

Italian FM: International force could be deployed in Gaza too

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25 August 2006 - ROME - If the planned multinational force in Lebanon succeeds, it might be possible to create a similar force for the Gaza Strip, Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema said in an interview with Haaretz.

D'Alema said that America's aggressive approach to the Middle East, which Israel shares, has failed, and has caused serious damage. Now, he said, Italy and Europe must prove to Israelis that only international intervention can bring them security.

D'Alema is considered the driving force behind Italy's decision to contribute 3,000 soldiers to a beefed-up UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), thereby making it the largest western contributor to the force.

But the Italian foreign minister, who met with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in Rome on Thursday, said that the multinational force can only help the government of Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah. This matter "essentially depends" solely on the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, he said, and will certainly not be done through force.

He also claimed that it would be "simplistic" to describe Hezbollah solely as a terrorist organization. "Were Hezbollah merely a small terrorist group, it would not enjoy the support of so many Lebanese," he said. "Even Tzipi Livni says that if Hezbollah becomes a political organization, this will be a success, and I agree with her."

D'Alema is president of the Democrats of the Left, and was also a senior figure in the party's earlier incarnation as the Communist Party. Many on the Italian right and in Italy's Jewish community view the party as hostile to Israel, particularly in view of the great support that Israel received from former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi.

The Italian foreign minister's views are clearly not supportive of the Israeli government. Nevertheless, he expressed concern for Israel during the interview.

"We are sending our soldiers to Lebanon and endangering their lives out of love for Israel. We have no interests in Lebanon; this is supposed to be a step that creates peace. And that is in Israel's interest," D'Alema said.

D'Alema said that it is still unclear whether Italy will head the bolstered UNIFIL, but it is already clear that it will be a leading contributor with its 3,000 soldiers. The decision to deploy the force enjoys overwhelming support among the Italian public, and in the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, it won across-the-board support.

Analysts explain that the Italians are pleased with the fact that D'Alema has managed to turn Italy into a central player in the international arena.

"Moreover, we're talking about involvement in Lebanon, which is nearby. This is not Afghanistan, which is so far away that no one understands what we are doing there," an official in the Italian Foreign Ministry explained.

Nonetheless, D'Alema is trying to make sure that Italy is not alone in Lebanon. At an emergency European Union meeting in Brussels today, D'Alema hopes a decision will be made to add at least 5,000 European troops to UNIFIL. On this point, Italy's hopes are shared by Israel.

Analysts say D'Alema understood the United States cannot mediate in Lebanon. The French are hesitant, the British are considered too pro-American, and the Germans do not want to get involved in a delicate situation. He is therefore pushing for Italy to take advantage of the vacuum.

What, in your view, would be considered a success for the multinational force in Lebanon?

"Success would be the active presence of international and European diplomacy in the region, a presence that has been missing for many years. Europe has not counted for too much in the Middle East, and Israel has always related to it suspiciously. The Arabs thought that Europe hands out money, but for the important things, one must turn to the Americans. If, with the assistance of a UN and European presence, a positive process begins in Lebanon - the country is stabilized and the fundamentalist threat is removed from Israel's borders - that will show people in Israel that the international community can be efficient, that Europe can be efficient. Such a process would prove to Israel that it can ensure its security better through the politics of peace than through war. The main problem is that in Israeli politics, peace and security are two different, often contradictory things."

And the current crisis proved, in your view, that the U.S. on its own cannot guarantee such security?

"This is obvious to me. The American policy, which Israel also supported, created an impossible situation. Just a few years ago, they foretold the demise of the UN. I recall that on the day Baghdad fell, Richard Perle wrote that along with Baghdad, the UN also fell. The thinking was that it is possible to control the world via the power of a hegemonic liberal power. This philosophy has created serious damage, and now the U.S. is looking for a logical way out."

D'Alema disagrees with Israel's description of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization: "An organization that has 35 members of parliament and three ministers cannot be described solely as a terrorist group. Hezbollah is not considered a terrorist group by the European Union, nor in my personal view. Hezbollah is a military organization, but also a force that participates in elections. The paradox is that we support Siniora, a democratic leader, and Siniora lauds Hezbollah as the defender of the Lebanese homeland. It is important to understand the complexity of the situation, because if you have a simplistic view of the enemy, you deal with him incorrectly."

Does this mean that UNIFIL and the Italian soldiers will not attempt to disarm Hezbollah?

"This essentially depends on the Lebanese. If the government of Lebanon wants to, it is certainly possible, and we must encourage the government of Lebanon. We cannot act against the will of the Lebanese government. Hezbollah's disarmament is not only Israel's demand, it is also Lebanon's, because a democratic country cannot be sovereign if it does not have a monopoly over the army."

There was talk in the past about deploying a multinational force to the Gaza Strip as well.

"The idea of sending UN troops to the Gaza Strip is currently being aired. But I think that if things go well in Lebanon, a similar positive process could also begin in the Gaza Strip: the release of [kidnapped soldier Gilad] Shalit, a Palestinian unity government that meets the criteria set by the international community, and the presence of a UN force to bolster the Palestinian government."

