

Paolo dall'Oglio S.J. kidnapped in northern Syria since end of July

At the ESITIS conference “Contested spaces, common ground?” in Bilbao April 2013, one of the invited speakers was Paolo dall'Oglio S.J., a scholar, activist and priest working in the field of Muslim-Christian relations in Syria since 30 years. His doctoral dissertation was about hope in the Koran. Since 2009 he has held a double honorary doctorate at the University of Leuven. As the leader of the Syrian Catholic monastery of Deir Mar Musa (close to the city of Nabk) and an appreciated dialogue activist Paolo has worked for dialogue and mutual appreciation between Christians and Muslims in Syria. After the 2011 events he supported the democratic movement in the uprisings, which lead to his expulsion from the country in 2012. Since then, he has travelled extensively to inform the European and American churches and the general public about the situation in the country.

In May 2013 he released his new book *La rage et la lumière*, in Paris. At the ESITIS conference, he claimed that the Western countries did not take responsibility for preventing the huge human suffering in the present war situation, and that part of the problem was that the West, according to him, did not trust Muslims. He was worried about the Syrian clergy - both the Christian and the Islamic religious leaders – for not taking the people's wish for democracy seriously enough. For Paolo, this was not only a present problem. He also viewed it as a future problem: In the case of a new constitution and a new leadership in Syria, how would today's leaders retain their authority and as well as personal security?

Paolo dall'Oglio went into Syria July 2013, and stayed for some time in the city of Raqqa. From here on the sources are sparse, and the following information is not confirmed. But according to some reports, Paolo went to see the leadership of ISIS (an Al-Qaeda linked group) in order to negotiate the release of some colleagues of him from Orient TV who had been kidnapped by the organization. He had earlier negotiated in different situations for releasing hostages in the Syrian war, so this was not completely new ground for him. Others claim that he wanted to negotiate between ISIS and the Kurdish groups fighting over the control of the area, with extensive civilian suffering as the result. The 28 or 29 July it seems he was himself kidnapped by the group. Since then, there have been rumors of him being executed, or that he has been swapped with other prisoners and may be held by another group or in a regime prison in Damascus. Other information states that he is alive and is being treated well by his kidnappers.

Two bishops and several other priests are currently kidnapped in Syria. Many ordinary people are also kidnapped, for money or for political reasons. It is difficult to get trustworthy information at the moment, but the Vatican and the Italian government are watching Paolo's situation closely to the extent it is possible to do so.

The extremely complicated and violent situation in Syria at the moment is difficult to grasp, and our concerns for all involved including our colleague Paolo is not easy to put into action. To seek knowledge and to remember are two possible options of action. Paolo would refuse to see the conflict as a Christian-Muslim conflict, but rather state it is a conflict between people who wants democracy and dialogue on the one hand and supporters of violence and conflict on the other.

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On behalf of the ESITIS board,
Anne Hege Grung