Terzi: «Observers must be able to defend themselves» (interview)

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The Friends of Syria are shut up in the Palace of Dolmabahce – where all the clocks perpetually read 9.05, the hour of the death of the father of modern Turkey Kemal Ataturk – when, almost like a dare, the news of the regime's latest massacre arrives. The quest is on for a political solution while the country slips toward civil war or something worse. The sensation is that these recurrent meetings on the elusive Syrian solution resemble those of Europe over the currency crisis: deep understanding of the problem but no strategic solution.

"I am not sure that the comparison is valid", replies Minister for Foreign Affairs Giulio Terzi, who promoted this encounter to work on a political response to the Houla massacre 10 days ago. Participants included Hillary Clinton and the European, Turkish, Saudi and Qatari ministers. "It's a sort of contact group", Terzi added. "Fifteen countries that have developed an influence over the international community: some are members of the UN Security Council, some of the Arab League and some are Europeans. They represent the nearly 70 countries involved in resolving the Syrian crisis".

Mr. Minister, the goal of involving Russia seems increasingly clear: to get them on your side.

It is necessary to resolve the crisis. But Russia must also understand that if it cares about its interests in the Mediterranean, its naval bases in Syria, what we are offering is an opportunity they can't afford to pass up.

But Russia is proposing to get Iran involved in the dialogue also, purposely confounding the nuclear question with Syria – more a provocation than a proposal.

That's what it seems like to everyone. Involving Iran would make any negotiation with Syria superfluous. It is very important that the Russians are aware that their interests in Syria and the Arab world depend on the Assad family stepping down and on the implementation of a political solution. Insisting on playing a zero-sum game that harkens back to distant times would make it difficult for them to maintain their influence in that part of the world.

How serious is the risk that Syria and the Iranian nuclear issue overlap, that the conflict spreads to Lebanon, that Israel is lured into it?

In the recent months of the Syrian revolt, Iran has proved to be very close to Damascus and to actively support her with weapons and intelligence. The two countries clearly support one

another, and are associated with the Shia Hezbollah and other anti-Israeli forces in the Middle East. There is a combined strategy. It is clear that Teheran is very worried about any change in the Damascus regime.

You have stated that the Annan mission’s results have been limited. Is that a criticism?

No. I have believed in it from the start, and I was the one who suggested our participation to my colleagues in the government. We have ensured our logistical support for sending the Blue Helmets into that theatre. The presence of our observers on the ground, who perhaps need to be given a greater capacity for self-defence, is crucial to stopping the violence. But under the current conditions it is not capable of fulfilling its mission. The regime is not even complying with the first of the Annan plan’s 6 points: the return of the soldiers to their barracks. The mission therefore needs support, but time is running out.

The removal of the Assad family seems no longer to be the prerequisite for launching a political process, but rather the result of that process.

I don’t know if that has to happen at the beginning, the middle or the end of the process. What is sure is that Assad’s exit from the scene is a fundamental element in this crisis.

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