Terzi: The Syrian crisis has come to a turning point (article)

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The Syrian crisis has come to a turning point, which could spell change as much for the Syrian people, who have suffered intolerable pain and violence, as for the region. Indeed, after vain attempts to internally “divide and conquer” the opposition and raise the spectre of Islamic fundamentalism (while the majority of Syrians are moderate Muslims) and terrorism (frequently sponsored by the regime itself), the Assad regime has tried to shift the crisis to a regional scale by fueling conflicts at the borders with Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Lebanon, precisely as an example of inter-faith democracy in the Middle East, is exposed to continuing attempts at destabilisation, as seen in the spiraling Teheran/Damascus engineered “sectarian abductions” and the recent arrest of former Lebanese Minister for Information Samaha, accused of planning terrorist attacks in the north of his country on instructions from Damascus. The liberation of the Syrian people and broader regional vigilance must, therefore, go hand in hand.

It is increasingly clear that only a united and democratic Syria can become a factor in restoring hope and stability to the entire Middle East; vice versa, an incomplete democratic transition would condemn Syria to prolonged instability that would leave the door wide open to outside interference by forces dedicated to permanent chaos (i.e. terrorist groups) or to changes in the hegemony of regional balances (Iran). Not to mention the danger of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – Syria has the largest arsenal of chemical and biological weapons in the Middle East.

With such high stakes, which include our “responsibility to defend” and regional stability, a sense of urgency is being felt within the international community – especially among like-minded countries (the Group of the Friends of the Syrian People, of which Italy is one) – and a need to hasten the end of the conflict and allow Syria to turn the page. A common strategy is being developed on two increasingly interconnected fronts: for the immediate present, every possible assistance, with the sole exception of military intervention, to the Syrian people and the opposition in their resistance against the regime and preparations for the transition; and the simultaneous launch of plans for “the day after”: for post-Assad economic and political stabilisation.

That the current regime is in crisis is by now a foregone conclusion. The proof lies in the army's mounting fatigue and its recourse no longer to internal militias (Shabiha) alone, but also to "foreign legions" (the 48 Iranian Shiites abducted in Damascus on 4 August included various Pasdaran and ex-military personnel), along with the continuing "excellent" defections and the ongoing resistance of the armed opposition despite its military inferiority. The transition that is therefore becoming inevitable must be led by the Syrian people and supported by an international community that, apart from any interests, has a moral obligation to do so.

Italy is active on both of those fronts, offering concrete support in various forms to the Syrian people and opposition. We have maintained close relations with the Syrian National Council, the opposition's umbrella organization, representatives of which have frequently been our guests in Rome. At the same time, we are engaged in ongoing dialogue with the other components of the variegated Syrian opposition, which represent the country's diverse local positions and with whom we are planning a series of political encounters in Rome in September.

Along with the Arab League and our principal partners, we are pursuing efforts to persuade the opposition to put aside remaining rivalries and build a political platform from which to launch the transition. We are also considering joining others of our main allies in providing communications equipment to the opposition that would help prevent attacks against civilians, especially women and children. On the humanitarian front we have completed and are planning new initiatives on behalf of Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey and, most recently, of the citizens of Aleppo.

We are also planning our post-Assad efforts, and in that regard have proposed an informal reflection to the held in Rome in the coming days with a group of allied partners in order to study the international community's role and responsibilities in post-Assad Syria. A reflection that will touch on aspects such as security, institution building, economic reconstruction and humanitarian aspects. In our opinion, the European Union is going to have to play a front-line role on the humanitarian front and in building Syrian democratic institutions.

But we must also be ready to begin immediately on the bilateral plane, with institution building and economic reconstruction initiatives, and for that purpose I have decided to set up a Task Force on Syria within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and suggested the creation of a special inter-ministerial discussion table. The Syrian crisis is one of our highest foreign policy priorities and we must be prepared to continue to meet the challenge.

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