

Jacques Mourad, priest who survived ISIS: "My interfaith work saved my life"

by [Rosie Scammell](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue

Jacques Mourad, a Syriac Catholic priest who survived being held hostage for months by militants from the self-described Islamic State, is certain that his interfaith work saved his life.

Mourad was kidnapped in May from the Mar Moussa monastery along with a volunteer, taken to ISIS's de facto capital in Raqqa, and held in a bathroom.

"During these 84 days that I was a prisoner in this bathroom in Raqqa, it could be said that it was one of the most difficult experiences that a person can go through: that of losing one's liberty," Mourad said, speaking through an interpreter to members of Rome's Foreign Press Association on December 10, the first time he spoke publicly in detail about his ordeal. "For me it was also a very intense experience, from the spiritual point of view."

While the priest sought to sustain himself through prayer, he acknowledged there were moments close to despair, such as when extremists threatened him with beheading if he did not renounce Christianity. Mourad said he believes his reputation at the monastery, where he fostered interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims, saved his life.

"I'm convinced I'm alive also thanks to this mission," he said. "The work we did contributed to preventing Islamic State from killing me."

He recalled a moment in which he thought he was to be killed, when a man came and asked if he was Christian. Then the man surprised Mourad by greeting him: "That amazed me because normally the people [militants] don't shake Christians' hands or touch them, because they consider them impure. They don't even greet Muslims that don't think like them."

In August he and the volunteer kidnapped with him were driven to another location, where he encountered 250 Christians abducted from his Al-Qaryatayn parish.

"I saw a young boy from my parish," he said. "As soon as I turned I suddenly saw all the 250 kidnapped Christians—the children, old people, disabled, women—it was a very hard moment for me."

In September ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi struck a deal to return the Christians to their community if they agreed to pay a tax and live under ISIS rule. The other options, Mourad said, were to have ISIS kill the men and keep the women captive, to enslave them all, or to wait until ransoms were paid.

After they were released, Mourad and his parishioners were taken back to Al-Qaryatayn and began celebrating mass in secret. Despite returning to "a certain sense of a normal life," Mourad said he soon decided to escape because conditions were becoming unbearable.

"Life had become unsustainable," he said. "We didn't have electricity, there was no food, water—it was difficult because it was also very dangerous. At the same time I felt a responsibility towards the Christians."

A Muslim friend helped smuggle Mourad out of Al-Qaryatayn in October; Mourad declined to provide further details.

While other Christians have been able to flee the area, Mourad said eight of his parishioners have been killed. Though he is especially concerned about his parishioners, Mourad described all Syrians as victims of war.

"We are responsible for the whole Syrian population, not only Christians," he said.
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