

End of the affair
By The Economist
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I met Father Paolo Dall'Oglio in the Jesuit residence in Beirut two days after he left Syria. For the past 30 years Syria has been home to this Italian Jesuit. He says he feels "solidarity with the youth of the uprising, those who are suffering, killed and tortured for trying to change society". It is this outspokenness on their behalf that caused the regime of President Bashar Assad to expel him.

Since first coming to Syria to study Arabic in the 1980s—another dark period for the country, when the regime cracked down on dissent following a revolt led by the Muslim Brotherhood—Father Paolo has become well known among Syrians for his work to improve understanding between Muslims, who make up the vast bulk of Syria's mosaic society, and Christians. He refurbished a 1,000-year old monastery in Nebek, north of Damascus, which he opened to all faiths, as well as those of none. Christians and Muslims prayed and talked together, and gathered for each other's festivals. The regime saw this as a threat and withdrew permission for his activities before the uprising. Father Paolo subsequently turned the monastery into a place for fearful Syrians to come and for families to mourn relatives lost to a conflict that has claimed some 12,000 lives.

Syrians have long boasted of harmony between the sects, a rare thing in a region riddled by religious conflict. But sectarianism has taken a hold in some areas of the country, in part because Syria's Baathist regime has exploited minorities, drawing them into the army and security forces. Most of the protesters come from the Sunni majority, while the regime's forces are predominantly drawn from the Alawite sect from which the Assad clan comes.

Christians, who make up around 10% of the population, have been split by the uprising. Some have sided with the regime and some with the opposition, while the fearful majority have remained on the fence. This has caused splits in some mixed communities. Just before leaving, Father Paolo brokered the release of a Christian held in Qusayr, a town close to the mixed city of Homs where the violence has been most fierce. "Those who had taken them—and they were not mainstream members of the opposition—saw the church in full alliance with the regime. The church is endangering Christians," he says. "But I was comforted by the fact they said they were not against Christians but against those who had collaborated with the regime."

Father Paolo hopes that the violence can be stemmed so the civil war doesn't eclipse an uprising that is calling for a plural, democratic country. "I see an Islamic bent in the armed opposition," he says. "We need not be afraid of Islamists but the less democratic ones will come to the fore as the war continues."

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