

Syria regime campaigns to mend relations with EU

Al Assad offers intelligence on terror attacks in exchange for normalisation of ties

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Dubai: Alberto Manenti, the director of the Italian intelligence agency for information and security, visited Damascus this week to discuss counter-terrorism cooperation with his Syrian counterparts.

This was the first such visit by a senior EU official to the Syrian capital since 2011, marking a significant departure from Europe's previous stance toward Damascus.

The Manenti visit, which remained confidential, came days after Deeb Zeitoun, the Syrian security chief, visited Rome last week, at the invitation of the Italian government. Zeitoun arrived in Rome via Beirut, despite EU sanctions that blacklist him and other Syrian officials, and stayed at a private villa provided by Italian intelligence.

In late June, Al Assad's presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban marked a similar breakthrough, addressing a German audience at the Schiller Institute in Berlin via Skype, weeks after making a similar guest appearance at a Washington think-tank. Also this summer, General Ali Mamlouk, head of the Syrian National Security Bureau, paid a secret visit to Berlin, for counter-intelligence sharing with German intelligence, also defying EU sanctions.

The Syrians stressed, on all three occasions, that they have extensive files on EU citizens fighting with Daesh.

Some are in Syria prisons and others are still on the battlefields, scattered between Raqqa and Deir Al Zor.

Syria is willing to provide all lists, they emphasised, if the Europeans took an initiative aimed at normalising relations with Damascus.

Full counter-intelligence would only happen, they added, once diplomatic relations were restored.

In Damascus, Manenti met with his Syrian counterparts and with President Bashar Al Assad. The Italian official proposed turning a new page in Italian-Syrian relations, if Damascus showed willingness at resumption of political talks and start of a political process that leads to democratisation and regime reform, rather than regime change.

The impression that the Syrians got was that something major had changed in the EU, due to the rising fear of Daesh, and that Italy was willing to use its considerable influence to extract a different position from the Europeans. The political process would have to yield results "within six months" meaning until December 2016, thereby scrapping an earlier date that had previously been agreed upon by UNSCR 2254, which called for the start of a transition government in Damascus by August 1.

According to sources in Damascus, the Italians promised to trigger an initiative by EU Higher Representative

for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, “within weeks” aimed at lifting economic sanctions on Syria if the Syrians agreed to share intelligence on Daesh and start a serious political transition.