Terzi: «We've certainly dragged our feet on the violence in Syria» (Panorama interview)

2012-07-05

"Yes, we've certainly dragged our feet on the violence in Syria. At this point we could have had 10,000 people still alive instead of 10,000 victims". This was the comment of Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, speaking on the plane bringing him back to Rome from Lebanon. He was there to visit the Italian soldiers deployed in the south of the country, and for talks with the Lebanese leadership, in Beirut. The feeling, in that small republic hemmed in by Syria and Israel, is that a turning point is nearing. "The count-down for Bashar el-Assad's regime has begun", is Minister Terzi's assessment. "Even in a setting like Lebanon, which is very prudent, given the ties linking it to Syria, I was told on several occasions: 'Assad has passed the point of no return'. Other leaders whose authority was questioned by the Arab Spring rebellions stopped on the edge of the precipice. But Assad is falling over it".

Is there not a risk that we could once again be too quick to count him out of the game?

"Not at this stage. President Assad is losing ground, among his own Syrian supporters too. They understand now how much he's damaging them".

But the regime can still count on Russia's support. It seems that even the weapon that shot down the Turkish F-4 last week was Russian, and newly delivered.

It's not clear which weapon shot down the Turkish fighter jet, but the act was disgraceful: the aircraft could be readily identified, because all the electronic recognition systems were activated. It doesn't seem to have been an accident at all.

So why decide on such aggressive action? Doesn't the fact that the news was reported by broadcasters close to the regime (Al-Manar, the voice of Hezbollah, the armed Lebanese party, and Al-Mayadeen, the pro-Assad TV channel recently set up in Lebanon) make you suspect that it was the Syrian president who was looking for the clash?

Assad has unceasingly raised the level of the violence and now he's trying to spread the destabilisation beyond his borders: by encouraging flows of migrants or through attacks like this one. I think, though, that the international condemnation of the attack on the Turkish fighter jet sent out an important signal. Even the Russians have changed their minds now and

are working to hold back the regime. I think China's opposition will crumble too, when Moscow officially lines up against Assad.

But isn't there a risk that we're leaving room for more massacres?

That's the question posed every time the United Nations comes into play: given that it's so slow, what use is it? The UN was a great revolution; it's a system that works. But unfortunately a series of shocks is always needed to shake up the international community and find an agreement.

In the meantime, the New York Times says that the Americans are taking action and using the CIA to arm the rebels.

I read that news story but I haven't received any direct confirmation. Personally, I don't agree with that course of action: we mustn't arm the rebels. Italy has never thought of encouraging the Islamic group in Syria or of arming the opposition. Our view is that we should follow the example of the National Lebanese Dialogue: meet around a table (at which Assad can no longer sit). It's working in Lebanon, and in Syria it would deprive the regime of some of the grounds for its rhetoric.

Can we trust the Syrian opposition?

It's hard enough to trust your friends in peacetime, far less these interlocutors in a conflict situation.

But is there not a risk of delivering the country into the hands of armed bands, as happened in Libya?

The operation in Libya was necessary, to avoid a genocide. Yes, there are still problems, but I see a society that, in democratic terms, is coming to maturity. Careful, though: the intervention in Libya is not a model that can be repeated.

Are you worried that in other Arab Spring countries the Islamist parties are winning?

Actually, I was very impressed by the way the Muslim Brotherhood candidate was recognised as President in Egypt. The electoral commission had hundreds of complaints at its disposal: plenty of grist for its mill. The commentators are free to say that the Egyptian Islamists won nothing but an empty box. But I have to recognise the positive signs and help ensure that the new Constitution enshrines principles such as pluralism, for example. We're doing the same thing with Tunisia.

Are our efforts to "export democracy" at an end?

The Europeans have never been convinced by this idea that you can export democracy. Not even those Europeans who had followed George W. Bush's line. At the time of the war in Iraq I was absolutely certain that we had to intervene. But in Iraq some colossal mistakes were made. For example, groundlessly dismantling the party that supported Saddam Hussein, under-estimating the influence of Iran, the idea that the Iraqi population was waiting for nothing but the revolution, with everything else in second place. We cut through certain pillars that were vital to the stability of the country.

We've withdrawn from Iraq, but not from Afghanistan. Given the results, does it make sense to stay there?

We won't leave before 2014, that's for sure. Speeding up the timescale for withdrawal would also create security problems for our soldiers.

On another point, when will the Italian marines arrested in India be coming home?

It's hard to say, we're certainly pushing for them to come back as soon as possible. This incident has created a need for new rules throughout the world. Can you imagine a soldier from a Ugandan or Indonesian contingent operating in a foreign country and suddenly being accused of a crime and thrown into jail? It's inconceivable.

Source : https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2012/07/20120705_intervistapanorama/