Gentiloni launches a challenge: peace is possible in Syria. «Beyond the embargo, with humanitarian corridors and aid”

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«Pressure must be exerted on two fronts: engaging the regime into opening humanitarian corridors and, through negotiations, obtaining a ceasefire in order to mitigate the ongoing tragedy», said Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni commenting the situation in Syria. He has a clear stance on the fact that the war in Syria, with its cities under siege, the drama of the embargo and of the population who receive no aid and are starving to death, are all problems that the international community cannot face by raising its voice.

But what can Italy do?

During the past few weeks we took part in operations whenever there were the conditions to open humanitarian corridors. In practice, this happened on a couple of occasions since the beginning of the year and we were among the Countries with the biggest presence. This is despite the unfortunate fact that, we must admit, during the last few months the willingness of the Syrian regime to open a way into the country has been quite limited. However, we succeeded to reach Madaya also thanks to the intermediation of Russia. The humanitarian drama is there for everyone to see: it does not only concern the victims and the drama of the displaced people. Six years ago school-goers where almost 3 million, today’s generation is lost. Therefore our first imperative is to increase humanitarian aid. This also applies to Italy, whose aid will more than double from the 20 million of 2015. The government will make the announcement at London’s Conference on Syria on Feb. 4. International commitment has increased during the past few years but humanitarian crises have quickly outgrown it. This gap must be filled if we want to avoid destabilising consequences on Jordan, Lebanon and the European Union itself.

NGOs continuously report the impossibility of getting relief supplies to the ailing population…

Of course, the war goes on, bombings multiply and there is no single front but a mushrooming of piecemeal conflicts. The UN envoy (editor’s note: Staffan de Mistura) spent a year working to achieve a truce in Aleppo and failed. The siege continued and there was no willingness among the conflicting parties to meet the request for a ceasefire.

And international sanctions, the embargoes by the EU and UN remain in force…

In Syria people die of war. Sanctions are debatable and we Italians have always been cautious in considering them decisive. However, we are talking about one of the fiercest wars ever, which has been raging for five years and which has killed more than 100,000 people and produced millions of refugees. So we must be careful in not shifting our attention away from those who are responsible for this situation: Bashar al-Assad's regime, and Daesh and al-Nusra terrorists.

Is this another reason why the third negotiation, which has been again postponed in Geneva, cannot fail?

It must not fail because a principle that has always been upheld by Italy, the government, civil society and the Church, has finally been recognised: the idea that solving the conflict only militarily is a delusion. The two prejudicial conditions that have been fuelling this tragedy for more than four years – on the one hand the impossibility of a negotiation prior to ousting Assad and, on the other hand, the impossibility of a negotiation because Assad would need to be supported militarily – have finally fallen through after having accepted the idea that the regime and its opponents can sit around a negotiating table. And, through a more inclusive government, do away with the present dictatorship.

Can our common jihadist enemy paradoxically have an aggregating effect?

The acceptance of the negotiation instead of a solution decided through air strikes is due to two factors: the first is the common enemy, and the risk of a stronger Daesh, and the other (which some see as controversial) is the contribution that Russia could make. The negotiation should be oriented to ousting Assad but not to destroying the regime, which would repeat the mistakes made in Iraq. It should provide for a transition period following the ousting of Assad, without creating a power vacuum. It is a difficult road but it is the only one that could lead to the ceasefire envisaged in the roadmap.

Isn't there the risk that Syria might be subjected to an irreparable fragmentation of the territory?

There is no doubt that it is subjected to centrifugal thrusts. One of the obstacles faced by Staffan de Mistura in these past few days was whether or not to include elements of Syria's Kurdish forces in the delegations that will negotiate with Damascus. But we must not give into, nor encourage, this type of moves. Next month will be the 100th anniversary of the so-called Sykes-Picot Agreement (editor's note: dividing the Middle East between London and Paris). It was undoubtedly a post-colonial partition characterised by enormous errors and limits but sitting down today to replot maps along religious and emic demarcation lines would mean heading in the wrong direction. We don't need Sunni, Shiite or Kurdish mini States or to witness the expulsion of Christian or Yazidi minorities because they don't have the power to

establish mini States of their own. What we need – as in Lebanon and I hope soon in Iraq – is for the different communities to be autonomous albeit safeguarding the national States.

Do you think that, despite everything, peace may be establish in Syria this year?

We cannot accept the idea that the conflict between some Countries – and I'm especially referring to increasing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia – can hinder the road undertaken by all the world's leading powers. Because it would acknowledge a sort of "veto power" but it would also mean shutting our eyes to the current tragedy. It won't happen tomorrow because we are expecting a delay of a few days. But once negotiations kick off in Geneva the goal of putting an end to the war within this year becomes realistic.

Hundreds of jihadists from Syria and Iraq are moving into Libya. Once the government led by al-Sarraj is legitimised by a parliamentary vote it can take office. But if the first thing it does is ask for an internationally supported intervention, wouldn't this risk unleashing a war that could become uncontrollable?

Our interests are clear and I believe they coincide with those of the Libyan people: avoid the failure of the State, maintain its unity and consolidate its institutions. With the support of the international community and on condition that the government take office with the support of parliament. This is what is at stake in the next few days. Some say: "We are wasting time; it is better to send fighter aircraft against Daesh before it spreads dangerously out from its Sirte stronghold". This is not Italy's stand: today it would be an error because we are aiming at something that is more ambitious than holding back terrorism: building a State entity so we can have a legitimate interlocutor across the Strait of Sicily on issues like migration, economic and commercial growth and also the fight against terrorism. Air raids can curtail Daesh's potential to expand but an increasingly stronger State entity exercising its control over the territory is the only strategic answer.

Without any external intervention?

If and when the Libyan government succeeds to have the minimum support I was referring to, the UN resolution n. 2259 not only authorises but also calls on the international community to support the government, including on security issues. It will be up to Libya to ask Italy and the other EU countries for the contribution it needs. This must be clear because Italy's commitment, also military, won't be towards carrying out blitzkriegs but towards stabilising the Country. For example, by contributing to assuring the security of some areas of Tripoli where the new government might chose to establish its seat. We are talking about missions that certainly entail risks. What is important is to understand the scenario in which we move. However we won't give in to one thing.

What?

We won’t give in to the idea that, in case no Libyan government is established, there can be a sort of Somalia-like area across the Strait of Sicily; a land stormed by criminal and terrorist groups against which European powers intervene with air raids from an altitude of 10,000 meters.

You won’t give in to this idea or you won’t tolerate it?

It won’t be tolerated. Then of course if it is impossible for the Libyan parties to reach an agreement and if the situation becomes comparable to the one in Somalia, only 200-300 km from home, then Italy has the right and the duty to defend itself and evaluate how to do it. But this is not on our agenda now: the international community has committed to stabilise the Country.

Source : https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2016/01/la-sfida-di-gentiloni-siria-pace/