Speech by Minister Terzi at the Aspen Bosphorus Dialogue «Double transition: Economics and politics across Europe and the Mediterranean»

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(please check against actual speech delivered)

“Double transition: Economics and politics across Europe and the Mediterranean”

The changing geopolitics of the Middle East: real dangers and common interests

Last year’s events were a watershed for the Middle East and North Africa. The title of this Aspen Bosphorus Dialogue rightly stresses that the transition is double. It concerns both politics and economics. And, indeed, it is not limited to the Arab world, but also affects the northern shores of the Mediterranean. Common interests and close interdependence oblige the two shores to work together to shape their future. If we succeed, the Mediterranean could become a new area of modernisation and global prosperity, so helping to promote the welfare and security of hundreds million people.

The outcome of the political and economic transition lies mostly in the hands of the Arab people. But Europe cannot stand idly by: our southern neighbours look to us for support and partnerships. I visited Tunis and Cairo recently, and I accompanied Prime Minister Monti to Tripoli. In all meetings with the leaders and representatives of civil society, I noticed that they expect tangible improvements in people’s daily lives. After a revolution, people long for stability, security and employment. For decades, we focused on what we could prevent from happening in the Mediterranean – conflict, illegal immigration, terrorism. Now, we should focus on what we can promote together: development, modernisation and prosperity.

Italy will do everything in its power to increase the EU resources allocated to our southern neighbours. We are also pushing for an effective and rapid mobilisation of the resources of international financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Delays or inadequacies in implementing the promises made by the G8 countries and by the EU would be unacceptable. The Arab people have waited many years. They have heard many promises. Where Arab regimes promised most they accomplished least. Now the international community has to deliver.

We must ask ourselves, however, if the financial instruments at our disposal are sufficient to accompany the deep and rapid transformations of the region as a whole. The challenges we are facing tell us that a wider and more ambitious vision is needed. Being forced to rapidly confront the end of the status quo means that we should embark on a new course. Without imposing pre-packaged solutions, we should turn to those models that have already worked well. Closer integration across the region and between the two shores of the Mediterranean is one such model. This model – though it succeeded in Europe – should not be perceived as a transplant. The ownership of this process belongs solely to the Arab countries. But we can invoke such a model, by encouraging stronger linkages and fewer barriers across the region; and by reducing distances between Europe and its southern neighbours.

The process of European integration started in the ’50s. At that time, the prospects for Arab unity also looked good. Nasser caught the imagination of millions of Arabs. The Baath Party took power in Syria and Iraq, promising to restore dignity and champion modernity. The United Arab Republic, a sovereign union between Egypt and Syria, was established. However, authoritarian regimes came to view these integration attempts as a threat to their absolute power. Regional rivalries frustrated these efforts, which – at best – were limited to the exclusive domain of personal contacts between despotic rulers.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the Middle East and North Africa region is still one of the least integrated in the world. The Arab countries trade more with Europe than among themselves. This lack of trade and free movement of capital and services, coupled with a weak regulatory framework, hinders foreign investments and increases unemployment. But now that autocratic regimes have been overthrown, the times are ripe for a step-change towards closer regional integration.

An important message in favour of regional cooperation was sent by the new Tunisian President, Marzouki, and the Egyptian Marshal Tantawi: both chose Libya for their first visits abroad. I promptly acted on that clear sign by convening two regional initiatives a couple of weeks ago in Rome: the 5+5 Ministerial meeting, which I co-chaired with my Tunisian colleague, and the Foromed. The high-level participation in these meetings confirmed that the choice was right.

The meetings were organized in a “back-to-back” format to create a “bridge” between the 5+5 countries and Turkey, Egypt and Greece, which took part in the Foromed. The bridge was extended to the regional actors invited as observers: the European Union, the Arab League, the Union of the Arab Maghreb, the Union for the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly. The key message of the two meetings was: the need for closer integration through concrete projects and on the basis of shared values.

We have also seen a revitalization of the Arab Maghreb Union, which recently held an important Summit in Rabat. Moreover, we are witnessing a growing political role for the Arab

League, especially in managing the Libyan and Syrian crises. These are very important developments. But we should not be too optimistic. We should not overload these initiatives with too many expectations. The success of any integration strategy requires patience and pragmatism. Artificial and untimely accelerations could stop the whole process.

Choices for Israel

The success of a strategy based on regional integration and further rapprochement between the two shores of the Mediterranean could hopefully set a positive example. It could create new incentives for relations between the Israelis and the Arab world as well. People took to the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi, Tripoli, Damascus and Sana'a for many reasons. They rejected oppression and humiliation, rampant corruption and the inequitable distribution of wealth, favouritism and the violation of human rights. But none of the revolts was directed against Israel.

The new democratic Arab leaderships will be more accountable to their public opinions than the old autocratic regimes. In the short-term – after the fall of Mubarak's regime, and with the ongoing uprisings in Syria – the regional picture has become more uncertain for Israel. Under Mubarak, Israel had no concerns about its southern flank. And even in Assad, Israel used to see a sort of 'predictable' enemy. However, in the medium-long run, things could look much better for Israel. Democracies are much more reliable than dictatorships. And Arab democratic transitions – if they consolidate – could open up new opportunities and choices for the Israelis.

Such opportunities, however, can be seized only if negotiations are resumed. European and Arab countries must, therefore, continue to provide the maximum support possible to the resumption of direct peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians. We should do our utmost to keep the Peace process high on our agenda. And we need to focus on the year-end objective set out in the Quartet's declaration.

The future of Syria: a regional conundrum

Syria today poses a tremendous challenge to us, on two main accounts. First, humanitarian. The ongoing violence in Syria has reached unacceptable levels. We are shocked by the daily pictures of the violent repression in Homs and other Syrian cities. The large-scale killings throughout the country must be stopped now.

Italy, therefore, is actively supporting all possible initiatives to bring pressure on the Syrian regime to end the violence against civilians and allow the free and unhindered distribution of humanitarian assistance. It is doing so in all possible fora – at the UN in New York and Geneva, and in the EU. This week, we adopted new EU sanctions and co-sponsored the Resolution presented in Geneva by Turkey, condemning the Syrian regime and calling for

humanitarian assistance. Our absolute priority is to stop the violence and alleviate the human suffering of the Syrian people.

The other common goal is to ensure that the legitimate democratic aspirations of the Syrian people are fulfilled – peacefully. Italy, with Turkey, is working hard to achieve a political solution to the crisis, in line with the Arab League's recommendations. Let's be clear. Syria is no Libya. We do not contemplate any direct military intervention. In our view, the solution must be political and Syria-led. It must be supported by the international community, and by the Arab League first and foremost. This is what we agreed upon last week in Tunis at the first meeting of the Friends of Syria Group. We look forward to the second meeting of the Group, which will take place here in Turkey. I want to thank my friend and colleague Ahmet Davutoglu for his leadership in managing this very delicate crisis.

A political solution requires two main conditions to be met. First, the Security Council should take on its rightful responsibilities. We need to work with all our partners, and most notably with the Russians and the Chinese, to: a) reassure them that the Libyan scenario will not be repeated; and b) peacefully resolve the crisis, taking into account the legitimate interests of the Syrian people. Second, we need to continue our political support for the Syrian opposition, on condition that it respects the principles of inclusion, democracy and non-violence. We continue to encourage the various elements of the opposition to coordinate and unify around the SNC, recognised as legitimate interlocutor by the Group of Friends and the EU.

We need patience and perseverance, but also strong determination. A further worsening of the crisis would have severe repercussions on Syria's neighbours through an increasing flow of refugees: first and foremost on Lebanon, where Italy is engaged in peace-keeping operations.

The Iran challenge

Iran is another threat to regional stability, for two main and intertwined reasons. First, its nuclear programme, which frightens its neighbours, creates tensions and risks triggering a nuclear arms race in the region. And second, its regional ambitions. Teheran is trying to spread its influence across the region from Iraq to Lebanon, fuelling antagonism and animosity between Sunnis and Shiites. Assad's regime has been Iran's staunchest ally. We do not know how the unfolding of the Syrian crisis will impact on Tehran's role in the region. But I cannot see how the Syrian branch of the Brotherhood, which has mostly suffered under the rule of the Iranian-backed Assad regime, could accept Tehran's leadership.

As we know, there is a risk of a preemptive military strike but I consider it to be unlikely. It would have negative repercussions on regional stability, without effectively and durably containing Tehran's plans. Iran has played for time. It has practised deception and been

unforthcoming on its nuclear programme. The last IAEA reports confirmed international concerns. But bombing the nuclear sites would not be the right solution. On the contrary, it would risk strengthening the regime, right when the sanctions are beginning to bite and the economic pressure has really started to have an impact.

The Iranian regime is nervous because it is beginning to pay a considerable price for its refusal to cooperate with the international community. So, I believe we must continue to subscribe to the “two-track” approach that we have been following thus far. An approach that maintains the pressure on the regime while leaving the door open to dialogue, should Iran decide to change its behaviour.

The Gulf factor

A broad coalition is needed if we are to overcome the many and complex challenges in the Mediterranean. For their natural and financial resources the Gulf States should be our essential partners in this coalition. These States have been taking on crucial regional responsibilities connected with their power and wealth. Most of them have been security providers in the Libyan, Yemenite and Syrian crises, and they can act as a factor for stability and growth throughout the region.

The Gulf countries can also play an essential role in counterbalancing the impact of the sanctions against Iran on the international oil market. And they could hopefully help keep alive the prospect of normalising relations between the Arab States and Israel, as envisaged by the Arab League Peace Initiative. Last but not least, the Gulf States provide the Arab world with an important model of closer regional integration: the Cooperation Council for the Arab states of the Gulf (GCC).

Conclusions

The changing geopolitical scenario in the Mediterranean poses new risks and opportunities. However, if we remain anchored to the old logic of divisions and barriers, any initiative risks being short-lived. Therefore, our ambitious strategy requires a new approach, built on a model of closer regional integration. This model should consist of more open trade; more concrete projects, more visas; more investments; more access to credit; more student and cultural exchanges. And it should also be based on cultural and religious dialogue, and shared values of democracy and freedom.

Turkey can help implement this successful model. A paradigm of flourishing modernisation, Turkey is not just a good example of blending democracy and Islam. It is also a powerful political and economic actor in the Mediterranean, driven by the principles of pluralism, respect for rights, free trade and free market. At this historic moment, Turkey is for Italy the natural partner in strengthening regional integration and thus contributing to the success of the double transition in the Mediterranean.

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