Bonino: «We are not in Kosovo, our troops are already engaged» (Il Mattino)

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«Syria is not Kosovo, it is not that clear that we have to go and help. The use of nerve gas is an atrocity, but only the United Nations can come to certain conclusions». These are frenetic hours for Minister for Foreign Affairs Emma Bonino, who is about to leave for France. But the Italian government has already made its decision: it will not participate in any way in a raid without a UN mandate. «Not least because our troops are already engaged in many other crisis theatres».

But, Minister Bonino, Italy has said that Syria has passed the point of no return, what does that mean?

«It means that the mounting evidence becoming available to our main partners points a precise finger at the Syrian armed forces' use of sarin gas in the eastern suburbs of Damascus. In any case, the proof that intelligence sources are said to have obtained must be communicated in a transparent manner to international bodies such as the UN that are capable of processing it and of formulating certain conclusions ».

Is a military intervention increasingly imminent?

«I consider the Security Council as having the duty and responsibility to make decisions relative to its role as guarantor of international peace and security. I wish to be very clear: we are looking at a war crime; the Italian government fully adhered to the international condemnation of it. Nevertheless, Italy will not actively participate in any military action decided and implemented outside the aegis of the United Nations. Our country is already engaged to the full extent of its capacity in various international theatres: in Lebanon, with 1100 men, in Afghanistan with over 300 men and in the Sinai with 80 observers. Not to mention the other smaller contingents being maintained in Libya, Somalia, Mali, Arab Emirates, Malta, etc. for an overall total of nearly 6000 troops».

But perhaps there's no time left to wait for the United Nations.

«The UN is the legal framework of reference for any eventual military action. A Security Council decision based on the results of the inspectors' mission currently under way is essential. As far as I know, the Council is meant to be meeting very soon».

Would it be right to speak of a Kosovo-style mission?

«I do not think it would be right, the two contexts are profoundly different. Among other things, in the case of Kosovo it was very clear who was to be helped by an armed intervention, while the Syrian situation is much more confused».

What is Italy's role going to be then?

«Italy, I repeat, will not participate in military actions that take place outside the aegis of the United Nations. That said, the extensive use of chemical weapons against defenseless civilians is a hideous crime and I believe that those responsible for it should be referred to the International Criminal Court. So the political reasons behind a limited and targeted military action are understandable, but I do not think a military intervention will contribute to stabilising the country. We have been engaged in seeking a negotiated political solution from the very beginning of this crisis».

Europe does not seem united on what to do. What are the main positions?

«Apart from individual national positions, it is clear that no European country alone can influence developments in the Syrian crisis. There are those countries leaning more clearly toward military action and those more reluctant. I have just spoken with the Polish and Swedish foreign ministers, whose assessments are similar to ours. Europe has achieved basic consensus, giving priority to a political solution and in support of democratic transition in Syria».

Then there is Putin's clear opposition. Is there a further deterioration in Russia's relations with the West?

«I continue to think that Russia is part of the solution, and that we have to back the Russia-U.S. Geneva 2 initiative, despite the obvious existing obstacles. The Syrian crisis has been the subject of continuous discussions between Washington and Moscow. Russian foreign minister Lavrov has repeatedly told me that Russia is willing to launch peace negotiations between the parties».

Could Syria be a preview of a more widespread crisis?

«It's possible. The conflict could spread to Lebanon, where the attacks of recent weeks are a source of deep concern, and where over one million Syrian refugees have joined a population of 4 million; Jordan too has taken in approximately 600,000, with all the associated social problems».

Are you concerned about a reaction from Iran?

«Iran surely continues to play its part in the Syrian crisis. Its appeals for caution and for the necessity of a political solution are offset by the not better specified announcement of the “serious consequences” of a military intervention in Syria. I continue to believe that Teheran is part of the solution to the problem and must in some way be involved in eventual negotiations».

What can be done to prevent the spread of the crisis?

«It is essential to work with all the actors that have influence in the region, and to pursue humanitarian efforts, especially on behalf of the Syrian refugees in the camps in Lebanon and Jordan. It is equally clear that a political solution remains the main route to preventing the conflict from spreading».

The Middle East, starting with Egypt, has once again become a tinder box. What are the principal causes?

«What is happening in Egypt is the result of dynamics that are causing a profound shift in power balances within the Arab world. And it’s not only a question of secular vs. fundamental religious forces, but of a double rupture, first within the Sunni family, and then between the Sunni and Shia. All this is having an impact on Syria, Libya and Tunisia as well as Lebanon, and fuelling the tensions between the Shia and Sunni galaxies. In addition to all this, there is the clash between Kurds and Qaeda members».

What differences are there with Afghanistan?

«There is nothing that links the two situations; different historical and environmental contexts and geo-strategic framework».

What is the balance of power now in Syria? How much control does the regime still have?«The Syrian regime controls the main cities, but is not able to control all means of communication. The armed anti-Assad groups control vast areas. What is most important is that neither Assad nor the rebel opposition is capable of prevailing militarily».

Could a military intervention hinder negotiations regarding the fate of the two Italian nationals – journalist Domenico Quirico and Father Dall’Oglio – abducted in Syria?

«It is difficult to say with certainty, the information we have on who is holding them is contradictory, but I am determined to pursue all possible leads».

Source : https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2013/08/20130828_bonino_ilmattino/