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Interview / Mons. Mourad

Archbishop of Homs: No one is safe in the new Syria

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM 31_10_2025

Elisa Gestri

The Pontifical Foundation Aid to the Church in Need, dedicated to helping persecuted Christians around the world, recently published its *Report on Religious Freedom 2025*, which was also reported on by *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana*. On the occasion of the

release of the document, which analyzes the degree of religious freedom in 196 countries, the Italian section of the Foundation organized a public meeting in Florence entitled *Witnesses of Hope from Wounded Syria*, in collaboration with the local diocese and the Agata Smeralda association. The guest of honor at the event was His Excellency Monsignor Jacques Mourad, a Syriac Catholic monk and former abbot of the monastery of Saint Elian, who has been Archbishop of Homs since 2023. Monsignor Mourad has an interesting background: he was born and raised in Aleppo to a family of Syrian Catholics who fled Mardin, now Turkey, in 1915 due to the persecution of Christians, especially Armenians (the infamous genocide), but also Syrian Catholics, Chaldeans, Greek Orthodox, and Assyrians, by the Young Turks.

After studying theology in Lebanon, he joined the monastic community of Mar Mousa founded by Italian Jesuit Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, who was kidnapped in 2013, presumably by Islamic State militants. Ordained a priest, Mourad obeyed his bishop's request to restore the ancient monastery of Mar Elian in the Homs region, becoming its abbot. In 2015, he himself was kidnapped by the Islamic State, but after four months he managed to escape from his captors.

On the sidelines of the public meeting, Monsignor Mourad granted *Nuova Bussola Quotidiana* a wide-ranging interview on Syria and his personal experience as a Christian religious.

Monsignor Mourad, in an interview with Agenzia Fides on January 31, you reported on the serious confusion in Syria after the former al-Qaeda group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham took power. How have things evolved today, almost a year later?

It is not easy to give an opinion because the situation is complicated and, above all, because the new government is not following a clear line: those in power now are adopting a strategy of manipulation, that is, they say one thing and do another. Relations with the population are not based on any frankness. For the new rulers, the Syrian population, composed mostly of resistance fighters who suffered and were persecuted under the Assad regime, is a population of flul (allies in Arabic, implying the old regime) to be persecuted.

In this way, the Syrian people suffered before and are suffering now...

Certainly. The people are innocently suffering the revenge against Assad, and the paradox is that the new government is using, in a perfected form, the same criminal methods already tried and tested by the old regime.

Furthermore, the Syrian people are severely impoverished: the new rulers have dismissed most of the civil servants, leaving them without a salary. The few who have been allowed to keep their jobs receive their salaries in Syrian pounds, while the new arrivals receive theirs in dollars: $60 per month for the former and $500 for the latter. Recently, the government announced that things will change next month and that everyone will be paid the same. Let's hope so.

We understand that on October 5, elections were held in Syria to renew the Parliament, but that most of the population was unable to participate. Did you personally vote?

No! No one voted. Only a small group of voters chosen by the government went to the polls to vote for candidates chosen by the government. There were no elections: it was a charade for the media.

You were a friend and confrere of Father Dall'Oglio, who has been missing since 2013. Do you have any news about what might have happened to him?

No news. In my opinion, the story of Father Dall'Oglio represents a grave injustice on the face of the earth, representing all the people who have been kidnapped for decades in Syria and the pain of their families. The point is that kidnappings continue today, with great aggression. It will take a long time for the situation to change for the better.

And perhaps different leaders will also be needed...

What worries me is that this government is welcomed by the international community.

Why do you think that is?

I believe that Trump's desire is to accommodate Israel, to do what Israel wants.

It is no secret that Hayat Tahrir al Sham took power in Syria with the approval of Turkey, Israel, and the US...

...and also Russia, which convinced Assad to leave the country and take refuge in Moscow.

Is anyone safe in Syria at the moment?

No. Muslims are in as much danger as Christians, if not more. The Druze are persecuted, the Alawites are persecuted, the Shiites are persecuted...

The Kurds?

No, they have not persecuted the Kurds because they are brave and armed fighters.Let's not forget that it was the Kurds who defeated ISIS in northeastern Syria.

In 2015, you were kidnapped by Islamic State militants. Did you recognize any of your kidnappers among Syria's new rulers?

No, those in power now are part of Hayat Tahrir al Sham, which comes from al Nusra, itself the Syrian branch of al Qaeda. ISIS and al Nusra are enemies; they fight each other.

Yet in the chaos of the new Syria, there seems to be room for ISIS as well, whose goals do not seem so far removed from the plans of the HTS government: for example, the elimination of religious minorities seems to be a common trait of both groups.

The difference is that ISIS is pursuing the project of an Islamic caliphate, that is, a kingdom in which the community of believers in Allah, the umma islamyia, will be subject to a single ruler. Al Nusra, and therefore HTS, aim instead to spread Islamic law throughout the world, while respecting the various countries.

Returning to the four months and twenty days of your captivity, what was the greatest suffering you had to endure when you were in the hands of your captors?

Undoubtedly, the psychological suffering. The first two days I was beaten severely, but psychological suffering is stronger and more dangerous than physical suffering. I must admit that ISIS has a very well-tested and effective way of applying psychological pressure. Initially, they threatened to behead me if I did not convert to Islam—for them, converting a Catholic priest would have been a great achievement. When they realized that this method was not working, they sent me a very gentle, very respectful man who told me the story of an Anglican pastor who converted to Islam, became a respected teacher, and had four wives. However, this approach did not work either.

Were you ever tempted to give in?

Of course, it's normal. Not only to give in, but also to feel abandoned by God. When I felt this way, I prayed the rosary in my mind because when they kidnapped me, I didn't have a rosary with me. When they beat me badly at the beginning, I gave in to the physical pain and the feeling of abandonment, and that was the only time I cried. Then I fell asleep, slept for two hours, and woke up singing the prayer of St. Teresa of Avila – *let nothing disturb you, let nothing frighten you* – in Arabic, a language in which I had never recited it before. I saw it as a sign that the Lord had not abandoned me, a free gift that

gave me the strength to go on.

What can we, the Western world, do for Syria?

Pray. We need to unite in prayer: I am convinced that prayer is the true force capable of saving the world. While I was a prisoner and prayed for everyone, I had the gift of hearing the prayers of many who were pleading with God for me. If I managed to escape my captors, it was thanks to the power of prayer.

Are you afraid today?

No. I have come to the conviction that if I die for my faith, I am neither the first nor the last. Moreover, as St. Paul says when he speaks of his own death, we are with Jesus, what more could we want? If death is the way to be with Jesus, it is beautiful.