UN: Bonino meets Zarif, focus on Syria and Afghanistan

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The Syrian crisis and the future of Afghanistan, but also other aspects of bilateral relations. Italian Foreign Minister Emma Bonino's packed agenda in New York started with a discussion with her Iranian colleague, Javad Zarif. In the US megalopolis, in the margins of the 68th General Assembly of the United Nations – which the minister is attending along with Prime Minister Enrico Letta – the foreign minister will be engaged in a whirl of meetings with her colleagues and taking part in numbers UN events. These include meetings on the Millennium Goals, on fighting malaria and on the campaign against the death penalty.

Bilateral with the Iranian Foreign Minister, Zarif

But it was a bilateral with the Foreign Minister of the recently elected President Hassan Rohani's Iran that opened the week of meetings in the shadow of the UN building. Syria and Afghanistan were the two key issues for discussion. Minister Bonino underscored that, on the Syrian crisis, "for various reasons a 'window' of time has opened up. A window that must be exploited to the full by diplomacy and by politics. We have two paths to follow, two paths than can be parallel. One concerns the chemical weapons convention, and the other the political channel which, if it works, could lead to a ceasefire. Because it's very difficult to actually begin destroying the weapons if the civil war continues at this level".

Syria: we need to ensure humanitarian access, says Bonino

Minister Bonino also stressed the human tragedy that is inextricably linked to the Syrian crisis. A political agreement leading to a ceasefire "must also ensure humanitarian access, which to date has been impossible. We don't want this issue to be forgotten at the negotiating table", underscored the minister at the end of her meeting with Zarif.

Memorandum of Understanding on Afghanistan

A Memorandum of Understanding on Afghanistan has also been signed, concerning the period following the withdrawal of the troops belonging to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. "The Italian effort is focused on Herat province, where collaboration with the Iranians is vital", commented the minister. "But we need to revitalise that collaboration, given that we'll still be in the region after 2014, albeit in another format".

The two ministers also addressed more strictly bilateral issues. They discussed the possibility of establishing closer Italian-Iranian relations in the economic sphere, but also in cultural and other spheres. And, as Minister Bonino remarked, her discussion with Zarif provided an opportunity to tell her colleague that she appreciated the release of the political prisoners a few days ago, following a decision by the President Rohani. Bonino underscored that “this is the start of a process that I think it’s right to continue”.

Minister Bonino’s meeting with Zarif was only the first of the many she will be holding in New York. On 23 September alone, she met her colleagues from Norway, Mexico and Albania. Later today, in the margins of the General Assembly, Minister Bonino will be meeting the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon and the President of the General Assembly, John W. Ashe. She will also be attending the High Level Event on Sahel.

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