Interview – Luigi Narbone

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Professor Luigi Narbone is the Director of the Mediterranean Platform at the School of Government and Professor of Practice at Luiss Guido Carli University. From 2015 to 2021 he was co-founder and Director of the Middle East Directions Programme at the European University Institute. Before moving to academia, Prof. Narbone had a long diplomatic career at the European Union and the United Nations. From 2008 to 2012 he was Ambassador, Head of the EU Delegation to Saudi Arabia, as well as non-resident EU Ambassador to Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Previously he held positions in Brussels, New York, Moscow, Santiago, Ankara and Khartoum. Prof Narbone's main research interests are MENA geopolitics, security and political economy, Gulf studies, conflict dynamics and peacebuilding. He is author of numerous academic publications and policy papers.

Where do you think the most interesting research is happening in your field of expertise?

The world that we live in is changing rapidly, marked by the morphing of the post WW2 universalistic, rules-based international system into a multipolar, more anarchical world order. In this context, it is not a surprise that we witness a change in the theories and methods used to analyse patterns and dynamics in international relations. Research based on traditional realist geopolitics, with a strong focus on nation-states and power relations, is making a come-back. This is an important departure from the times when international cooperation, development, and trade were considered central IR topics. Obviously, it reflects the times we are living in. But this trend can also be dangerous. The risk is that we oversimplify our complex, globalised world. It is not always useful to present the international arena as a space of confrontation between nation-states, seen as a coherent actors pursuing fixed interests. To understand how international politics really works many other elements need be taken into account. For instance, the role of non-state actors in the domestic political struggle and their links with the political economy dynamics of a given country; or the activities of transnational actors, or the shaping of, and developments in, cyber-space. These factors influence the working of international power-dynamics. Adopting and switching between multiple theoretical frameworks allows you to have a better grasp of how the world really works.

How has the way you understand the world shifted over time and what or who prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I finished my studies towards the end of the Cold War. At the time there was a sort of consensus as to where the world was headed. Liberal and universal values were seen as a potential common basis for a rapidly expanding rules-based international system. Throughout the 90s, this seemed to be the framework shared across the world. Of course, there were always different positions regarding the interpretation and implementation of values, as there were different views of democracy, free-markets, and human rights. But some basic ideas were broadly considered applicable to all states and actors across the world.

That vision was gradually eroded in the years that followed. As I took up diplomatic positions in Russia and Turkey, I saw a gradual shift in how the Western way of thinking was perceived by these countries, and by many others for that matter. Differences between the West and countries in the Global South deepened, shaped by growing political and economic divergences. But the importance of history, culture, and geography also returned to the fore. These factors influence the attitude of states and how they relate to the rest of the world, and do not always fit into a narrow, universalistic world view. Thirty years later this process has reached new heights. The world seems to be headed to

a fully fledged battle of narratives – and there is little to no common ground to build upon. This could not be more different from the time when I started my academic and diplomatic career.

Turkey is an interesting example of how history shapes countries' foreign policies. I served there in the early 2000s, shortly after the EU had accepted Turkey's candidacy. For Turkey this was a major achievement, especially in light also of Ataturk's project of reorienting Turkey towards the West. But the country's history influenced the way Turkey went through its candidature path in the years that followed. Its Ottoman Empire past and its conflictual relationship with Europe in the decades that led to its demise and to the birth of the Turkish republic put a strong emphasis on its capacity to fend off foreign influences. That attitude proved hard to combine with the EU-accession process. In its relationship with the EU Turkey always sought extra guarantees, a reassurance, of the EU's commitment to accept the country in the European family. As a result the accession process became increasingly politicised, moving away from the bureaucratic and technical dimensions that the EU is used to.

Fast-forward to the EU of the 2020s, which is clearly adopting a more geopolitical approach in its external actions. It is understandable given the way the world has changed. The main driving force behind the new approach is the desire to achieve geopolitical objectives, as a means to guarantee our security and prosperity in the face of growing global competition. Rather than emphasising mutual interests, as we used to do within the paradigm of EU international action, to fostering development and EU values through trade and cooperation, we start from our own interests. Some say this is a good development, as the latter approach tended to feed paternalistic attitudes. At the same time, I believe that building trust is a key component in international relations, and consistency and credibility are essential in order to do that. We should not lose sight of this dimension as we enter into a new geopolitical era.

What added value does a strengthened EU-MENA relationship entail for both actors? Why should we pursue this relationship?

The relationship between the EU and the Middle-East and North-Africa (MENA) region involves numerous elements of mutual interests that can strengthen the geopolitical position of both actors. First of all, we are neighbours, and in our interdependent world you cannot escape the fact that what happens in your neighbourhood is of growing relevance. We have to identify mutual interests, create win-win situations, and embark in a cooperation that aims at achieving long-term objectives that are important for both sides. Ad hoc coalitions, dominated by only European interests are not going to be effective in the long run.

The need for cooperation only grows stronger when considering the magnitude of the challenges we are all facing. Take the risks posed by climate change. Successfully addressing complex problems of climate adaptation and mitigation in the Mediterranean area can only be done in cooperation with partners. Even an effective management of migration needs cooperation. Irregular migration and large migration flows towards Europe are certainly problematic for the EU. But migration is a problem for MENA countries as well, as shown for instance by the impact of brain-drain on these countries' economic potential. The current status-quo is a lose-lose situation, but through a better relationship and forward-looking comprehensive migration policies, the situation could be turned into a win-win opportunity.

Security is another area where interests are shared between the EU and MENA. Insecurity is what drives large migration flows, as we witnessed in 2015. Insecurity is what allows for blatant violations of human rights in wars zones or fragile states, and what prevents states in the region from achieving their socio-economic potential. Of course, the devil is in the detail. We do not always agree on how to improve security, but it is a fact that enhancing security across the Mediterranean is in the interest of both European and MENA countries.

Energy politics is another important dimension of the relationship. The economy of Europe is decarbonising rapidly, and the whole world seems to have taken this turn for good. What does this mean for oil and gas producing MENA countries, where the economic model is based on the export of fossil fuels? How can they move on the path of energy transition and position themselves for the new carbon free global economy? Through cooperation, enhanced trade-relations, and investment agreements, the EU and MENA can help each other move swiftly in the energy transition, exploit complementarities, and make economic systems green. Think of the potential that the MENA region has for

the new generation of solar energy, or green hydrogen and how renewable energy produced in the countries of the southern shore could find profitable markets in Europe.

An often overlooked point relates to supply-chain problems which were brought to our attention during the COVID pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine. For a number of strategic and economic reasons, Europe will seek to re-shore companies from far away countries in the next few years. This process would be easier if our geographical neighbourhood was a viable alternative for companies. The MENA region is not yet attractive, due to persistent instability and insecurity, political risks and a poor investment environment. But we could manage to address those conditions through improved cooperation and serve the national interests of countries in both regions. Shorter-supply chains, increased economic activity, better governance and a more attractive investment climate, and other spill-over effects could boost sustainable growth across the Mediterranean. All in all, there are many mutual interests encapsulated in this relationship. These should function as the building-blocks for better cooperation.

Despite its importance, the EU-MENA relationship is one marked by big ambitions but disappointing results. In your opinion, which factors are mainly responsible for that dynamic?

There are many elements to consider, but the context of this relationship is important to consider first. The EU has not been capable of promoting a region-to-region dialogue with the MENA region. MENA is politically too fragmented to meaningfully engage in such an effort. The countries in the region are not – as of yet – capable of getting together and presenting a regional vision to the EU. It is in fact the least economically integrated in the world. It also lacks a regional security system, mechanisms to tackle and resolve the many regional security issues and disputes. There is currently no regional order – although it is in the making. This situation is difficult for the EU to deal with, because that block-to-block approach is exactly what the EU excels at. So political actors at the national level prefer a different modus operandi, which further complicates the relationship. When the priority goes to bilateral relationships between EU member states and MENA countries competition and political rivalries tend to prevail and the result is fragmentation in action.

It is also for these reasons that Europe has not properly realised the necessity of the partnership. Other issues have been prioritised by member states. For instance, more attention has been devoted to Eastern Europe – as central and eastern European countries which have acceded the EU in 2003 have shifted the geopolitical focus to the east, due also to their historically thorny relationship with Russia. The EU Mediterranean countries have not been capable of shaping EU external policies to make relationships with the MENA region feature high on the political agenda. Several Mediterranean cooperation initiatives have been launched by the EU, such as the Barcelona Process and the Neighbourhood Policy for the southern neighbourhood. But these policies have not managed to transform the relationships between the north and the south of the Mediterranean. Perhaps they lacked substance and political support to be really effective. Nonetheless, it remains our neighbourhood and we are always going to face the consequences of our unwillingness to deal with it.

The result is that the MENA region has gradually turned into a source of threats and challenges rather than an area of opportunity and potential. The lack of a common EU approach to the region creates awkward situations where different European powers adopt different stances towards certain countries. For instance in the case of the differences between Italy and France in Libya in recent years. Pursuing different interests narrows the space for a common approach.

Countries in the MENA region obviously seek to benefit from Europe's lack of cohesion. They privilege bilateral cooperation that enhances their negotiation position. If their interests are better served by setting European countries up for competition among themselves, they of course do this. On a more positive note, amidst the rapid changes in our international system, the EU seems to be more aware that attitudes towards the region need to change. I do not think that it is surprising, given that the EU-MENA relationship concerns crucial policy issues such as energy, migration, security, and future economic growth.

You have published an article on EU engagement with Tunisia. Could you elaborate on the successes and failures of this engagement and its implications for future EU foreign policy?

The case of Tunisia is important for the EU because it has a high symbolic value. It was the first country where the 2011 uprisings occurred, and the only country that moved towards a positive democratic transition afterwards. For Europe, it represented a litmus test on whether and how it had the capacity to promote and support such a successful democratic transition. If you look at the fate of countries like Syria and Libya, that significance becomes more striking.

In my article I outline the different stages of the EU's engagement towards Tunisia. The initial phase focused on supporting the institutional transformation of Tunisia. That process was successful and led to the adoption of a new Tunisian constitution, which ranks among the most progressive in the region. The second phase entailed a strong emphasis on security, as Tunisia became the target of ISIS and other terrorist attacks. Also in this phase, the EU managed to usefully support Tunisia, though security training, intelligence cooperation and other supporting measures.

However, the main shortcoming in this process was the incapacity to favour socio-economic progress. Ten years after the revolution the country was still struggling with economic stagnation and high unemployment. That led to widespread disenchantment with democracy among the Tunisian people, which in turn led to a new cycle of protests and the election of president Said on a populist ticket. It also led to frustration on the EU side, as the EU felt that in spite of the billions of euros invested in supporting the transition, the transformation of the country was elusive. I consider that this is a self-defeating way of thinking. Look at the success stories from our enlargement policies, such as Poland and Slovakia. It demonstrates that if the EU can provide a country with solid perspectives and long-term horizons it can trigger fundamental socio-economic transformations. This is never an easy process. Think of the impact that economic transformations have on the daily lives of the citizens. Family businesses might go bankrupt, economic players with vested interest will resist change, social unrest will slow down the process. In order to be successful a long-term approach is needed, and external support must also include measures to prevent or absorb systemic shocks. The policies and instruments that guide such a process need to be modulated according to the priorities and obstacles that are encountered. It is unrealistic to think that situations can change easily in three to four years, policymakers and politicians alike would do well to keep that in mind. Yet such a flexible, steadfast and long-term approach is not what the EU typically excels at.

Your experience as an EU ambassador in the Gulf Region has allowed you to further develop an outsider perspective of the EU. How do these countries in the region perceive the EU and its member states, on which blind spots should Europe reflect?

As an ambassador, I spent a lot of time explaining the dynamics and processes within the European Union. It is a complicated political and institutional system, and we would do well to explain it to others rather than assume that they can figure it out. This involves the role of various institutions and their competences, for example. Something that I also worked on intensively was enhancing the visibility and reputation of the EU as a valuable partner for Gulf countries. Some European member states have a long history of engagement with countries in the Gulf Region, which begs the question why they should also engage in parallel with the EU. Success stories and concrete examples of valuable cooperation are needed to change this perception. In this difficult endeavour even technical matters, such as sharing best practices regarding the design and implementation of waste disposal policies, can be helpful. The EU has high-level expertise in such technical policy areas. These are less eye-catching than matters of political or security cooperation, but they also represent a tool to enhance engagement and cooperation with strategic partners.

On a different matter, the EU's commitment to human rights in its engagement with foreign countries is clearly important and something that I strongly support. However, if not managed well, it can transform into an ideological blindspot. Human rights are best served, across the board, through continued engagement. Engagement is the space for a discussion even on matters where we do not see eye to eye.

The geopolitical composition of the Middle East is subject to a wide range of ongoing developments, including rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a decreasing US presence, and increased diplomatic engagement by Israel with its neighbours. Which other factors should we pay close attention

to when analysing the state of the region?

Beneath all these mentioned dynamics is an overlooked and underlying trend: a regional reset, which started about two years ago. It is caused by the failure of many conflicts and tension-driven relationships to provide any good outcomes for the major actors in the region. I believe we have arrived at a moment of conflict fatigue, where a lack of tangible results and continued high-costs for prolonged conflicts are no longer justifiable in the eyes of regional powers. In such a context, diplomacy has a chance. For example, Turkey has reached out to the UAE, after the two countries confronted each other from opposing camps of a regional geopolitical contest in a number of theatres in the MENA region and Africa. The Abraham Accords are creating new economic, social, and political dynamics between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, and Qatar. Last but not least, Saudi-Arabia and Iran are engaged in a dialogue once more. This process is not always steadfast, or coherent in its direction. It can be easily hijacked by political events, and we should still be cautious of the geopolitical implications of the ongoing protests in Iran.

But taking a step back allows one to see that the region is realising that it needs to move to a new security system and this necessitates engagement between the major regional powers. The USA is no longer willing to play the role of hegemonic power in the region. China, though pushing for deepening economic ties, does not seem interested in a role as security provider. Russia is becoming increasingly limited in its capacity to act in a meaningful manner, and the EU is not yet capable to play a significant role. Thus, countries in the region need to find their own ways of handling conflict, tensions, and crises. I believe we are witnessing the first steps in this process. The major obstacle is the lack of trust, which feeds into security dilemmas. Trust-building is needed on all levels, not just between elites. People can influence the political preferences of elites in these countries and push them towards a shift in the political that will translate into de-escalation, less escalatory rhetoric, and cease-fires in conflict zones. Confidence-building measures in the military and economic areas can also play an important role. Transparency regarding what military forces are doing and where, better channels of communications between military and political elites are all tools that have been tested successfully in the European OSCE experience. Based on this, some principles can be found to start shaping the regional security architecture. It is a long process, but eventually all countries would benefit from more stability in the region.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

Do not fall victim to overt simplification of our complex world. Instead, remain open to insights from different perspectives, and analyse the world through various theoretical frameworks. It requires more work, and occasionally undermines the security that comes with a steadfast belief in your standpoints, but it pays-off. This applies to both practical and theoretical complex issues, like the ones discussed in this interview.