“Action is needed on crises that are producingdesperate people” – Minister Bonino’s interview with L’Unità

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The war in Syria, the new stance adopted by Iran, the bloodshed in post-Morsi Egypt, and the Mediterranean and its appalling tragedies, which only fuel others, like the one that occurred just a few days ago off the coast of Lampedusa. These “hot” dossiers were the focus of Foreign Minister Emma Bonino’s interview with l’Unità.

The countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean are marked by bloody transition processes and wars. First, the civil war in Syria. Italy has fought for a political solution rather than international military action. Have we only been marking time?

“No, we’ve made definite progress. The Russian-American agreement on chemical weapons and the Security Council’s recent resolution, no. 2118, which followed it, have paved the way for the multilateral institutions to renew their efforts in response to the Syrian tragedy. The United Nations have regained a central role after months of stalemate. I believe that our stubborn advocacy of a political solution, in close liaison with the allies and other influential players in the region, was been rewarded. An awareness has prevailed that military action would not resolve the situation and, on the contrary, could have had unforeseeable consequences.

Now the international community has the primary goal of opening up humanitarian corridors to bring help to the population. I had hoped that in New York, at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly, a date could have been set for a new international conference on Syria. We didn’t succeed in that, but I’m confident that a Geneva 2 can be convened in the coming weeks: we need to see a ceasefire established as soon as possible, and a political process for a lasting peace”.

Another significant point of our diplomatic initiative seems to be the more open position with respect to the new Iranian stance under President Hassan Rohani.

“I think we need to realise that Rohani’s Iran has sent out significant signals – the release of the political prisoners, the acknowledgement of the Holocaust – that the country wants to open a new dialogue with the international community. We should avoid any excessive or inappropriate enthusiasm, but at the same time we need to look the Iranian leadership’s ‘hand of cards’ on Syria and on other dossiers, such as the nuclear issue. Even before

Tehran adopted this new, more open stance, I took the view that if Iran is part of the Syrian crisis problem, then it must also be part of the solution. Back in August, Deputy Minister Pistelli was checking the lie of the land during his visit to Tehran, with encouraging results. Important western partners, who had taken a very cautious approach, now seem more open to the idea of Iran's involvement in the Geneva 2 conference.

The Saudi Foreign Minister, whom I met a few days ago, confirmed that they too intend to examine Rohani's new, more positive frame of mind more closely. The Iranians suffered directly from Iraqi chemical weapons attacks in the 1980s and support the idea of destroying Syria's stockpile. The Supreme Leader's most recent positions show that an important debate is also taking place between the centres of power in Iran, on how – and how much – to open up the country to the outside world. In the next few weeks we'll be seeing a 5+1 meeting on the nuclear question and that should give us a more concrete idea of just how far the collaboration can go".

If we extend our gaze to the Arab world as a whole, we see that some observers claim that the "Arab Spring" has faded into an Islamist winter or, in the case of Egypt, into a bloody return by the military and warfare in the streets with the Muslim Brotherhood. Has it really come to this?

"I propose a balanced reading of the recent convulsions in the Arab world. The picture wasn't entirely rosy in the early months of 2011, when the 'springtime' version of events prevailed. Equally, I don't agree today with a purely catastrophic view of events. The movements and currents that have come into being are chipping away at a decades-long vicious circle made up of poverty, corruption, repression and authoritarianism.

Two major challenges now loom over the entire extended Mediterranean region. They are: internal chaos and a geo-political vacuum, factors of great instability that are diverting resources from more urgent social needs. The countries concerned are demographically, ethnically and culturally diverse. And the political-economic pathways we shall see them follow in coming years, until a real outlook of human, social and economic development opens up, will also be diverse.

In today's historic context, one point that I never tire of underscoring is the existence of an unresolved and vitally importantclash within the Sunni world. It sees Saudi Arabia, the Arab Emirates and Kuwait on one side, and Turkey and Qatar on the other. And it is spreading its pernicious effects throughout the region, first and foremost in the Syrian crisis. And then we have the continuing, acute Sunni-Shiite conflict in Syria, but also in Iraq, Lebanon and the Persian Gulf. The scenarios are unique to each country, and often hard to decipher. Italy, for example, looks to Libya for the historic and cultural bonds and the interests that tie us to the country, and we have extended political and economic credit to the Zidane government. But

we are still coming up against the contradictions of a transition marked by the absence of a firmly established leadership throughout the country, one where local interests prevail.

The developments in the Egyptian revolution have thrown up controversial features that can be traced back to the new military regime's decision to punish the Muslim Brotherhood 'tout court'. I don't deny that President Morsi made mistakes, some of them serious, but I don't think repression will help Egypt on the road to pacification and stability. The new, bloody clashes we are seeing now confirm my fears. I hope that the forces of law and order will exercise the necessary self-control and that a political dialogue, one that is as inclusive as possible, can be achieved".

On the question of the Syrian tragedy, and that of the migrants who have died in the Mediterranean, many commentators have called Europe into play. What diagnosis and treatment would you recommend, as a convinced European, as well as Foreign Minister?

I hope that the tragedy in Lampedusa will stir people's consciences not just in our country but in other European capitals. And I hope that Europe will see a marked improvement in its immigration policies. But the challenge here is an exodus involving unknown numbers in recent decades, millions of people moving from Syria, Jordan, Kurdistan, and southern Sahel. Europe, and individual countries, need to have a far-sighted vision and courageous policies that will enable us to lessen the impact of a phenomenon of major proportions. There is an urgent need for a European policy that at present doesn't exist. Italy will press for the support that is its due for the difficult task it has performed on behalf of Europe as a whole. Europe's Home Affairs Ministers will be discussing the question tomorrow [editor's note: today] in Luxembourg.

We need to see Europe take responsibility with respect to the member states most exposed to the problem, by boosting the financial and operational resources of Frontex, Europe's border management agency.

At the bilateral level, our collaboration with Tunisia has been a success, but with costs that are by no means negligible and with a partner, in the form of the Tunisian authorities, that is sufficiently reliable. Otherwise, it is a truly arduous task to combat the criminal gangs who send the 'death boats' to sea, in spite of Italy's operations to monitor the situation, with notable expenditure of personnel and resources, and to provide help in any situation that may arise.

But in Italy, too, we could do more at the legislative level – for example by eliminating certain offences applied to illegal immigrants and establishing 'pragmatic' integration policies that take demand from the business community into account".

It is a great pity that the Radical Party's referendum on immigration was not supported, especially by the left, with the result that it didn't attract the necessary number of signatures

to repeal the Bossi Fini law. We need to move on from that law, especially its approach based on detaining immigrants and provisions that encourage illegal labour in truly oppressive conditions. We need new laws on refugees and on political asylum, as President Napolitano has rightly pointed out”.

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