Italy and Austria: «Syria, Europe shall change its strategy» (Il Messaggero)

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With world attention focused on crisis hotspots such as Gaza and Ukraine, the situation in Syria has been shunted to the sidelines in the media, but also in the EU’s foreign policy agenda.

This is a strategic mistake.

Despite massive humanitarian aid, including EUR 33 billion from the largest international donor, the EU, the Syrian people are still in poverty. More than 16 million people are in need of life-saving assistance, the highest number ever recorded since the beginning of the conflict. The suffering extends far beyond the country’s immediate borders: Syria is still the source of the world’s largest refugee crisis, with 13.8 million internally displaced people and refugees. Many are still on the move, prey to the traffickers’ highly profitable business model. These effects are felt far beyond the Middle East, even in Italy, Austria and the rest of Europe.

Meanwhile, Assad remains firmly in power. With the support of Russia and Iran, the Syrian regime has managed to strengthen its power, regaining control of more than 70 per cent of the country. Our Arab partners in the region have recognised this unfortunate reality, and have readmitted Syria to the League of Arab States.

The EU strategic thinking is lagging behind. After thirteen years, we have to admit that the EU’s approach has not kept pace with the evolving situation on the ground. Our policy objectives date back to 2017 and have not been updated.

Any further action obviously cannot and must not imply any compromise on the basic principles of democracy, inclusiveness, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. To this end, however, it is urgent to relaunch a substantial and meaningful dialogue between the current rulers in Damascus and the opposition, within the framework of the political process led by UN Special Envoy Pedersen. We therefore urge Assad to show the necessary flexibility in a reconciliation process that is needed to get Syria back on track.

In this regard, we believe it is time to rethink our approach to Syria. This involves asking uncomfortable questions: how can we ensure that Syrian citizens have economic prospects and are not forced to embark on a dangerous journey to Europe? How can we help create

the conditions for people to return to Syria? How can we ensure that our sanctions hit the henchmen of the system and not the population at large? We have no ready-made answers to all these questions. We are ready to engage in a transparent and open discussion.

Together with the Foreign Ministers of Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Slovakia and Slovenia, we have therefore called on the High Representative to revise the EU strategy for Syria. Our goal is a more realistic, proactive and effective policy on Syria to increase our political influence, the effectiveness of our humanitarian assistance and to create the conditions for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of Syrian refugees.

Maintaining the status quo while the situation in Syria and neighbouring countries continues to deteriorate is not an option. We must finally put Syria back on the EU agenda as a top priority. If we fail to do so, the consequences for the civilian population in Syria, for neighbouring countries in the region, for our Mediterranean partners and, ultimately, for Europe, will be disastrous.

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