Terzi: «Mediterranean, a proving ground for dialogue» (Famiglia Cristiana)

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Flying at 9,000 metres over the Mediterranean aboard an Air Force Falcon 900, Minister for Foreign Affairs Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata speaks with Famiglia Christiana about some of the main current international events. His packed calendar of commitments has recently included a meeting in Rome of the 5+5 Mediterranean Dialogue Forum, then on to London for a summit on Somalia and to Tunis for a meeting on Syria. On 27 February, Terzi was in Brussels and Geneva, after which he left on a mission to Asia, with stops planned in Singapore, India, Vietnam and Istanbul. The 65-year-old Bergamo-born career diplomat leads the foreign ministry after having served as Ambassador to Israel, Permanent Representative to the UN in New York and Ambassador to the United States in Washington.

Minister Terzi, there are various parts of the world where instability is leading to the fear of new armed conflicts. Possible war involving Iran, as a result of its nuclear programme and its threat to Israel. How close are we to new conflict in the Mid-East?

«The risk of military intervention exists, but it seems improbable to me. I think that Iran should be totally transparent about its nuclear programmes, since the fear alone that it could develop atomic weapons could have a destabilizing effect on the entire region ».

Is it possible that it will take a military intervention to stop the Bashar al-Assad regime's bloody repression of the Syrian people, similar to the one that led to the ouster of Gaddafi?

«An intervention like the Libyan one is not repeatable. I am not all that pessimistic about the possibility for the Syrian crisis to be resolved through a cessation of the violence. We applaud the appointment of former UN S-G Kofi Annan as special envoy for Syria, an excellent example of solidarity between the United Nations and the Arab League. At the moment, however, the priority is to put an end to the horrendous suffering of the Syrian population. We Italians are on the front lines; we have already sent aid through the refugee camps over the border and are willing to pursue such efforts ».

The future of Christian communities is at risk in Syria, as in other Mid-East countries. Are you worried?

«The conditions of Christian communities in the Middle East worries me. We are seeing the cities and towns of Iraq, Turkey and Palestine being drained of Christian communities that have extremely ancient roots. My goal to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis also has the aim of reassuring religious minorities».

What attitude did you find among the civil and religious authorities on your recent trips to the region?

«On the visits I made to Tunisia, Libya and Egypt I repeatedly asserted the need to respect Christian minorities, and I received assurances from political and religious leaders to that effect. The highest Muslim authorities in Egypt reiterated their pledge to ensure the Christian community's integration into that society. What I consider an important document has come out of the Al Azhar Islamic Centre, written by the Muslim Brotherhood and some of the Salafist components, which emphasizes the need to fully acknowledge freedom of opinion, worship and human dignity ».

Does the defence of human rights remain one of Italy's foreign policy priorities?

«I can say without any hint of rhetoric that the defence of human rights has always been in the DNA of Italian foreign policy. At bilateral and multilateral levels alike, we have never ceased to stress the need to protect the rights of women, children, families and religious minorities. The international community has, by now, become deeply aware of the fact that human rights are intimately linked with other important themes such as security and development».

We sometimes end up in the role of the accused, however, on the theme of human rights. The European Court of Human Rights condemned Italy for refusing Libyans in 2009. What was your reaction to that ruling?

«I can say that, for Italy's part, there is a strong desire to undertake all possible measure to avoid situations such as the one ruled on by the European Court. I would point out that we are not only faithful to and scrupulously compliant with all the United Nations conventions on human rights, but we have even proposed them. I refer to Italy's role in the creation of an international criminal tribunal, and our commitment to a moratorium on the death penalty and female genital mutilation and the defence of child soldiers».

One year on from the Arab spring, how are Europe's relations with the opposite side of the Mediterranean?

«There is great ferment. The new Arab leadership wants to recuperate lost terrain, precisely because the quality and intensity of relations between the Arab countries and Europe have not been able to develop as a result of regimes that have been suffocating the societies of these countries. There is also the awareness that it is necessary to act fast and give a push

to economic activity, get young people working, and offer a response to the demand for better living conditions that triggered the revolt a year ago».

And what role is Italy playing?

«Italy is well placed in this ferment, thanks not least to the work of a team involving, nor only the foreign ministry, but also Ministers Cancellieri, Severino, Passera, Riccardi and Clini. The government has perceived this Mediterranean challenge in its own interests, and is working on all fronts, coordinating with missions, contacts, and Italian civil society and business community initiatives ».

In international politics countries like India and Brazil are increasingly decided about making their voices heard. Are the tensions surrounding the Battisti case and the arrest of two Italian servicemen in India a concern?

«Our relations with India and Brazil are excellent. There can be incidents along the way that at times can lead to outcry, but it is the task of diplomacy to lower the tone and separate those incidents from the bulk of international relations».

Can the UN work better?

«The UN must be given more incisive and realistic instruments for the resolution of international crises and conflicts. It needs to have more developed and stronger collaborative relations with regional organizations. In my opinion this collaboration would not weaken the Security Council’s prerogative, as some fear, but would instead give the international community greater credibility in its efforts to resolve crises».

Mr. Minister, you have a Twitter profile, how do you find that?

«It helps me keep pace with a more informed public and offers me food for thought. What’s more, it is a new and modern means to publicise, even in 140 characters or less, the efforts and commitment of our diplomacy».

Source :
https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2012/03/20120301_mediterraneo_prove_dialogo/