

Missing Italian Priest Reported Alive in Syria

An Italian Jesuit priest who went missing in Syria several months ago is still alive, according to an Assyrian priest speaking at the European Parliament last Tuesday.

Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana of the Assyrian Church in the East said the latest reports from inside Syria were that Father Paolo Dall'Oglio is alive, although no more detail was given about his condition.

Reuters reported on July 29 that Dall'Oglio had been abducted by Islamists with links to al-Qaeda in the northern Syrian city of ar-Raqqah, but the Vatican would not confirm the news.

A month later, several reports claimed that the priest had been killed, although the Vatican remained tight-lipped.

Father Dall'Oglio is an outspoken supporter of the uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The UK-based pro-opposition Syrian Observatory of Human Rights recently reported that the priest was kidnapped after a visit to the ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, linked to Al-Qaeda) rebel group headquarters, as did All4Syria—an agency which operated as an anti-Assad online news outlet for several years before the outbreak of war in Syria.

Dall'Oglio is not the only priest in Syria whose whereabouts and wellbeing have created headlines in recent months. Bishops Yohanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yaziji were kidnapped in April and have yet to be released.

Fr. Youkhana was a guest speaker at the presentation of a report, "Vulnerability Assessment of Syria's Christians" to a packed room of Brussels parliamentarians, policymakers and

NGOs by Open Doors International (ODI).

ODI is an international organization that works to support Christians persecuted for their faith around the world, and has been supporting partners and churches in Syria since 2008.

It currently has a 'Save Syria' campaign, in 13 countries, with more than 150,000 signatures on a petition for Western governments to keep the plight of the Church at the front of their thinking.

Beyond the kidnappings of leading Christian figures inside the country, the situation for the nation's Christian minority is precarious.

Open Doors spokesperson Esther Kattenberg said Syria's Christians are "squeezed" in between a rock and a hard place, neither feeling comfortable siding with the widely condemned current al-Assad government, nor the various factions – many of which are

Fr. Youkhana said Syria's Christians, like those in Egypt, are desperate for a "third option". They do not want to live inside a police state or a military dictatorship, he said, but neither do they want to live under Sharia law.

Youkhana added that the Christian minority were not guests within the country who needed to be appeased, but rather the very fabric of the country, whose existence there dates back to the first century.

As such, he said they deserved to be treated as fully part of the future of Syria and whatever political solution is found. He said that many of them are asking whether they have a future in the country or whether their voices would be heard. For Fr. Youkhana, the answer to both is a resounding 'yes'.

Reports from many Syrian church leaders say that, under the stress of war and hardship, they are finding a unity of

mission and purpose that they had not experienced before.

The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, Elmar Brok, visited briefly to express support of the meeting's initiative.

Member of European Parliament (MEP) Ria Oomen-Ruijten, from the Netherlands, said the European Parliament had been concerned about the plight of Syria's Christians since October 2011 and had been "consistent" throughout. She added that a political, democratic solution remained Syria's best chance of future recovery.

Youkhana pleaded that the proposed international meeting in Geneva to discuss Syria should not become a deal between extremist groups and called for the EU to use its influence to let minorities have their say.

A representative for EU foreign affairs, Maciej Golubiewski from the European External Action Service, said he agreed that this should be the EU's course of action, although he refused to make any promises.