The Italian Reaction to the Syrian Crisis

Riccardo Gavioli

The Syrian crisis began in March 2011, after the outbreak of demonstrations and revolts in other countries of the region as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, just to mention the most resounding cases. No one could imagine that the Syrian revolt would assume such dimensions as to cause the involvement of the international community and not even that the repression would have been so heavy. The last data provided by the United Nations suggests more than 8000 deaths from the beginning of the fight. Despite the diplomatic developments of recent days, the resolution of the crisis still appears so far away that different analysts are starting to talk about civil war.

The Syrian events have had a big echo in Italy, in particular because of the peculiarity that distinguishes them from the other occurrences of the so-called “Arab spring”. In this short article I will try to describe the Italian reaction to these events, showing two different areas of analysis, even if strictly related between them: the reaction/action of the government; the reaction/narration of the press. The sources that I used for this article are: the statements and the news disseminated by the Foreign Office ministry between March 2011 and April 2012; and the articles published, during the same period, by Il Corriere della Sera, one of the main Italian newspapers.

The Reaction/Action of the Government
Since the beginning of the first clashes in Syria, the Italian government expressed strong concern about the situation and unanimously condemned the heavy repression of the regime, calling for the end of the violence, the introduction of reforms by the government of Damascus and the beginning of a dialogue with the opposition. Since these first statements, the Italian Foreign Office ministry underlined that these visions were the same of those expressed by the other countries of the European Union, trying to communicate a common purpose.

During the following months Italy continued criticizing the Syrian government, following the international community’s wake. The first real reaction of the government took place August 2, 2011, when the Italian ambassador in Damascus, Achille Amerio, was summoned to Rome for consultations. The then-Foreign Office minister Franco Frattini defined that convocation as a strong political sign, underlining that Italy was the first European country to do so and inviting the other nations of the Union to do the same. Afterwards that decision would be referenced several times by the government, as if Italy had been the first country to take a strong position against the violent repression of the Syrian regime.

In November 2011, while the European Union was discussing the possibility of increasing the sanctions against Syria, and while the Arab League was supposing the suspension of Syria, the then-Foreign Office minister Franco Frattini granted audience to a delegation of the Syrian National Council, confirming the strong condemnation against the violent repressions perpetuated by the Syrian regime. In that occasion the minister stated also that Italy identified itself with the European Union’s will. Just a month later, after the plea made by the chair of the Syrian National Council, Bürhān Gālīyūn, the Italian government decided to send to the Syrian evacuees in Lebanon basic goods for the a value of 150,000 Euros.

The Italian position about the Syrian crisis was getting clearer with the worsening of the situation. Rome stated that the government of Bashār al-Asad was no longer acceptable and it began to support the Arab League’s proposal for the resolution of the crisis. On February 6, 2012 the Italian ambassador in Damascus was summoned again to Rome for consultations, but it was said that the embassy would remain open in order to help the Italians still residing in Syria and also to monitor the situation. A month later, the 13th of March, the Italian government decided to close the embassy and to repatriate the diplomatic staff because of issues of security, but only after that measure was taken by other countries, including the United States, Great Britain and France. Currently, Italy is completely supporting the Kofi Annan plan for the end of the violence.
In conclusion it is possible to say that Italy maintained a careful attitude, following the road made by the international community, in particular the European Union, but it was unavoidable in such delicate circumstances.

**The Reaction/Narration of the Press**

The articles published by *Il Corriere della Sera* can be divided into two big groups: news stories that describe the Syrian events, and articles that try to investigate the deep reasons of the crisis and to explain the regional contradictions.

The news stories describe the Syrian “war” events: the demonstrations, the clashes, the deaths. These articles often try to underline the most macabre and debasing aspects of the repression as if the fact that a government uses violence against its own population would not alone be enough to condemn the Damascus regime. So it is possible to find details about children involved in the demonstrations, about the tortures suffered by the prisoners, about the arrests that took place directly in the public hospitals. Probably these elements are used to emphasize how far a regime can go to maintain its power. Normally these articles become a direct attack against the president Bashār al-Asad and his inner circle of collaborators, in particular his brother Maher, commander of the Republic Guard and the army’s elite Fourth Armored Division, who is accused of being the perpetrator of the violence. Often these articles try to give the idea of a continuity with the past, so every time the city of Hama is cited, it is possible to find a reference to the massacre of 1982, under the presidency of Ḥāfiz al-Asad. Another point to which these articles often return is the effort made by the regime to justify the recourse to arms as necessary to defend the country from terrorists, trying in this way to describe the embarrassment of the Syrian government.

From the other side, the second group of articles tries to give a complete description of the national, regional and international situation around the Syrian crisis. It is possible to find articles about the religious divisions inside Syria, for example the Alawi minority from one side, that concentrates in its hands all the power, and the Sunni majority from the other side, with its will to revenge, even if sometimes the newspaper insists too much on this topic. Another subject often broached is the possibility that the clashes could spread over other countries of the region, in particular Lebanon or Iraq. A lot of space is normally dedicated to the international arena, for example when Russia and China vetoed the resolution of the United Nations the newspaper investigated the internal reasons for this refusal. These articles try also to answer the most common question of readers: “why it is not possible to intervene in Syria as was done in Libya?” Normally the answer refers to the stability of the regime, still supported by a large part of the population, the delicate geographic position of the country, between Lebanon, Iraq and Israel, and the international allies of Syria, in particular Iran and Russia.

In conclusion I can say that the newspaper tried to give a complete image of the crisis, talking about the current events happening in Syria and the probable inner reasons of those events, even if sometimes it is not impartial in the description of the facts; but in situation like this it is not easy to remain detached.

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