
Meet the dialogue architect

In Naples, president of a leading Italian-based Euro-Mediterranean foundation told **Magda El-Ghitany** that the Southern Mediterranean is eager to establish common ground with its Northern counterpart

It was almost noon and Michele Capasso, president of the Euro-Mediterranean *Fondazione Laboratorio Mediterraneo*, the organisation tasked with establishing peace and understanding in the Mediterranean, was looking out of his office window. "Look at the sea and the people sitting before it; don't they remind you of the people sitting before the other shore of the Mediterranean in Egypt's Alexandria? Don't they look so much like each other," Capasso reflected.

Perhaps it was these common features -- whether the sea itself or the physical and psychological characteristics that people on both sides of the Mediterranean share -- that led Capasso to establish the *fondazione* in 1994. Before then, Capasso had worked as an architect engineer. However, following a trip to former Yugoslavia where thousands of Muslims were massacred, he decided to quit his job and dedicate his life to finding ways to build bridges of mutual tolerance and understanding in the Mediterranean region, where his homeland, Italy, lies. He was keen to prevent the occurrence of any cultural or ideological conflict that would be similar to the ones he witnessed in former Yugoslavia.

According to Capasso, the *fondazione* aims at establishing a "coalition of shared values and interests among the countries, which throughout history, have acted around the Mediterranean." To pursue such a goal, Capasso introduced the concept of the "Greater Mediterranean", which, in addition to the 1995 Barcelona declaration member states, includes all Middle East countries and Europe's Balkan states.

The reasons for such an initiative are many. As Capasso explains, the Greater Mediterranean is a concept that has ancient geopolitical roots -- something which is often forgotten. At present, these ties are being put in question. Rising tensions between Islamic and Western cultures have made it all the more urgent to establish inter-cultural dialogue. "The world is divided enough. We do not need to add further divisions among its regions and states."

Capasso believes that despite the frequent portrayal of Southern Mediterranean states -- specifically Arab countries -- as hot beds of violence, conflict and terrorism, almost all European countries, even those that do not directly relate to the Mediterranean, are willing to become part of the "Greater Mediterranean" region. Capasso emphasised the intricate ties between Islam and the West. "We should never forget that the European civilisation owes a great debt to Islam... The European Renaissance owes its being to the science and technology of the Islamic civilisation." The problem is, Capasso noted, that this debt has not been properly paid. "Now, modernity and technology are offered to the Muslim world in a way that does not promote equality but oppression."

Capasso believes the problem of Islam and modernity is not one of incompatibility; the problem lies in the fact that nowadays, voices calling for confrontation and clashes between different cultures are getting louder, despite the fact that the current global challenges require both sides to unite. "Islam and the West need to move together. They have common goals, even if their starting points are different." And just as the Islamic world may appear to suffer from the lack of modernity -- as indicated by the lack of democratic systems in some of its countries -- "Europe suffers from an excess of modernity. Both regions need to balance each other," Capasso insists.

"It is also necessary to highlight the fact that the Arab world is not the only region that suffers from a lack of development. We in Europe have also united with the newly joint Eastern European states -- and these suffer from problems similar to those in the Middle East. Both regions will benefit if they exchange experiences in confronting such common challenges," Capasso said.

Over the past 12 years the *fondazione* has organised dozens of seminars and events in various Mediterranean countries, all of which have aimed at introducing peoples of different cultures and ideologies to each other. The *fondazione* thus seeks to spread an alternative way of thinking, as far as the relation between Islam and Europe is concerned. It will work on making moderate voices that call for an alliance between both sides loud and clear. "It would be naïve to assume that all people think the same and adopt common beliefs. Even people sharing a common religion and identity differ in their thinking; it is thus normal for people coming from different cultures to adopt different beliefs and ways of life." However Capasso noted, "what really matters -- and this is what the *fondazione* has been striving to attain -- is that differences do not, and should not, create clashes among peoples; they create diversity so that they complete each other when cooperation takes place."

To spread the "spirit of diversity" both sides first need to get to know each other, something most easily achieved through cultural exchange. Culture "has no boundaries; it is the only means through which people can genuinely interact and know each other." Accordingly, Capasso explains, the *fondazione* is currently working on translating four Arabic books into Italian.

In order for such attempts to succeed, Capasso adds, the media -- be it Western or Arab -- has a crucial role to play. Capasso highlights the need for the formation of a code of ethics governing the role media plays in critical issues, with an emphasis on more moderate voices. It should not only focus on, and exaggerate, all incidents of clashes between peoples from different cultures. "We need to construct a media network that is aware of the impact of the word or the image it publishes on the whole globe." As a Euro-Mediterranean organisation, the *fondazione* realises that the "role of information and technology in minimising conflict and cementing ties between the various cultures" can never be underestimated.

One major factor that hinders efforts to spread mutual understanding across the Mediterranean is the "lack of a common interest". According to Capasso, the problem is that, again, "different Mediterranean countries are still unable to realise that we are all confronting the same challenges in today's increasingly globalised world. We are all facing the same environmental hazards, the same diseases, and the same threats posed by violence and terrorism."

Accordingly, the *fondazione* will work on attaining this sense of common interest among Mediterranean states by the end of 2010, as outlined in its "Manifesto for Alliance Between Civilisations". The only means to attain such alliance, Capasso argues, is to "mobilise civil societies in these states. We need the citizens, not the governments to attain a practical dialogue that would take place in all fields-- social, political and cultural."

Despite set-backs, most notably the controversy surrounding the Danish cartoons, Capasso remains optimistic regarding the ability of different cultures to co-exist. Nor does he perceive the rise of Islamist trends in the Southern Mediterranean as a threat to his foundation's goal of reaching mutual understanding between the countries on both sides of the Mediterranean.

"A successful dialogue is one that is conducted between different peoples with different ideologies in order to reach a common ground at the end. I believe that all the talk about clashes between cultures and civilisations could amount to nothing but a storm in a tea cup -- but only if we, as the Greater Mediterranean nations, dedicate ourselves to promoting dialogue and deeper understanding. At the end of the day, the majority definitely wants to survive in peace. The Greater Mediterranean region and the *fondazione* could be the starting point

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