

Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region

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Wolfgang Mühlberger • Toni Alaranta
Editors

Political Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa

Conceptions of Order and Perceptions
of Instability

 Springer

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Foreword

Without narratives—stories with purposeful actors and consequential chains of events, beginnings and endings, meaning and direction—the chaotic world (of international relations) would remain chaotic to us, its inhabitants. Although facts seldom speak for themselves in any area of life, the realm of international relations is often viewed as exceptionally distant and difficult to grasp: it operates with abstract entities such as states and nations, brings into play complex ideas such as sovereignty and prestige and regularly takes place in highly symbolic or violent contexts such as summit meetings or foreign battlefields. Contending interpretations among both actors and analysts abound. The stories of adversaries are often mirror images in conflict situations, and as part of normal scientific practice different researchers single out different incidents and trends as essential evidence for their studies. International relations cannot be experienced directly and comprehensively. The need for coherent plots that delimit, mediate and organize action—both in the past and in the future—for various audiences is acute.

The authors of this volume regard narratives as strategic tools used by political entrepreneurs interested in developments in the Middle East and North Africa. They refer to subjective interpretations, manipulative rhetoric and power-seeking behaviour. This is well-justified given the material under scrutiny—in other words the competing narratives of the different local, regional and global actors in the context of crisis and change. There are solid grounds for believing that narrative victory or hegemony is indeed the goal here and that the conflicting stories are carefully designed to persuade specific groups. I would go further and claim that narratives also assume importance in many situations in which storytellers seek objectivity, have little personal interest in the events and lack political power. As the editors of the volume suggest, we are indeed fundamentally storytelling animals (Mühlberger in the Introduction), and even our scholarly perspectives (Alaranta in the Conclusion) come in narrative form. As I see it, it is not only in situations in which we intentionally work towards a specific goal that we refer to, evoke and produce narratives: we do this all the time. All our observations (concerning international

relations) fit into and lend support to larger interpretative frameworks—in other words narratives.

What is fundamentally important, in my opinion, is that we learn to compare the competing narratives, the competing bids for the best explanation in any context, with a critical eye. The choice of narrative has profound effects: it determines which actors we see and who are left in the shadows, the events we deem significant and the ones we consider marginal, the interpretations we find natural or strange and the solutions we are inclined to reject or recommend. The articles in this volume demonstrate the vast variety of alternative narratives available for framing a specific issue or arena of action. In that individual readers will find different stories analysed here the most convincing—and many might find all versions of the events described self-serving—it is impossible to determine what “the true story about MENA” would look like. Unfortunately, we are forever stuck with imperfect narratives. Nevertheless, this volume makes a major contribution in terms of understanding the varying logic and making our own choices in our attempts to form as balanced a picture as possible.

Helsinki, Finland
14 September 2019

Riikka Kuusisto

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