



ASIA/SYRIA - The turbulent context of Raqqa and the mission of Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio

Raqqa (Agenzia Fides) – This silence regarding the fate of the Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, who disappeared about a month ago in the area of Raqqa, generates fear and concern in the Christian community and in Syrian society. As reported to Fides Agency, the youth of the "Free Youth Committee" in Raqqa, linked to the Syrian opposition, continue the research, in a very tense situation.

The Jesuit had gone to Raqqa at the end of July, coming from the border of Tell Abiad, with the help of Kurdish fighters. His purpose, according to local sources, was to try to smooth out the contrasts between Kurdish and Arab fighters and rebuild a certain unity within the Syrian opposition. A delicate mission and for some too difficult.

The conquest of Raqqa by the forces of opposition to the regime, which took place in March 2013, had been accomplished thanks to a local sheik, Mouhammad Faycal al Houeidi, leader of the "Avadilat" tribe, a great Arab tribe present in Raqqa with strong links with the Saudi Kingdom. The sheikh was a member of Parliament who managed to make Raqqa "the first independent city of the Syrian revolution". The conquest of the city by the Free Syrian Army, FSA took place, however, thanks to the contribution of the group "Jabhat al-Nusra Front", later renamed "Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham" ("Islamic State of Iraq and Syria"). Fr. Paolo arrived in the city in a very intricate situation, in which there were at least three forces in open conflict with each other. And he tried, refer the young people, "to establish a line of communication with the Islamist militia".

Between 29 July and 5 August, the day of his disappearance, violent clashes took place in Raqqa causing deaths and injuries among the guerrillas of the FSA and members of Islamist groups, a sign of strong tensions between anti-regime factions.

The "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" had agreed to talk with Fr. Paolo. But the basic idea, that of establishing an Islamic state, remains an area of rift between the Islamists and the FSA. The last time Fr. Paolo was seen officially was when he participated in a banquet with the sheikh of the Avadilat tribe, Mouhammad Faycal Al Houeidi, to talk about these issues and to try to establish some form of negotiation. In previous days, however, the Jesuit had participated in a demonstration of the youth of the FSA in which he praised the revolution and its ideals. For this reason he may have been watched by the same Islamist factions (because he is seen as "an ally of the FSA").

According to some, it seems he has been taken to a place called Akarsheh, 20 km from Raqqa. "We know with certainty that Fr. Paolo is in serious danger", say the young people of Raqqa. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 26/08/2013)