation of the “other”) is not a new invention. For example, in international relations, commentators generally refer to the use of carefully crafted narratives as an effective and smart diplomacy approach. While science and truth may (and should) be at core, narratives and myth



## » The region's countries are commonly regarded as suffering from societal post-traumatic stress disorder «

matter: they are an important 'sugar coating' that sells in international relations. In revisiting the narrative of the Arab Spring, there is much to be gained from taking a fresh approach to the question of how to interact with the region – as opposed to making policy recommendations solely on the basis of negative stereotypes.

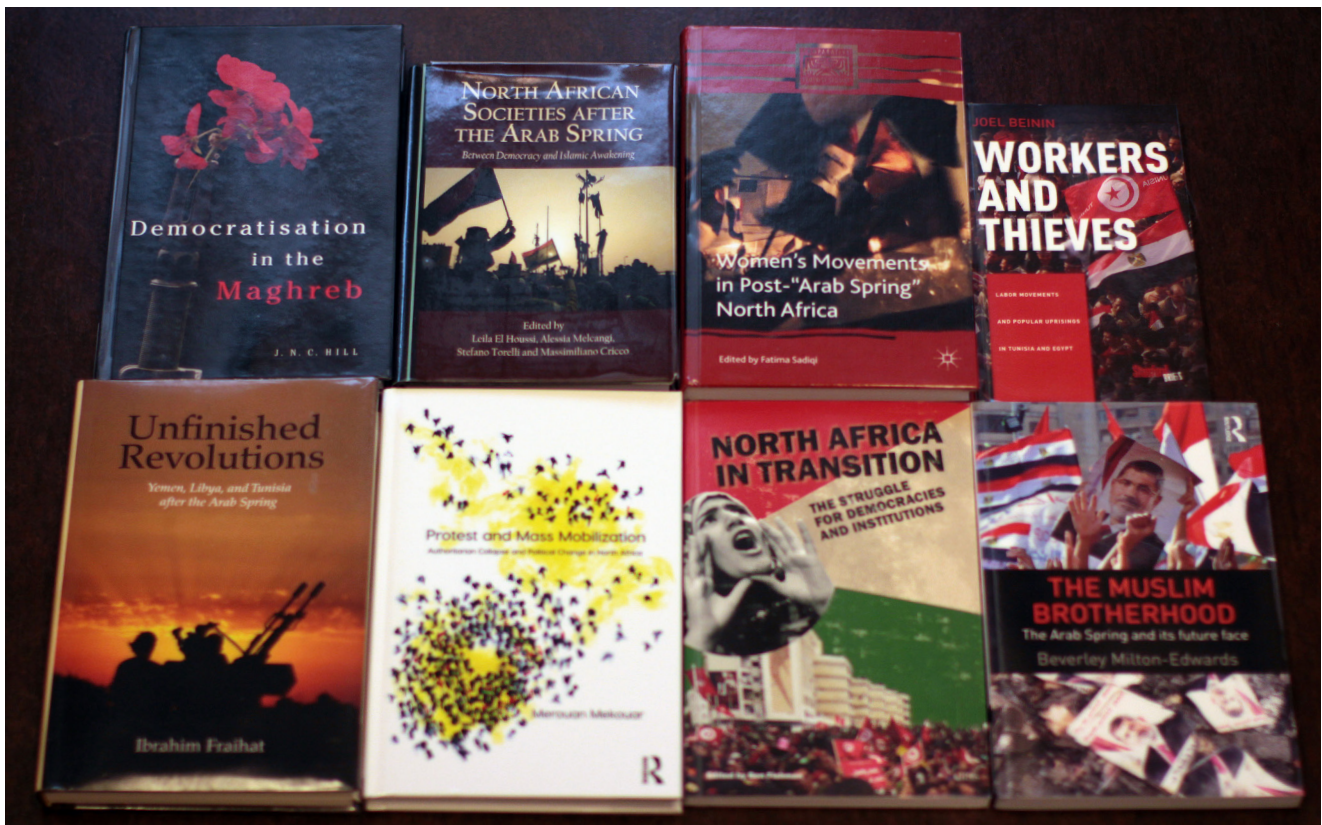
While constructive criticism and constant re-evaluation are always necessary, at times it is also important for external commentators to reconsider the existing narratives. One way of doing that here is by revisiting the force that first arrived with the forces of the Arab Spring.

### The flurry of external responses

In 2011, the political events of the Arab Spring shook the old image of North African states. In essence, that image suggested that authoritarian rule was essential to keep the citizenry in place and to avoid further chaos

and instability. As has frequently been pointed out by external commentators, each country was ruled by a well-established party or family dynasty. States were led by elites, and little heed was paid to local voices. With the Arab Spring came a sudden eruption: the old image of authoritarian states was overturned. An obsession with the state was replaced by an image of the democratic spirit of people protesting. In consequence, citizens' demands for dignity, human rights, democracy and greater freedom led quickly to the formulation of a new, positive and constructive narrative.

With previously voiceless citizens taking to the streets, the new narrative reminded outside spectators that in North Africa there was indeed a vibrant community of engaged citizens who sought profundity in social and political life. What was opportune about this development was that it provided a new perspective on the potentialities of the region. It informed external actors in the West of



The Western perspective. Recent book titles, all of them from USA and the UK, on democratisation in Post-Arab Spring North Africa.

the rich and vibrant civil society that existed beneath the surface of the ‘deep’ state. It also offered a window for the establishment of a new relationship with the region’s states and its people. A narrative that essentially suggests that countries in the region need to be governed with an iron-fist so as not to allow social and political chaos to occur.

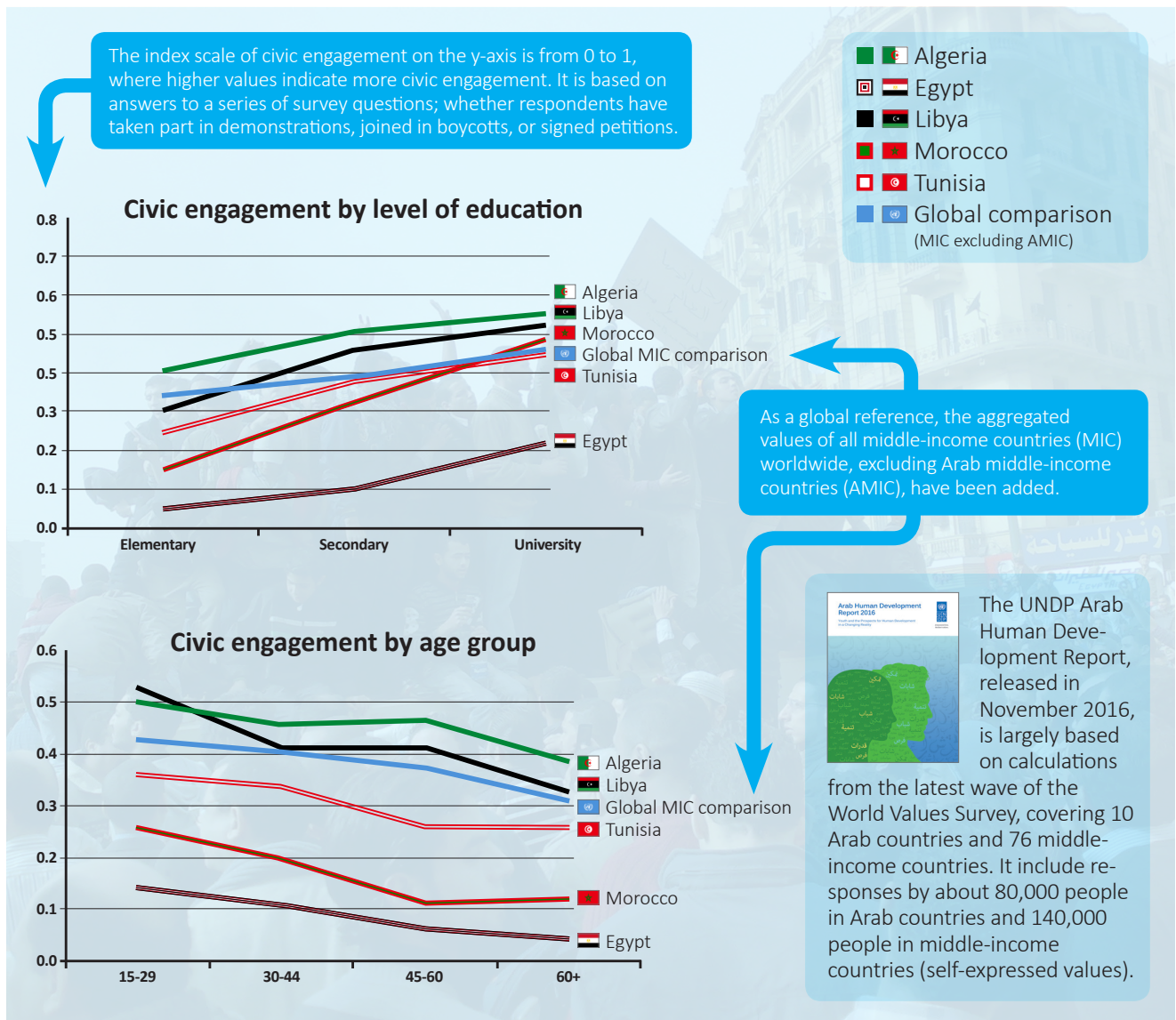
**Taken hostage by geopolitical realities**

Just a year later, in 2012, the Arab Spring was taken hostage by ‘geopolitical realities’, and the fresh narrative of a vibrant and dynamic North Africa began rapidly to erode, hastened on its way by those geopolitical interests that did not benefit from the evolving saga. With this came the new, more undesirable narrative of the ‘so-called Arab Spring’.

As a result of both geopolitical interference by stakeholders external to the region and harsh internal security measures, the debate on the Arab Spring changed. The shift in the vocabulary used to describe the events that unfolded reflects the shift from a phase of popular calls for democracy to a resurgent view of instability, crisis and fear. Several external commentators suggested that the region was intrinsically violent and authoritarian, and so inevitably chaos would ensue.

**Energy washed away**

Rather than being seen as emerging from the Arab Spring with newly won, profound political reform, popular democratic representation and full recognition of human rights, the region’s countries are commonly



Background photo: Demonstrators on Army Truck in Tahrir Square, Cairo, 29 January 2011. By: Remy Rooff, CC BY 2.0

Age and education effects on civic engagement are significant nearly everywhere. Youth are more active than their elders, and education has a positive effect. Civic engagement is higher in Algeria and Libya than the global middle-income-countries comparison at all or most age and education levels. Egypt stands out as the North African country with the lowest civic engagement at all levels. Source: UNDP Arab Human Development Report 2016 (p 60).



regarded as suffering from societal post-traumatic stress disorder. For example, several commentators consider that the Tunisia that is emerging from the so-called Arab Spring is inward-looking and preoccupied with deterring armed groups from penetrating its borders. The potential and energy released by the people taking to the streets has all been washed away.

In Egypt, the military has regained power under President Sisi, and there is a fear that Cairo is turning away from democracy and respect for human rights. The streets are empty of larger protest movements, as the people are fearful. Meanwhile, Algeria and Morocco are considered to have largely escaped the most violent consequences of the so-called Arab Spring, since several of those who were in power when the protests began are still in power. Furthermore, Algeria is eyeing the deteriorating security situation in Mali and Libya and is doing its best to prevent the trouble from spreading across its borders; meanwhile Morocco is seeking regime protection and limited reform, while aiming to neutralize the Western Sahara conflict. Finally, the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya has led to the complete breakdown of the Libyan state. The country has spiralled into civil war and internal tensions could well become even worse.

### **Re-emergence of the re-orientalist perspective**

The narrative that has emerged in the post-Arab Spring environment tells a very negative story of the prospects for stability and democracy in North Africa. Indeed, several of the region's commentators firmly maintain that the Arab Spring was always an illusion. However, such an analysis is based on hindsight. It was not the Arab Spring that died; rather the idea of the Arab Spring was overwhelmed by geopolitical interests. It became a process overshadowed by a new and far more deleterious narrative of the region.

This shift resulted in the new-born Arab Spring narrative being replaced by a more simplistic narrative – one that suggested that the people of the region were unable to reform and that any aspirations of freedom were bound to sink in chaos and violence. The negative narrative of the 'so-called Arab Spring' has thus taken on a life of its own. With it, a re-orientalist perspective appears to have re-emerged. Yet importantly, beneath this new characterization of North Africa large sections of the population still aspire to dignity, freedom and democracy. In order to steer a fresh engagement with the region back on track, what is needed now is an overhaul of the so-called Arab Spring narrative and a return to the more complex and constructive characterization

that arrived with the events of early 2011. The image of North Africa needs corrective treatment: instead of being regarded as a region that is intrinsically disordered, the view needs to reflect the reality that this is a politically, socially, historically and economically rich region. A region whose potential has yet to be fully realized.

Since the so-called Arab Spring nearly six years ago, much has happened in North Africa. While the states in the region seem to have adjusted fairly well to the new realities, their citizens – particularly their young people – continue to struggle and aspire to dignity, democratic practices and human rights. The young people are still seeking to achieve – in terms of both work and education. Opportunities are being sought in all walks of life. Civil society is more vibrant than ever. States are modernizing, reforming and seeking a role in regional and international affairs, despite the challenges they face. Yet, as already mentioned, in the context of the so-called Arab Spring the region is currently misrepresented. A fresh narrative, using words with a positive slant, would provide a stronger basis for representing the region. That narrative would also help develop policies that are better geared to future constructive engagement.

### **Towards a fresh narrative**

In sum then, rather than speaking of North Africa exclusively as a region plagued by violence and authoritarianism, it is time to re-engage the region by thinking outside the box. With this fresh narrative in mind, imagine the following policy recommendations: What about a new Silicon Valley in Tunis? The establishment of a large UN headquarters for migration in Rabat? The siting in Tripoli of a major centre of excellence for research in ocean studies? The creation in Cairo of a large campus for Euro-Africa studies? Or in Algiers, a civilian space-launch facility and research centre?

Investment is needed in new, outside-the-box, projects. Such a shift in narrative could help to bring the vibrantly dynamic states of North Africa together; but it could also encourage development and constructive interaction with states in continental Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

Experience with shifting narratives should also be taken as a lesson for other parts of Africa. Without rethinking and critically engaging with existing narratives from time to time, bad policy judgements could easily result. In the end, such bad policy judgements have vital consequences for those governments and citizens affected.



MIKAEL ERIKSSON is Deputy Research Director at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) and Senior Researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI).

## About the Author



NAI POLICY NOTES is a series of short briefs on policy issues relevant to Africa today, intended for strategists, analysts and decision makers in foreign policy, aid and development. They aim to inform public debate and generate input into the sphere of policymaking. The opinions expressed in the policy notes are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute.

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