# “The expulsion of their diplomats sends a strong signal to Syria”, says Terzi (L’Eco di Bergamo)

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Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain and Spain took coordinated and simultaneous action yesterday, 29 May, to isolate Syria at the diplomatic level. Today Annan is reporting to the Security Council on the situation, in a remote video link. During the day the US, Canada and Australia also expelled the Syrian Ambassadors to their countries. In Rome, Syrian Ambassador Khaddour Hasan was summoned by Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi di Sant’Agata.

Minister Terzi, is this Italy’s response to the massacre in Hula?

“Just a few minutes ago [yesterday, for readers, ed. note], the Syrian Ambassador came to the Foreign Ministry to receive notification of the ‘persona non grata’ provision, in a measure coordinated with other European partners. Condemnation alone is no longer a sufficient response to the horrors of Houla. We needed to react by sending a strong, unequivocal response to the regime in Damascus. The massacre in Houla demonstrates the true and dramatic extent of the tragedy in Syria and the need to implement the commitments we have undertaken over the last 50 years to awaken consciences and respect our fellow men and women. We are deeply dissatisfied with the Syrian Government’s failure to apply the Annan Plan. The violence must cease immediately and completely. All the points envisaged by the joint Arab League United Nations Plan must be respected, starting with free and unconditional access for humanitarian organisations”.

The last 15 months have seen 9000 deaths confirmed, nearly all of them civilians. Tens of thousands of displaced people within Syria. The Syrian National Council is calling on the free army to fight and is appealing to its Arab brothers and friends for support, i.e. weapons. Is the ceasefire becoming increasingly remote and are the people who have written off Kofi Annan’s Plan as a failure right?

“I wouldn’t say the ceasefire is remote, the situation is much more serious. A total cessation of violence against the population is only one of the six conditions set out in the Annan Plan that have not thus far been met. Neither have the others, including access for humanitarian organisations and free movement for journalists. Responsibility for the failure to execute the Plan lies principally with the regime in Damascus and its decision, evidently, not to collaborate with the UN and the Arab League”.

Tomorrow you'll be in Istanbul to talk about Somalia. But you've asked your Turkish counterpart, Davutoglu, to include the Syrian crisis in the agenda for the talks. Is this with a view to an alliance to take a more decisive stance in the UN, maybe by finding a way to appeal to the "responsibility to protect" without going through the Security Council, and thus getting round the Russian-Chinese veto?

"No option can be ruled out on principle. But for now the only road Italy and the international community can take is the one mapped out by the Annan Plan, to which we must continue to give our convinced support. I've spoken about this with Ban Ki-moon in New York, and I've spoken about it just recently with my Turkish colleague and with Italy's other major partners. And we'll certainly be discussing it in Istanbul. Unfortunately, however, it looks as though it's Assad himself who's pushing the situation towards other solutions, maybe because he thinks the Plan is and will remain open-ended. If that's the case, a return to the Security Council will be inevitable to weigh up all the possible scenarios on the basis of each state's obligation, vis-à-vis the international community, to protect its population and the consequences of a prolonged violation".

After Houla the Israeli premier, Netanyahu, broke his silence and said he was disgusted by the massacre. You're very familiar with the situation in Israel: does this mean that the stand-by is finished?

"It means that history contains tragic, horrible incidents that mark a turning point in events and in the way the international community reacts to them. Faced with tens of children slaughtered in cold blood we feel a moral obligation to do more".

What's your view of Obama's proposal for a "Yemeni solution": removing Assad from power but leaving his entourage? In spite of the assurances made to Medvedev in Camp David to the effect that Russian influence on Syria wouldn't be affected, the idea seems to have been "returned to sender". You, however, seem to believe the contrary. You've spoken about a space for Russian-American dialogue in the margins of the G20 meeting that opens in Mexico on 18 June.

"As I said, we can't rule out any possibility. Far less a scenario like the one in Yemen, that would enable Assad to leave the stage and open the way to a political solution. It would be crucial to have a reliable interlocutor in the opposition, one who represents the social, ethnic and religious elements of Syrian society. In recent weeks we hosted a meeting of the Syrian National Council (SNC) here in Rome with a view to fostering internal dialogue. And indeed, we've started to see a more open position with respect to the Christian community. Now, however, the resignation of the President of the SNC, Ghalioun, is not a positive signal or an encouragement to the international community to lend ever-more support to the opposition movement".

It’s civil war, even if no-one calls it that. But the situation in Syria seems already to have gone further than that. You yourself have spoken of a situation that’s wide open to terrorist infiltration designed to destabilise a much wider area. And let’s not forget that we have people in Lebanon. What risks do you see?

“Technically, the term is ‘spillover’, a potential contagion with instability spreading outside Syria. The country most at risk is Lebanon, where we’ve already seen violence in Tripoli and where, as you’ve just underscored, we have a military presence under the UNIFIL framework. But the crisis could also be exported in other directions, through flows of refugees into neighbouring states like Turkey and Jordan. For this reason, and in agreement with the authorities in Amman, Italian Development Cooperation is about to send a field hospital to the Jordanian-Syrian border”.

In Istanbul, when you discuss the transition in Somalia, will you also be touching on the piracy issue?

‘We’ll be discussing the risk of instability in a country on which the security of the Horn of Africa depends. One risk is that terrorist organisations like the ones that have kidnapped Italian nationals in the Sahel can take root. We are working tirelessly on the Rossella Urru case. Part of the terrorists’ funding comes from the proceeds of piracy in the Indian Ocean. That’s why it’s unacceptable for important countries like India, whose coasts are washed by that Ocean, to adopt behaviour that in effect weakens international collaboration. They do so by establishing precedents that blur the lines of the legislative framework within which the fight against piracy is being conducted. That’s why, in all of the international fora, starting with the European Union and the United Nations, we have raised the case of our marines, the sole jurisdiction of the flag state of ships sailing in international waters and the immunity of our military as bodies of the state”.

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