Di Maio: «The time has come to dialogue with Damascus» (Corriere della Sera)

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Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio believes that in Syria it is necessary to keep open all the channels of dialogue with “all representative actors” and to also give “greater momentum to the dialogue with Damascus”. Therefore, in his opinion, the dialoguing members of the European Union and Italy must include the never deposed Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, a traditional acquaintance of Italy, the relations with whom the representatives of our Country understated and downplayed after the Raiss ordered the security forces to shoot on the crowd of street protesters in 2011. Di Maio also affirms that he spoke “frankly and constructively” – meaning without hiding divergencies in an attempt to settle them – with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu about a sensitive case: the dispatch by Ankara of military vessels in the proximity of Cyprus in order to discourage Eni’s explorations for hydrocarbons.

These are two of the positions that the Italian Foreign Minister and the political leader of the 5-Star Movement expressed in answering the questions posed by the Corriere della Sera in view of the “Rome Med, Mediterranean Dialogues”.

What are the main talks that you are planning to have during the Med Dialogues? And to what end?

«In all, I am planning to have 17 bilateral dialogues. I will address issues of primary relevance for Italy such as the stabilisation of the region, the migration phenomenon, the fight against terrorism and supporting economic growth. »

The Italian Government condemned the offensive ordered by Turkish President Erdogan against Northern Syria. What does our Country do to help the Kurds who suffered losses in fighting the Islamic State and were subsequently attacked by Turkey after essentially receiving green light from Donald Trump?

«The Kurdish and Arab militias united in the Syrian Democratic Forces paid a very high price in their fight against the Islamic State, which remains a serious threat. Italy has supported and will continue to support programmes aimed at stabilising the North-East of Syria by facilitating some basic services and fostering local institution-building. Contributing to stabilising and rebuilding Syria means also consolidating the security of our own Country. We

give our utmost support to the efforts made by the United Nations and by Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, whom I met at the Farnesina, and I think it is important to also give greater impulse to our dialogue with Damascus, by involving all the representative players, as we are doing in Libya. The developments on the ground require renewing diplomatic efforts and I believe that all of Europe must do more in this respect. »

Turkey dispatches military vessels in order to discourage cooperation with Cyprus, such as in the case of Eni in the exploration for hydrocarbons. It is a show of muscle that could entail more missions by our Navy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Did you discuss this with the Turkish Foreign Minister?

«The Eastern Mediterranean is strategic for us. Italy has always taken a moderate stand. In this perspective, in the Foreign Affairs Council of 11 November, we supported the decision to take targeted provisions that transmitted a clear political signal following the dispatch of Turkish drillship Yavuz to “Block 7 of the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone”. Also because we’re dealing with a European border. Yesterday I met with my colleague Mevlut Cavusoglu with whom I addressed the matter frankly and constructively. »

Libya is incapable of achieving peace. At present Italy does not appear to be particularly active in fostering a solution, at least in a visible way. What is your ministry doing?

«Italy is in the forefront in the stabilisation of Libya. And for me it is one of the highest priority dossiers. At the UN, most of my meetings concerned Libya, and the same applies to my visit to Morocco. We are acting to achieve a political solution and to alleviate the humanitarian situation. We are contributing to the Berlin Conference and we are due to host the “Meeting of Libya’s Neighbouring Countries” in Rome. »

General Khalifa Haftar succeeded in violently extending his control beyond Cyrenaica but not to Tripoli. Do you think that the openings offered to him by Italy’s preceding government paid off?

«There is no military solution to the Libyan crisis. The present conflict has only exacerbated instability, fuelled terrorism and worsened the humanitarian situation. We have always kept all our channels open with all the parties involved, including the tribes in the Fezzan region, and we will continue to do so, as we are convinced that only dialogue among Libyans can lead to a lasting solution. »

Haftar has Russia and Egypt among its leading supporters. Do you think that Moscow facilitates or hinders the peace process as it draws advantages from the instability?

«With Russia the goal of Libya’s stability is a shared objective. Moscow is a key interlocutor. I will soon see Minister Sergey Lavrov. I intend to reaffirm our firm conviction that there is no military solution in Libya and that no one can draw advantage from a situation that only

creates instability. This is why external interference must stop. On the contrary, all possible efforts must go into convincing the parties that the only viable solution is a political one. »

Through investments, priority access to ports and other measures, China has increased its activities in the Mediterranean. How come you don’t condemn the brutal repression of the claims of freedom of the youth in Hong Kong who are against irreversibly ending up under the dictatorial dominion of the People’s Republic of China? You in fact supported the protest of the “yellow vests” against France, an allied Country, to the point of meeting some of their leaders.

«We are interested in strengthening our economic relations with China also in the Mediterranean and on the issue of ports. As to the issue of Hong Kong, jointly with the European Union, we have expressed the need to respect individual freedoms and fundamental rights and just as clearly expressed our rejection of any form of violence. The statements by the Governor of Hong Kong, who acknowledged the outcome of the district elections of 24 November and promised she would “pay heed to the opinions of the electorate”, help to build confidence between the parties. Italy will continue to be committed to fostering the return to stability in Hong Kong, also in the interest of the many Italians and Europeans who live there. »

The Chinese Embassy in Rome judged the video conference between Italian MPs and Joshua Wong, one of the leaders of the protests in Hong Kong, to be “irresponsible”. The Foreign Ministry recognised that this judgment is “unacceptable”. Do you have other solutions in mind that will avoid such an attempt at intimidation from being repeated in the future?

«I immediately made a statement on the respect owed to the prerogatives of the Italian Parliament and to the nature of our constitutional system, leaving no room for misinterpretations: the Italian Government will not allow for these to be questioned in any way. I think that the message was clearly understood. »

Source : https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2019/12/di-maio-e-tempo-di-dialogare-con-damasco-corriere-della-sera/