

The Northern Echo
The North's campaigning newspaper

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COMMENT

Come on the North-East

THIS is a part of the world where football really matters and, as the new season gets under way this weekend, we wish the North-East clubs well.

Passions will, as always, run high but North-East fans have learned to be realistic.

In the Premier League, it will be enough for many Newcastle fans to avoid another relegation skirmish and to finish above great rivals Sunderland. And, naturally, the same applies the other way round.

Both are great clubs with proud traditions and support that is the envy of many other boards of directors. Steve McClaren and Dick Advocaat are positive appointments as managers, with both possessing great experience, but we all know how quickly things can turn if results go the wrong way.

In the Championship, Middlesbrough have an outstanding chance of securing promotion after missing out so agonisingly last year. Steve Gibson has backed Aitor Karanka and the return of Stewart Downing is a major coup. Downing could easily have stayed in the Premier League and earned more money but it is refreshing to see him choosing to help his home town club.

As exciting as it turned out to be, Hartlepool United fans will surely settle for an avoidance of last year's "great escape". Ronnie Moore now has folk hero status and it is to be hoped that the momentum from the end of last season will be carried forward.

Play-off places would represent success for Spennymoor and Darlington but the bigger goal for Quakers' fans is to see their club return home. A viable future depends on a return to Darlington and we hope progress can be made on groundshare plans with Darlington Rugby Club. Compromise is needed on both sides.

Here's to a successful season for all North-East clubs.

What do you think?
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QUALITY

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Arab Spring to see new dawn?



The Arab Spring may not have delivered the fledgling democracies we in the West hoped but author **Rory O'Keeffe**, who lived in the Middle East during the uprisings, says we should not give up hope

EARLY in 2011, it appeared the 'Arab Spring' uprisings might deliver millions of people from the hands of tyrants and oppression. Four years on, the reality is quite different.

In Egypt, military dictator Hosni Mubarak was deposed. Today, the state is governed by military dictator General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Since shooting his way to power in July 2013, Sisi has killed more than 1,000 people (some estimates suggest as many as 2,600), injured at least 4,000 more, imprisoned 16,000, and outlawed almost all political opposition.

In Libya, two illegitimate governments sit, powerless, at either end of the state, forced to watch as four illegal militias kill one another – and thousands of civilians – in a bitter civil war. Its capital Tripoli has been bombed three times this year by Egypt and Qatar, at the invitation of one of those militias, which claims to support one of the two governments, but was fighting before that government even existed.

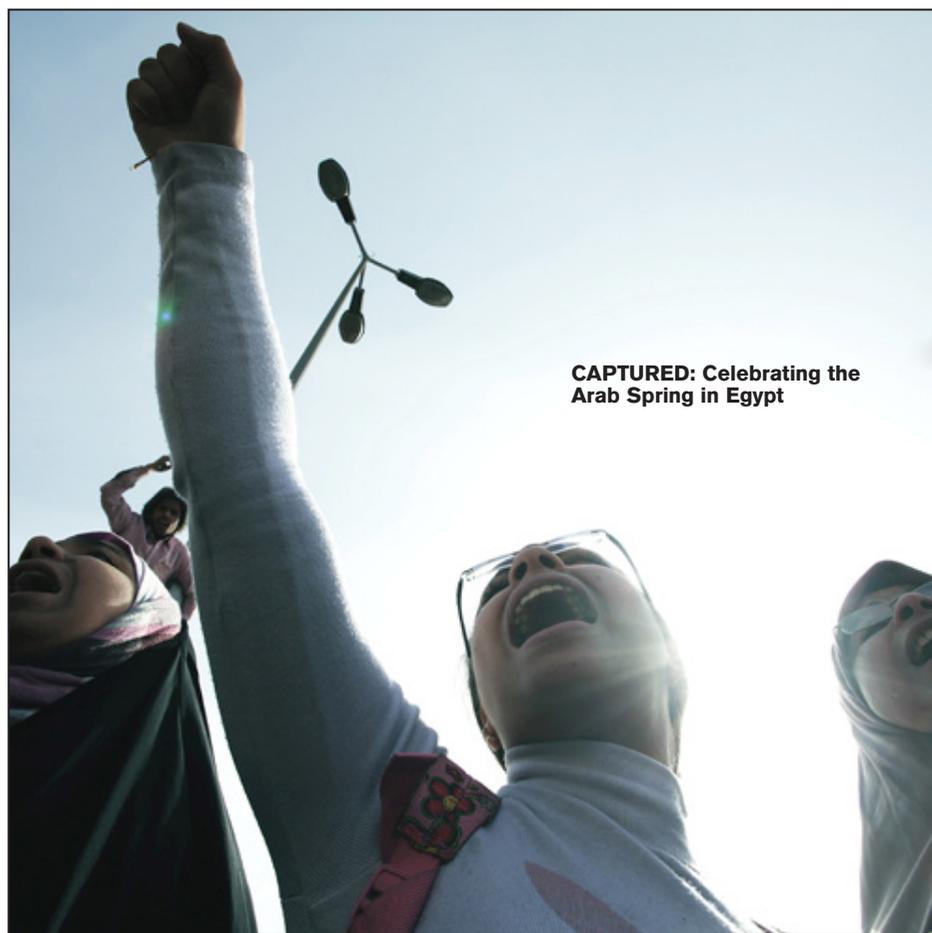
In Syria, more than four years into a grim many-sided conflict, civilians are bombed by their own government, shot by rebel forces, or tortured and murdered by IS. More than 11 million people have been forced from their homes and more than four million forced to flee the nation altogether.

In the wake of the Sousse beach and Bardo museum massacres, it may seem strange to consider that so far, Tunisia is the only state to have made any positive headway since its uprising. It is alone among the Arab Spring states in having elected – and retained – a democratic government and drafted a constitution (which protects the environment, delivers rights to workers and women, and the right to belong to any religion, or none).

I lived and worked in Tunisia, then Libya, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring. At Choucha refugee camp, on Tunisia's border with Libya, I met, worked with and interviewed people from across sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, who had fled their homelands – Somalia, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, Palestine, Kuwait, among others – and then, when the Libyan uprising turned into that state's first Civil War, also left their adopted home.

One young man, who escaped Somalia as a child, described his feelings when Nato bombs fell on Libya: "I had to escape, before Libya became a failed state like my country, where the law was replaced by bullets."

Their stories, along with those of Libyans who had fought to protect or depose Muam-



CAPTURED: Celebrating the Arab Spring in Egypt

mar Ghaddafi (or simply fled the conflict) are shocking. Not only for the brutality those people endured, or for the audacity of their successful escapes, but because they were recounted evenly, calmly, as if their lives, rather than ours, are normal, average, run-of-the-mill.

Those stories – and historical and political commentary on the events which caused them – are at the heart of my book, *The Toss of a Coin: Voices From A Modern Crisis*. Because of them, and the people who told them, I am now a close follower of – and commentator upon – social and political issues across the Maghreb and Western Middle East.

It has not always been a joyful experience. Among the 21 Egyptians beheaded by IS on Sirte beach, Libya, in February were people I had worked with. The beheadings took place just yards from where I had lived. When thousands of people drowned in the Mediterranean in April and May, I knew people who had made – and failed to make – that crossing.

At Calais, today, it is people who have fled war in Syria – boarding vessels they themselves nickname 'the death boats' – and people who had found sanctuary in Libya, only to be forced once again to flee as a result of renewed warfare there, who are now so desperate they are risking their lives clinging

to trains to enter the UK.

And in Aleppo, Syria, I spoke to a young man who was working to help those widowed or orphaned by the conflict. He told me how excited he was about beginning – in just a few weeks – a marine biology degree in France.

Hours before we were due to speak again, a barrel bomb was dropped on his office from a helicopter flown by pro-government forces. He was killed instantly.

In at least three-quarters of cases, the Arab Spring has not delivered. Tied to that failure are countless individual tragedies, and the gravest human crisis of our age.

This is not "okay".

But if you spend time with humanitarians, you are sure to hear the phrase: "If it's not OK, it's not the end."

The same sentiment ran through the words of a Tunisian woman who had left her home to work with the people at Choucha. During the first days of her country's post-revolutionary era, she told me: "If we get it wrong at first, we will keep trying, and our lives will be better. We will get it right."

The Arab Spring has not yet delivered.

But nor has it reached its end. Together, we can help it succeed.

■ Rory O'Keeffe's new book *The Toss of a Coin: Voices from a Modern Crisis* can be purchased at <http://amzn.to/1P8pcwA> and costs £14.99.

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Rory O'Keeffe