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Renzi government and the Syrian Crisis:

between multilateral approach and non-intervention

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On February 22, 2014, Matteo Renzi, Secretary of the Democratic Party, was appointed as Prime Minister by the President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, and was nominated to form a new coalition government. A few months later, Daesh militants declared an Islamic State in the territories of Syria and Iraq, further complicating the ongoing Syrian crisis. The above raise the question of what are the Italian interests at stake in Syria? Is the Renzi government's position on the Syrian conflict in contrast or not with the policy adopted by the previous administration? Is an Italian involvement in Syria still possible and realistic considering the traditional importance of Libya for the country?

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The Italian-Syrian relations and Enrico Letta's government

Before the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, the diplomatic relations between Rome and Damascus were good and stable, as confirmed by the frequent meetings between Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and President Giorgio Napolitano.¹ Syria was recognized as a key player in maintaining the stability of the Mediterranean area and as an important economic partner for the country. In 2003, a notable bilateral agreement for investments – signed in February 2002 by Bashar al Assad and the former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi – came into effect, leading to the enhancement of commercial trade. Italy was the second largest European trading partner of Syria and the first supplier of arms for the country before the beginning of the civil war, while Damascus represented 0.2% of the entire Italian trade exchange.²

The beginning of the civil war led to the deterioration of the diplomatic relations between the two countries. In response to the bloody repression of the protests, Italy strongly condemned Assad's regime and supported all the initiatives proposed by the international community at the UN and in the EU, as, for instance, the sanctions adopted against Damascus. In 2013, the growing presence and participation of several Islamic groups to the conflict, including the involvement of the Iran-backed Hezbollah in support of Assad's regime, increased concerns over the Syrian crisis. During the G20 summit held in the following September in St. Petersburg, former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta explained the Italian position on the Syrian crisis, claiming that even if he could understand the US administration's outrage towards the alleged chemical weapons use by Assad, Italy would not intervene in Syria without the endorsement for action by the United Nations. The lack of an endorsement by the UN Security Council made his country unable to involve itself in that conflict.³ As a result, in a following meeting held with US President Barack Obama, Letta emphasized the urgency to have a Geneva II summit as soon as possible in order to work together with all willing countries on Syria.⁴

Renzi government's position and the non-intervention

Right after he came into office in February 2014, Matteo Renzi, talking about the Syrian crisis in an interview on Bloomberg, confirmed the previous administration line, highlighting the need to achieve an agreement approved by a wide group of countries and to avoid a new Libyan situation, effectively referring to Sarkozy's decision to intervene in that situation. As in the previous two sessions of the UN General Assembly, the Italian Prime Minister repeatedly stated that a sustainable solution of the conflict could only be reached through cooperation and the adoption of a long-term and comprehensive approach, including negotiating a cease-fire and building secure areas for people to be able return to their country. The Italian fear of a Libyan predicament can also be perceived in the statement of current Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paolo Gentiloni concerning the Assad issue: in continuity with his predecessors Franco Frattini and Federica Mogherini, he reformulated the Italian skepticism concerning ruling out an Assad-led government because of the risk of creating a void capable of being exploited by the terrorist groups. For this reason, a political transition is necessary in order to overcome the present regime and Assad's leadership.⁵ Gentiloni's "formula" - "a political transition at the end of which Bashar al-Assad will leave the field"- reflects the adoption of a "midway approach", an Italian attempt to bring together the two opposite sides on Assad's longevity in power, held by Rome's main and traditional ally, the United States, and its crucial economic partner, Russia.⁶

The reinvigorated jihadist threat, triggered mainly by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's proclamation of the Islamic State in June 2014, and the rise of the migratory flow led to a strengthening of the Italian efforts for finding a resolution to the Syrian crisis.⁷

Italy provided important logistic support to the international operation for the disarmament of Assad's chemical arsenal by providing the port of Gioia Tauro and by also joining the operations aiming

to impede the flux of funds in support of Daesh. In addition, by opposing the military option advocated by some Western countries, the Italian government has supported the diplomatic efforts of the UN special envoys, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Staffan De Mistura and has highlighted the necessity to bring both Russia and Iran into the negotiation process.⁸

In fact, while being excluded from the Geneva II talks in the beginning of 2014, the government of Teheran participated in the ISSG meeting held in Vienna in November 2015. After the Iranian nuclear agreement finalized in July 2015, Rome strongly promoted that cooperation and dialogue with Teheran are crucial in order to achieve stability in the Middle Eastern region. This view has also been fostered by the Italian government at the EU level and has received the support of other countries. This initiative was validated by the meeting between the Iranian President Hasan Rouhani and EU foreign policy Chief Mogherini in the end of October concerning an Iranian-EU cooperation on the Syrian crisis.⁹ During his participation at the Business Forum in Teheran, Renzi expressed his willingness to work together with the Iranian government in order to put an end both to the conflict in Syria and to the Libyan crisis.¹⁰

Concerning the humanitarian emergency response, in December 2014, the Renzi government, backed by the European Commission, promoted the creation of the Madad Trust Fund, the first European Trust Fund, aiming to ensure better coordination when sending humanitarian aid to the Syrian people. The Italian initiative includes also incisive activities to prevent and counter the illegal traffic of archaeological artifacts from Syria and Iraq, which represents one of the most important sources of revenue for Daesh.

During October 2014, the Italian commitment in the counter-ISIS coalition is followed up: most of the Italian military's efforts in this field have been in favor of the Iraqi government and the Kurdish security forces, by sending light weaponry and ammunition (of a total amount of 1.9 million euro), by training local security forces, and by ensuring aerial reconnaissance and support activities to the international coalition in the Iraqi region.¹¹ Italian soldiers are deployed in the cities of Baghdad, Erbil and Kirkuk and are implementing various training programs. In Kuwait, around 250 Italian pilots, two Predator drones and four Tornado aircrafts are deployed as well. 24 Centauro tanks were also provided to Jordan in 2015 for border patrol activities. Nevertheless, Rome opted not to join in the military operations in Syria, regardless of repeated US requests for a more significant participation in the coalition's activities.

Renzi government's decision to not involve the country in Syria, to not take part in the airstrikes was effectively reaffirmed after the terrorist attacks in Paris of November 13 and the subsequent call of French President François Hollande for help in the war against ISIS.¹² On the domestic front, the current party at the opposition, the Five-Star Movement, supported the non-intervention policy, maintaining, however, a distance from the government's decision to join the sanctions against Damascus and to conduct business with Saudi Arabia, a country where some parties are rumored to support ISIS. On the contrary, the center-right party, Forza Italia, emphasized at several times that Italy's refusal to heed France's recent call would only isolate Rome. Furthermore, the government's decision seems not to be in line with the ambitious content of the "White Paper for international security and defense" adopted in 2015, which stipulates how the Italian Ministry of Defense must be ready to take direct action when responding to a crisis affecting the Euro-Mediterranean region.¹³

Renzi justified the government's position by pointing out once more the lack, on the international level, of a comprehensive and long-term strategy to put an end to the conflict and by highlighting the fact that the country has already committed its troops to numerous peacekeeping missions and military operations around the globe including Afghanistan, Lebanon and Iraq.¹⁴

However, the main reason underlying the approach of non-intervention adopted by Rome has to do with the absolute priority given to the solution of the Libyan crisis. In several occasions, Prime Minister Renzi emphasized the need to restore stability in Libya. The crisis has strongly challenged and threatened the numerous Italian interests on the country, which was a crucial Mediterranean trade partner and, more than that, the main Italian oil supplier.¹⁵ Rome referred to the possibility of intervention in Libya, only when the political and legal requirements are satisfied, one among them being a UN

endorsement. Nevertheless, even if many experts discuss the sustainability of an Italian intervention in Libya in the long term, given the broad and active participation to the security missions, the scarcity of resources and the difficulties in implementing a reform of the military, an intervention alongside the anti-ISIS coalition in Syria seems far from being taken into account in the future. Moreover, the new expenses concerning the migrant emergency and the wake of earthquakes that hit the country in recent months ensured a worsening of the financial budget.

The policy towards the Middle East region for a country such as Italy is, more than ever, far from a simple one. It must be conducted within a multilateral framework in concert with allies, with diplomatic efforts for a resolution to a crisis taking precedence over military action. Given NATO's current focus on the Eastern border following the Ukrainian crisis, most of the Italian diplomatic efforts have been deployed within the European Union. Rome has strongly demanded that the migration issue, Italy's main concern about the Syrian crisis, would have been managed and addressed at the European level, evoking art.80 (TFEU) on the "solidarity principle". After the replacement of Mare Nostrum with a downsized mission (Triton), the Renzi government pushed for EUNAVfor Med Sophia, an operation to counter illegal migrants trafficking, and the Migration Compact, a long-term plan for reducing the migratory flow.¹⁶ However, Italy still asks for a greater and more coordinated involvement of the EU countries in dealing with the current Middle Eastern and Mediterranean crisis, and still meets resistance on the issue. At the summit of the European Council on the Syrian crisis held on the 19th of October, both Renzi and Federica Mogherini put pressure on Merkel, Hollande and May to approve a document without sanctions against Russian entities or individuals supporting Assad's regime. Renzi claimed that it would make no sense to talk about sanctions on Russia while everybody agrees that all the efforts must be directed in reaching an agreement on the Syrian crisis as soon as possible.¹⁷ This particular instance confirms that the Italian focus for a multilateral resolution in Syria is not going to shift.

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