



ASIA/SYRIA - A parish priest: "The exodus of civil Christians from Qara, invaded by foreign jihadists"

Damascus (Agenzia Fides) - Christian and non-Christian villages, in the north of Damascus, are targeted by foreign jihadist armed groups, bringing only death and destruction. This is what was stated by Fr. George Louis, a Greek - Catholic parish priest of the Church of San Michele in Qara, which was ravaged and burned. The priest explains: "Maalula, Sednaya, Sadad, then Qara and Deir Atieh, now Nebek: the armed jihadist apply the same model: they target a village, invade it, kill, burn and devastate. For Christians or non-Christians, life is always more difficult. The militia act outside the control of our foreign Syrian compatriots of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who instead are respectful towards everyone, and do not want to raze the entire country".

Fr. Louis reports what happened in Qara between 16 and 20 November. For months, the village lived in a particular "status quo", in a regime of "semi-autonomy", with the tacit agreement between the FSA and the Syrian army. There was no conflict although the town was under the control of the FSA. The state meanwhile continued to supply electricity, and water services to the population.

When made things worse, says Fr. George, is when "on November 16, more than 3,000 jihadists entered the village, turning it into a battlefield.

Soldiers of the FSA, in minority, withdrew. People began to flee. About 6,000 people fled immediately towards the city and neighboring villages". But the Christian community of Qara, who gathered in the historic center, did not want to move. The priest told Fides: "Rocket attacks against the homes and on the streets began. With nearly 35 Christian families, we took refuge in the church to pray. The gate of the church was hit. Armed fighters entered with covered face, long hair, not Syrians, it was not clear what nationality they belonged to. They said: we want to kill you all, Christian dogs. And we will burn this idolatrous place". At that point, one of the parishioners, Emile speaking in Arabic, began boldly to negotiate with the leader of the group, citing verses from the Koran, saying that Islam respects Christians and other minorities. "The man replied that he would ask his boss to decide our fate and leads his men out of the building", says Fr. George. Meanwhile, the priest and the faithful leave the church, and all flee in the alleys of the old town. They go on the motorway and join other refugees, reaching the village of Der Atieh. Here they receive warm hospitality from the local Christians of other denominations: the priest and the Greek - Orthodox faithful welcome them with great generosity. Meanwhile, even Der Atieh ends up in the crosshairs of jihadists (see Fides 25/11/2013). The militiamen begin a "manhunt" and take Christians hostage.

"We hid in the basement for 4 days and 4 nights, without food, water, electricity", says Fr. Louis. "After a night of prayer, we decided to escape. We reached Sadad, another martyred city (see Fides 31/10/2013). Archbishop Selwanos Boutros Alneme and the faithful who returned to the city welcomed us with love and kindness".

Meanwhile, the situation is dramatic in Qara. After days of fighting, there is rubble everywhere. Many homes and roads were mined with explosives. The Greek Catholic church of St. Michael was devastated and burned. Other Catholic Orthodox churches in Der Athie suffered the same fate as well as some mosques: is a warning to moderate Muslims.

Fr. George explains: "These are extremist foreign fighters, who want to sow hatred and sectarian violence, wanton destruction, no respect for civilians. I am not in the FSA. We do nothing but pray. In this exodus, we tried the beautiful experience of solidarity and affection between Catholic and Orthodox Christians". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 28/11/2013)