Interview – Riccardo Fabiani

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Riccardo Fabiani is the Director of the North Africa Project at conflict-prevention NGO International Crisis Group, where he oversees work on Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Western Sahara. He has more than fifteen years of professional experience as a political analyst and economist on North Africa, having worked for Eurasia Group, Energy Aspects and other consultancies. Riccardo is also the author of "In Transition: North Africa's Long Decoupling from Europe and the US", "Tunisia and the International Community since 2011: Rentierism, Patronage and Moral Hazard", and "Morocco, Tunisia and the politics of the EU's list of non-cooperative tax jurisdictions" (written with Chloe Teevan).

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The conventional wisdom would be to say that social media analysis, the nexus between climate change and local and international politics, and quantitative approaches to social sciences are the most exciting and innovative fields. I wouldn't disagree with this statement, as these approaches are indeed valuable and are changing our sector. However, I find that a field that is sometimes overlooked and is actually quite insightful is qualitative political economy. There is a lot of interesting research published by young researchers, who are taking a fresh look at various issues, such as patrimonialism, corruption and smuggling, and changing our understanding of these concepts. Rather than looking at new phenomena and trends, they are changing our pre-existing ideas and established wisdom – a contribution that I find very interesting.

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

My thinking has evolved in stages that roughly correspond with my professional and academic experiences and the readings and conversations that these entailed. My initial focus was on the key role played by macro and international economic factors on countries and their international positioning: basically, the issue of economic resources. This has been my main concern for years: what drives economic development? How does development affect a country's international standing and relations of power? My initial intellectual faith in the role of the market gradually evolved into a more complex and cautious understanding that developmental processes are basically chaotic experiences significantly affected by a country's position in the web of international relations. I slowly realised that adopting supposedly business-friendly policies is not enough and can actually be an illusion, and that growing out of poverty is not linear, but rather the (sometimes intended, sometimes accidental) result of a series of trial-and-error approaches mired in messy politics and asymmetric ties. To these ideas, through my work at Energy Aspects and now at the International Crisis Group I have added a more precise and subtle understanding of the global energy markets, international relations and its intrinsic limitations, and conflicts' devastating impact on developing countries. Overall, if I had to identify three authors that literally turned upside-down my understanding of the world, I would mention here Musthaq Khan's political settlements approach, William Ferguson's focus on collective action and development, and Herman Mark Schwartz's outstanding history and analysis of international economic relations.

Recent years have seen Algeria recalibrating some of its relationships within the Maghreb and across the Mediterranean, as well as a notable shift in the tone of US-Algerian ties. Can you explain these developments?

For many years, domestic factors held back Algeria and its ability to weigh in on regional affairs. Firstly, it was President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's ill health, which injected a considerable degree of uncertainty into the decision-making process. Later, it was the stand-off between the Hirak protest movement and Algeria's transitional leadership. Add to this mix Algeria's reliance on hydrocarbon revenues (which introduces a cyclical component to its domestic and foreign policies) and the difficulty of adjusting to a new international environment, marked by uncertain US commitments across the region and growing external interferences in North Africa and the Sahel (starting from the intervention in Libya in 2011).

Since President Abdelmadjid Tebboune took power and gradually outmanoeuvred the protest movement, the authorities' focus has been on sending a signal to their neighbours (namely, Morocco) and international partners (the US and Europe) that Algeria is back and wants to be listened to and weigh on major decisions that affect the region. Ultimately, Algiers wants to see the departure of external actors from the area and contain what it sees as Morocco's revisionist foreign policy in the region.

Being the largest exporter of natural gas in Africa, Algeria has emerged as a potential candidate to reduce the energy shortfall looming over Europe this winter. Do you think Algiers is equipped to meet this new demand, and if so, will it elevate Algeria's standing in the region?

There are two main elements to take into consideration. Firstly, in the short-term, Algeria can shift part of its export volumes to prioritise some of its European partners. That seems to be Algiers' strategy to meet Italy's needs, for example. Italy's imports from Algeria have gone up considerably, while volumes to Spain, Tunisia and LNG exports have apparently gone down. Exports to Morocco, meanwhile, have been suspended. While we cannot talk of the weaponization of energy (indeed, the Algerian authorities position themselves as a reliable energy partner for Europe, unlike Russia), this strategy raises the question of Algeria's politicization or prioritization of its gas exports. It is a well-known fact that rising domestic demand for gas and roughly stable production levels mean that the country cannot suddenly increase its overall export volumes (and the idea of capturing gas that is currently flared is more problematic than sometimes assumed, as Geoff Porter brilliantly explained in this thread).

Secondly, there is the longer-term issue of investment. The Algerians have been very clear to their European counterparts: if you want more gas, you need to step up your upstream investment and support our renewable energy efforts (as this source of energy can both be exported and used to cut domestic demand for gas in the future). Algeria has not been the hottest hydrocarbon prospect for a long time, due to a combination of political risk and increasing exploration and production costs keeping away many international oil and gas companies. However, now that global energy markets are fragmenting and European political concerns around supply security are changing its companies' priorities, Algeria can benefit from this reorientation to attract much-needed foreign capital into its energy sector. For Europe, Algeria is more of a long-term bet on its energy security than a short-term alternative to Russian gas.

As I said earlier, Algeria is aware of this shift and is rightly trying to capitalise on it. The authorities want to "reset" their relations with their European counterparts and reposition the country as an indispensable partner. While Algiers refuses any open instrumentalization of its energy supplies, it is well capable of using them to recalibrate its relations with Europe.

Aside from energy, how else has Russia's invasion of Ukraine impacted the Maghreb?

There have been multiple, mostly indirect effects. Russia is a major player in the Western Sahara conflict, as a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council. From the beginning of the invasion, Morocco and Algeria have studiously avoided antagonising Russia by adopting a neutral stance on this war at the UN General Assembly and in diplomatic statements. For Rabat, the main concern seems to be avoiding a possible Russian retaliation at the Security Council, while for Algeria its long-standing military and diplomatic ties with Moscow justify this position.

From an economic perspective, North Africa has been hit by rising inflation and, most importantly, higher food prices. This issue has once again highlighted these countries' post-colonial structural dependence on wheat imports and the failure to boost domestic production to meet demand (outside of various pockets of export-oriented, specialised

agricultural output). While Algeria could afford to pay more for its food imports thanks to its higher hydrocarbon revenues, other countries (such as Morocco, but also Tunisia and Egypt) have experienced great pressure on their external accounts, which remain structurally in deficit. In turn, this pressure raises the issue of debt sustainability in countries like Egypt and Tunisia (and, to a lesser extent, Morocco). These countries have accumulated very high debt levels and their economies are stuck in a sub-optimal equilibrium that is insufficient to generate revenues and raise incomes –these problems, in turn, contribute to domestic instability, as we know.

Another impact of the invasion of Ukraine is on Algeria's military ties with Russia. Will Algiers continue to receive the military equipment and technology that it needs from Moscow, given that the latter is completely absorbed by its efforts in Ukraine and in view of the current arms race between Morocco and Algeria (with the former turning to Israel to secure technology transfer and upgrade its capabilities, and the latter announcing a 130% increase in military spending)?

Since 1975, Algeria has been the most steadfast backer of Western Sahara's claim to self-determination. How much do questions of Algerian national identity overlap with its support for the indigenous Sahrawi?

There is often a misperception, particularly in the West, regarding Algeria's position and support for the Polisario Front and its cause. Of course, Algeria's colonial experience and anti-colonial struggle set this country aside from the rest of North Africa and continue to shape the country's collective identity. This also translates into a direct or indirect identification with the Sahrawi cause, even though how much this feeling is shared by the broader population remains unclear: for example, during the Hirak demonstrations, there were no Sahrawi-Arab Democratic Republic's flags or pro-Polisario banners in sight.

I would argue that, more generally, the anti-colonial struggle has left a deep mark on Algeria's identity and, in particular, its foreign policy, which is still largely inspired by principles of self-determination, non-alignment and national sovereignty that are the results of this collective experience. From these principles (which are sacred but can also be adjusted based on circumstances), stems Algeria's rejection of Morocco's stance on Western Sahara, which is motivated both by its support for the Sahrawi population's right to self-determination and by its opposition to Rabat's revisionist foreign policy, i.e. its refusal to accept post-colonial borders. While Morocco and Algeria have signed a treaty that defines their bilateral frontier, Rabat's control of Western Sahara and its non-recognition of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla is still a source of concern for Algiers.

To what extent is Algeria's support for Western Sahara also an extension of regional competition with Morocco?

Rather than a simple regional competition, I would talk of two diverging (and partly self-contradicting) geopolitical and security visions clashing in the Maghreb. Morocco positions itself as a revisionist state that pursues the goal of unity with Western Sahara as a foreign policy priority and is ready to establish close diplomatic and security ties with the West and Israel. It does not shy away from using these alliances for its own agenda and accepts the asymmetrical reality of international relations to carve its own role within it. In other words, Morocco is both a revisionist state at the regional level and a supporter of the status quo at the international level through its alliances with the US and France, for example.

On the other hand, Algeria views the region through a completely different lens: it considers post-colonial borders as untouchable and opposes any external interference in the area. At the same time, Algiers has always positioned itself as a non-aligned country that looks for a rebalancing of North-South relations and criticises Western/Northern hegemony at the global level. Therefore, it is possible to consider Algeria as a status quo power in North Africa and a revisionist state vis-à-vis the current international distribution of political and economic power.

These two visions converge and clash on the Western Sahara dispute. Of course, regional competition plays a role in this situation, as Algeria and Morocco strive to impose their understanding of regional and international relations on the rest of North Africa. By virtue of their size, economic and natural resources, population and geographic position,

these two countries aspire to shape the surrounding area based on their understanding of the outside world (which is, in turn, shaped by their historical experiences).

What are the main challenges facing Algerian foreign policy?

Algeria is clearly pursuing a strategy that aims to re-establish its regional pre-eminence and centrality in the eyes of both regional and international actors. The message Algiers is sending through its multiple foreign policy initiatives (involvement in the Palestinian reconciliation talks, resumption of the CEMOC in the Sahel, a more inflexible stance on Western Sahara, renewing energy ties with European states etc.) is that its views, interests and voice need to be taken into consideration by local and external parties dealing with North Africa.

However, this approach also poses a major challenge to Algeria: where does this rebalancing end? To outside observers, it is still unclear what the proximate and ultimate objectives that Algiers is pursuing in this new strategy are. Is this rebalancing an end in itself or, more realistically, the prelude to a more pragmatic and concrete agenda that is yet to be clearly articulated and communicated? Basically, what does Algeria want? If the ultimate goal is the end of external interferences in the region, how does it plan to achieve that? What are the intermediate steps for that to happen? And how does it intend to deal with an equally assertive neighbour, i.e. Morocco? Algeria will need to clearly communicate on these (and more) issues, if it wants to be not just heard, but also understood.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

An important but underestimated piece of advice, in my view, is to read as much as scientific literature as possible, also outside of one's field of specialisation. There is a wealth of ideas and models that needs to be identified and can be very useful. The only problem is that it is often hidden and buried under a mountain of not-so-insightful articles and books. It is a hard slog, but the intellectual rewards of finding a truly eye-opening paper or book are remarkable. Also, it is important to exchange as much as possible with practitioners. Talking with diplomats and other officials can be enlightening, because many analysts and researchers continue to commit the capital sin of articulating recommendations without really understanding the hard limits imposed by reality. This is not to say that we should all be moderate and reasonable; but even a radical perspective needs to be grounded in reality, if the aim is to ultimately change it.