Terzi: «Assad cannot remain in power» (interview)

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Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, you have been foreign minister for just under six months. Did you prefer being an ambassador?

«It's not a question of preferences. Having technocrats from various sectors strengthens rather than weakens this government, and I have been given a great honour and responsibility, that's all I think about».

Nevertheless, the foreign ministry's role appears to have shrunk; European policy is more the precinct of the prime minister's office, cooperation has been given its own ministry; and then there are the budget cuts.

«Over an arc of three years, the foreign ministry has gone from a 2.5 billion euro budget to a 1.6 billion euro one. It has had to make a profound adjustment, many sacrifices, but I think we are still an excellent ministry. As for responsibilities, I do not feel diminished by the inclusion in the government of strong and skillful professionals to handle cooperation and European negotiations – on the contrary, it's an asset».

It must have been unpleasant, however, to have had to deal with a case like that of Mario Vattani, Consul in Osaka accused of giving a «fascist-rock» concert.

«It is never pleasant when events force the administration to take disciplinary action. It is not pleasant for a minister to have to impose punitive measures. What took place was reviewed and punishment was dealt [4-month suspension, editor's note], and I saw fit to go along with the conclusions that were reached».

There are many crisis hotspots in today's world, but what is most striking is the international community's impotence in the face of the massacres in Syria. What's to be done?

«The first step must be to launch real dialogue among the opposition forces, whose approximately 15 different groups must choose a single path. Italy has been working hard on that. Then it is necessary to convince Russia and China that the power in Damascus must change hands, explaining to Moscow that this is the best way to hold on to friends in the Arab world. Assad and his family must undeniably go, and there has to be a transition. Within this framework, the international observers' mission is fundamental, and must be credible and more independent, not least in order to ensure its own safety».

But after his recent visits to Berlin and Paris, Putin does not seem to have added to your hopes.

«Russia is not in favour of armed international intervention in Syria, but clarity is essential here. It is one thing to supply weapons to the opposition, quite another to mount a military intervention. No one has any intention of repeating the Libyan experience. There have been some subtle and important modulations in Moscow's position; it does not intend to support Assad at all costs and is rather aiming toward a transition to a new political design, which must be the foundation for applying the Annan plan».

Speaking of Libya: the elections have been pushed back, the Tripoli airport was occupied for half a day by an armed militia, human rights violations persist, and the risk of fragmentation is increasing. We are a long way from the goals of the war.

«Elections have been postponed for a just few weeks and will take place before Ramadan, and voter registration is going well. Of course there are problems on the level of security, but progress is being made in other sectors, such as reconstruction. We are working with the Libyans, and pressing Europe for a marked reorientation of Community policies in North Africa. I have just recently found myself very much in agreement on this with my French colleague Fabius. We are calling for two-thirds of neighbourhood policy programmes – in place of the current one-third – to be launched in the Mediterranean. Gaddafi's fall has, in any case, created a new Libya and an institution-building process, despite all the challenges that remain».

The release on bail of our two marines in India is good news, but nothing has been guaranteed and we are already at the preliminary hearings.

«The two servicemen were induced to disembark at Kochi under the conditions we already know about, first by deceit and later by force. From that moment on the government has been handling the situation under conditions of extreme difficulty; from the beginning the two men have been physically threatened by crowds fueled by xenophobic attitudes. We have obtained permission for them to continue to wear their uniforms and not to be detained in the company of common criminals, and we have assisted them in every way possible. At the same time we have also been acting on the level of international diplomacy. President Monti recently raised the issue in the meeting of the G8, and we are asking everyone, Europeans and otherwise, to support our rights and work together on the more general concern of piracy. We have succeeded in reducing the charges, eliminating the absurd one of terrorism. We are working at legal and political levels with the Indian authorities, and I myself went to New Delhi and to Kochi, even though in your judgment my initiative was "debatable».

That's true, and I maintain that opinion. But let's go back to the two marines, what could happen after the trial? And if they came back to Italy, would they have to answer for their

actions?

«Even if the two servicemen's involvement in the incident is proven without a doubt, an incident nevertheless it remains. And the Prosecutor of the Republic has notified by letter rogatory the launch of criminal proceedings in Italy. We do not wish to forget the episode but we do claim jurisdiction and, in any case, are working toward a solution, even after the trial, that will bring our men home».

Do you think the idea of an Israeli attack on Iran is still valid if negotiations on Teheran's nuclear programme yield no results?

«That the military option exists is without a doubt and, what's more, this concerns the U.S. as well as Israel, have a look at Obama's interview in The Atlantic. An act of this sort would clearly have catastrophic effects. At the same time we believe that pressure on Iran needs to be increased through sanctions, first and foremost the ones on petrol that go into effect on July 1st. Negotiations need to resume with Moscow, there is still time to avoid the worst».

Speaking of the sanctions, has Italy already found a way to make up for the Iranian supplies that will disappear in less than a month?

«We are ready, and have diversified our supply sources. Naturally we'll have to bear the burden of higher costs and lost contracts, but we feel putting pressure on Teheran is a priority in the general interests».

The Arab Spring, Syria, Iran: has the Palestinian question been put on the back burner?

«We are discussing a great many issues at European level, such as the Israeli settlements, that gradual erosion making it more difficult to create a Palestinian State, the new political strength that the Netanyahu government now has. We are convinced that there is a debate under way in Jerusalem; Ehud Barak's recent statements are part of the discussion. Certainly, everything is going too slowly, but the key lies in the internal Israeli debate. Non-action is no longer an option, and that's the development that counts. Obviously it is important for the Palestinian Authority and Hamas to come to an agreement as well, and in that way perhaps there could also be something new in the position of Europe ».

The European soccer championship begins today. Mr. Minister, you use the weapon of diplomacy to defend Italy's image. But don't you think the damage caused by the soccer scandal is worse?

«Look, in these past months I have found an appreciation and interest for Italy that place its credibility on a much higher plane than certain other painful aspects. But, that said, another thing needs to be stressed: what has hit the soccer world is owing to the behaviour of a few that have betrayed the commitment and sacrifice of an entire nation looking to its future».

Source :
https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2012/06/20120608_assad_non_puo_restare_al_potere/