

Last call from Syria

Exclusive Interview with **Fr Paolo Dall'Oglio**, by Maria Laura Conte and Martino Diez
*From the **monastery of Saint Moses the Ethiopian**, 100 km to the north of Damascus, a wide-ranging survey of the situation in Syria.*

Oasis, 26 Jan 2012, <http://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/node/7635>



Bits and pieces of rather confusing news have been leaking out through the borders of Syria. How are you to describe the present situation in the country where you have been living for thirty years? How do things stand right now with regard to the conflict?

Let me preface my remarks by saying that, in accepting to give an interview, I am taking on some kind of responsibility with regard to the obligation I am under not to take political action at the risk of being expelled. I am only abandoning my silence because of the gravity of a situation which requires us to do everything possible to encourage a pacification of the country such as which will respect the requirements of justice. Any attempt on my part to take advantage of the situation for personal gain would be completely inappropriate. On the other hand, in the last few weeks the state has chosen to allow greater scope for freedom of information, so I look at this contribution of mine as a positive response to governmental openness. I very much hope that this gesture will be seen for what it is intended to be – a gesture of patriotic solidarity - and valued as such in the context of the country's development through a greater freedom of opinion. The situation remains tense and fraught with violence. The territory looks like a leopard skin, with patches where the opposition movement has the upper hand, sometimes peaceably and sometimes more or less violently, and others where the state is wholly in charge and fully supported by the populations. There are two big islands, Damascus and Aleppo, which remain solidly in the hands of the central government, but these are steadily reducing in size and subject, them too, to high levels of insecurity.

The mountain region between the sea and the River Orontes, which runs from the Lebanese Beqaa to Antioch, is almost completely under the control of the government. This region is in fact inhabited principally by minorities (relatively to the overall population of the country) who are Muslims (Alawites or Ismaelis) or Byzantine Christians (Orthodox and Catholic) or Maronites. The Sunnis who are the majority in the country as a whole are actually in a minority in this region. They were among the first to rebel, probably in hopes of a speedy general uprising. Here repression has basically obtained success. Consequently the possibility foreseen by many of a division of the country has become a concrete fact in this area. The end result would be liable to be a coastal strip of Syria in the Iranian orbit together with the Southern Lebanon of Hezbollah, over against an inland Sunni Syria linked with Central Iraq to the East and with Hariri's Beirut to the West.

This disastrous panorama does not yet do justice to the overall reality of the country. The forces are in a balanced equilibrium. The basic state services continue to operate, though with difficulty. A great number of people remain unable to take up a position and are

preserving their neutrality. On the other hand, prescinding from religious affiliations, popular support for the constituted power continues firm (albeit shaken). No doubt this has to do both with the strong attachment of Syrians to their national unity and with the refusal of many to allow themselves to be reduced to an identity defined purely and simply by their confession. In spite of this, some areas are now in the hands of the “free army”, although I would not go so far as to say that their position is assured. In general the political climate is confused and the security position leaves much to be desired. We are seeing instances of theft, hooliganism, sabotage, assassination, abduction, the settling of scores, vendetta, and murder. Violence only continues to spread. People who are no better than criminals are profiting from the situation as well. All too often we find ourselves taking part in the funerals of persons slain in violent confrontations or assassinated.

Many want to continue to hope that the promised constitutional reforms will soon be a reality and that the Bashar el-Assad presidency will overcome the crisis and hold plebiscitary elections for a new mandate.

With respect to possible solutions, in the Summer of 2011 you were hoping to see the birth of a form of consensual democracy that would have the capacity to take account of the plurality of identities existing in the country. But since then things seem to have gone in another direction and positions have hardened. Do you still consider this suggestion to be practicable?

Paradoxically, I am even more convinced of it today, for the feeling in the two camps is that a stalemate has been reached, with the forces cancelling each other out. In the intervening period, in accordance with a more or less “mutual” desire, decisive steps have been taken towards a militarisation of the conflict. Nonetheless it is becoming increasingly clear that for a great number of local, national, and international reasons, neither side has the means to annihilate the other.

You speak of conflict. Are you using the term in a metaphorical or in a concrete sense?

In a very concrete sense. We have just had news of a ceasefire arranged between the regular Syrian army and the antigovernment forces in the town of Zabadani, close to Lebanon. We are in a civil war scenario.

Does this situation not remind you worryingly of Iraq? Apart from the fact that the movement in Syria was not triggered by a foreign military invasion, are there not many features common to both?

There are certainly some common features but there are also just as many differences. The phenomenon of abductions for example is extremely worrying. If things go on like this it will be catastrophic for ordinary folk. The greater part of the Christian population has two impressions: on the one hand they feel they are caught up in a conflict that is ultimately between Muslims, and on the other hand there are many who are perfectly supportive of the Syria of the Assads. They had assured a kind of secular state perceived by the Christian minority as offering them the possibility of advancement, while the Sunni majority saw it as the expression of an alliance of minorities. On the ground, a significant number of Christians are aligning themselves with the government. Many are civil servants and employees of the state and others are involved in the conflict as members of the army, the police, and the security services. Quite a few young men have volunteered for the forces engaged in repressing “terrorism”. We must also note the

presence of Christians in the opposition movements, and of course they choose the parties with a less markedly religious character. However, as in Iraq, the dominant feeling is that a generalised civil war would be infinitely deleterious for the Christians in particular and would probably result in them emigrating en masse.

Are there differences of opinion among the Christians?

There is a very explicit alignment with the government on the part of a large proportion of the various ecclesiastical authorities. This position is however tending to give way to a more pronounced neutrality. We can well understand, as we have said, the reasons for those being frightened about the possibility of a Sunni Islamic republic. Others however are emphasising the idea that the revolution may open the door to democracy. In any case, it is completely misleading to present the issue as a straight fight between friends and opponents of democracy, or likewise between friends of the regime and enemies of the regime. The reality is much more complex. There are a great number of young persons, Christian and Muslim, devoting themselves body and soul to help bring about the birth of a democracy worthy of the name in Syria. Some believe that this objective can be attained more satisfactorily and more securely through the evolution of the current regime. Others however, equally committed to democracy, are aiming at an immediate change away from the current establishment. The great variety of the positions came home to me clearly when the issue of my expulsion arose. 6600 young persons subscribed to the Face-book page «No to the expulsion of Father Paolo». The opposition supporting the Coordination Committees promoted a “Father Paolo Sunday” in which solidarity with me was expressed in the whole country in various demonstrations ... even involving groups of veiled Muslim women! Leaving aside any political exploitation of the event, it is significant that among the young people who took up my defence, all committed to democracy, were to be found both those who were pro-government and those who were pro-revolutionary, and there were both Muslims and Christians.

What is the position with regard to the decree of expulsion?

It is an old story involving a complex of questions, some internal to the local church and having political implications, others directly connected with our twenty years of cultural work for the emergence of a civil society, interreligious dialogue, and democratic development which was a part of our action on the ground. In February 2010 the Monastery’s Nature Park was closed and all activities suspended, including meetings for interreligious dialogue. It has become known internationally that in March last year, as something quite apart from the opposition movement in Syria, my residence permit was rescinded. In practice, if I had left Syria, I would not have been able to return. Then in November came the decree of expulsion, which has not however been enforced. It is currently on ice, not least as a result of the massive and multifarious mobilisation, above all of young people, in my defence. Quite apart from the personal aspect to the case, this episode manifests the quality of Syrian society, which has reacted in defence of a symbol of interreligious harmony and civil reconciliation.

I feel I have a duty to put forward a plan for a non-violent peace initiative on an Arab and international level, involving the participation of local volunteers. I see no reason why Gandhi cannot be an inspiration to help resolve the current Syrian conflict. I am asking for the formation of a contingent of 50,000 non-violent and unarmed “companions” from all over the world. I say “companions” and not observers because the latter are viewed by many in Syria as the advance guards of armed invasion and as censors motivated by hostility. In Syria even the word “international” reeks of plotting and provokes negative

reactions. Invitations should be issued by Syria herself, on the basis of a UN proposal, to representative companions from the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the Scouts, the Sant'Egidio Community, and the Non-Violent Peace Force, in short to representatives of global civil society, with the aim of helping in Syria's democratic development. There is no need for international armed forces that are seen here as occupation forces looking for a coup and motivated by economic and strategic interests. Criminal violence can and must be resisted by the state police in cooperation with the local population and under the oversight of a free press and "companions".

Unfortunately the central core of the civil apparatus, which is in a position to negotiate democratic development, seems more and more absorbed in the polarisation and militarisation of the current conflict.

This is not the first time I have put forward a suggestion of this kind. In 2001 I proposed the creation of an exit channel for Arab fighters in Afghanistan, the kind of people who had been enlisted for decades - even by the US - to go and liberate Kabul, and who all of a sudden turned out to be hostile terrorists. Well, today in 2011, they are actually talking about negotiations with the Taleban, after 10 years of ferocious war, with so many dead and such endless suffering! In 2003 in the course of a public fast, we declared that we could not remain silent for the sake of Iraq since the regime of Saddam Hussein was intolerable, but neither could we side with the idea of war. Everybody knows what happened then.

So you recommend the way of negotiation. And yet, in a document you put out at Easter 2011, we read that «the damage inflicted on Syrian society is already irreparable». Is it not simply too late to think of negotiating today?

The passage that you are quoting refers to the situation in Syria last Spring, when the possibility was still being mooted of a long-term reformist path led by President Bashar al-Assad. We stated that on account of the violence this was no longer readily achievable, and today still less so, given the radicalisation of the conflict. There has now been a stiffening on the opposing sides. Today the democratisation of the country would involve a negotiation between the protagonists in the armed conflict and therefore it requires effective mediation, especially if we take account of the fact that Syria's domestic difficulties are not separable from regional tensions. The responsibility and the task of the presidency remains great, since it is called to create the conditions for a gradual transfer of powers away from the old one-party system to whatever fully democratic one the nation chooses.

It would not in fact be Syria's first experience of pluralism. There was an episode of it in the Fifties, and it was a very unstable period, ending only with the advent in power of the Ba'ath Party. I do not believe that we can draw a parallel with that period. At the time Syria did not have a clear idea of which camp to join and it was oscillating between the Western democracies and the USSR, until it opted for a one-party regime. Moreover, at the time, the Muslim Brotherhood had not developed a culture of democratic thinking, while today things are different.

You pointed out earlier that at present neither of the two parties has the wherewithal to defeat the other. So do we have to wait until one of them reaches a point of exhaustion?

The two sides will not succumb to exhaustion, because today Syria is the theatre of a vast regional conflict. Here we can see being played out the tensions between the US and Russia, Turkey and Iran, Sunnis and Shiites, the secular conception of the state and a

religious vision of society, and, on the domestic level, we are seeing the emergence of specific geographical identities which up to now had not found any adequate expression... All this means that the potential for nurturing conflict is virtually infinite. But the novelty does not lie there. It lies in the desire for emancipation on the part of the young, which is an immense new fact, an element of disequilibrium in the traditional conflictual equilibria.

What are you in your monastery doing?

Throughout the difficult months we have been passing through, we have continually been seeking where our duty lies. Our monastic condition stretches us like a bowstring between the eschatological perspective that counsels us to pray more and talk less, involving ourselves in the spiritual growth of persons, and the incarnation in history that calls us to have the courage - even assuming the relativity of our positions - to identify perspectives for "liberation" in the concrete context. We have drawn up documents and put them out on the net in various languages; we have done an eight-day fast for reconciliation which had a not insignificant impact in the milieu of the more progressive young people; we continue to offer hospitality to persons who are looking to meet one another and find in the monastery a place for dialogue and spiritual development in relation to this tragic time. We are also setting up production of a good-quality cheese so as to be less dependent on international charity... Above all we live daily the anguish of this country, seeking to transform that anguish into solidarity and hope.

I would like to emphasise a positive sign: a few days ago, as I mentioned at the start, the government began to allow a wider and less restricted access to foreign journalists. It is a crucial fact and it changes our situation as well. Press freedom represents a precondition for reconciliation through negotiation. The choice of the state, if confirmed, might prevent a dramatic prolongation of the war. Freedom of information reduces the number of people killed.

Al-Jazeera is regarded by many in the West as an informed source on events in Syria. How do you view it?

It is a party-run television channel. Its action helped spark off the revolutionary movements of last year, and that needs to be recognised as a simple fact. It has played an extraordinary part in the breaking of the monopoly of information held by totalitarian governments and it is a factor for change. However, with regard to Syria, it has chosen the military option; it fights against the regime in a partisan way and so its news bulletins show a corresponding lack of objectivity. We witness a televised civil war even before the one on the ground. We see under our eyes a fight between the TV channels which sets realities like al-Jazeera against the media controlled by the establishment, which themselves are skilled at defending their cause. I am convinced that guaranteeing a generalised press freedom would make it easier for sound reasoning to get a hearing and would consequently be an aid to the restoration of peace.

You refer to a widespread desire for democracy and participation in civil society, but where do you see that? How is it expressed?

As said, not actually in the media, where the most disparate conspiracy theories are in circulation. There is talk of a broad entente involving the US, Israel, al-Qaeda, Salafites, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Arab League, aiming at destroying the last Arab state that has not yet capitulated to the Zionist project and has not abandoned the struggle with

imperialism ... Discussion is obviously difficult on this level. And yet I can see civil society emerging in everyday life, I can see it in the love for their country displayed by all those who are ready to pay with their lives. I observe an extraordinary civil and moral maturation in the young who are committed to change.

The big difficulty is that really quite cultured and socially sophisticated sectors in society, and even church circles, allow themselves to fall into an extremist radical logic expressed in remarks like: “We’ll accept anything but letting the Muslim Brotherhood get hold of the state!”. Indeed some embrace genocidal ways of thinking according to which, if to save the country millions have to be killed, then we have to put up with it. Such a radicalisation of language creates a spiral of violence with no way out. I have no illusions nor do I despair. The violent folk of today and their children are called to become the citizens of tomorrow. Of course it is the duty of everyone everywhere, and a fortiori of those on the Mediterranean and the Italians, to work here and now to avoid the worst.

How important has the role of the new media been?

I would say that it has been fundamental. Without the new media the logic of repression would have been able to operate unhindered. There would have been no Arab Spring, or at least it would have taken very different forms, “more classic”: concentration of the insurgents in one region and its gradual extension, as in the past in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Iraqi Kurdistan etc. Without the international watchfulness made possible by the new media, there would have been even worse massacres. Widespread repression becomes relatively impotent as a consequence of international pressure based on the use of the new media, as a consequence of civil maturation, especially on the part of the young - encouraged by the networks - and also as a consequence of the new religious militancy which is organised on the net.

How many weapons are there around in Syria today?

We would need to know how many weapons there were around already. In anticipation of difficult times everyone tends to get his weapons together at home. Having said that, the Lebanese frontier is full of holes, Iraq equally so (during the war against the Western allies the Syria-Iraq border was constantly being crossed by Sunni Islamist fighters ...), the smuggling trade with Turkey is flourishing, the deserts are difficult to patrol. Those who want to support the armed groups from outside are far from being few in number and they are already effective.

Forgive us for going back to this, but do you not think that it is unfortunately easier to arm the contending parties than to allow a space for dialogue to emerge?

Frankly, if war breaks out against Iran, things may happen very quickly here but they may also take a very tragic turn. I think we need to have serious negotiations with Iran and allow it to have the status of a nuclear power on certain conditions, to create an equilibrium of deterrence according to the logic of the Cold War, but in a much more concerted and limited way. India, Pakistan, and Israel are already nuclear powers. In any case only a generalised nuclear global disarmament, guaranteed by a real global authority, would make Iranian aspirations unjustifiable. Let us go and dialogue with Iran and commit ourselves to making Syria a place of encounter and agreement between Sunnis and Shiites. This bitter inter-community confrontation is developing across all of the region: in Bahrain, in Yemen, in Saudi Arabia, in Lebanon, etc. So let us try to find a better “grammar” than the fatalistic mode.

What was the starting-point for these revolutions? Why precisely in 2011?

In the case of the three North-African countries, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, people seem to have found it unendurable that power was being passed from father to son, and that seems to have signalled the destiny of those dictatorships. People are no longer prepared to put up with the idea of being treated as someone's private property, of being treated as someone's inheritance. The opposition was already very strong. Then the unendurableness of the present was aggravated by the economic crisis, and I would add that there was a real and true maturation of the young; this development had long been furthered by Europe (among other influences) through institutions like the Euro-Mediterranean Anna Lindh Foundation and the various forms of international development cooperation. So things came to a breaking-point after the Egyptians had for years been shouting in the streets "kifâya", the slogan of the pre-revolution: Enough is enough!

Father Paolo, what role can Italy play?

Now that Berlusconi has gone, Rome can aspire to play a significant role again, and so it would be good if moves could be made at once to set up a negotiating table for the warring parties on the ground and also for the warring parties located outside Syria. I hope that the Minister for International Cooperation Andrea Riccardi, who loves this country, can put forward some really effective proposals. At the same time, the Church in Italy can have its say too and support the non-violent resolution of regional conflicts, it can encourage the creation of a space for negotiation and promote international mediation. I also expect the Church in Italy to commit to the creation of nonviolent interreligious volunteer contingents of "companions" of peace.



*Paolo Dall'Oglio (Rome, 1954), graduated in Naples in Arabic and theology at the Gregorian University, with a thesis on *La speranza nell'Islam*, and was ordained priest in 1984 in Damascus with Syriac rite. In 1991 he reopened the Monastery of Saint Moses the Abyssinian in Syria. He is the author of many publications on spirituality and dialogue. The monastery of Mâr Mûsa is dedicated in particular to hospitality and to Islamic-Christian dialogue.*