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Patriarch of Antioch issues statement on sad anniversary of Aleppo hierarchs' abduction by Islamist militants



Today, April 22, marks the sad seven-year anniversary since the abduction of Metropolitan Paul Yazigi, of the Patriarchate of Antioch's Archdiocese of Aleppo, and Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo Yohanna Ibrahim.

Both hierarchs were abducted by Islamist militants while traveling by car to negotiate the release of two other kidnapped priests. No confirmed reports of their

fate has emerged since then.

In a statement issued on Wednesday, the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, His Beatitude John X, stressed, in part, that:

“… From the moment of the kidnapping to this day…2,557 days have passed since, and we have never spared the least effort to bring this cause to a happy ending, and ultimately to the most desired release of the two bishops, when we shall have them among us once more.

“We pray today for our two bishop brothers and for every kidnapped person, bearing in mind that we will spare no effort to advocate for this cause and bring it to the desired outcome, much awaited by every Christian heart, every descendant of the Levant, and every well-intentioned person. Saying this, we confirm that the path of the Cross ended by a dawn of Resurrection.”

A video is posted today on the pages of the *Orthodoxia News Agency* showing Bishop Yazigi’s last interview with the online magazine *Pemptousia*, during his pilgrimage to Mount Athos and shortly before his abduction.

Read the full statement down below:

> Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East
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> Seven Years Since the Kidnapping of the Bishops of Aleppo
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> Beloved Brethren and Spiritual Children
> Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!
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> Brothers, we address you with the Pascha greeting, sharing your prayers in your home corners and bending with you the knees of the heart before Christ, who was crucified for our sake, who resurrected from the dead and made us resurrect by His divine Light, wiping away from souls the dust of bitter times and the ashes of desolation and despair.
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> However, the radiance of Pascha stands incomplete due to the sorrowful case of our two brothers, the Bishops of Aleppo, Metropolitans Paul Yazigi and Youhanna Ibrahim, kidnapped since April 22, 2013. Today, we address you heart to heart and we address the whole world as well, to

say that the Christians of this East, along with its other groups, are still paying with their lives and their fate the taxes to terrorism and violence: displacement, kidnapping, murder, and many a tribulation. Despite all this, they remain faithful to their pledge of love for Jesus Christ, as the Lord Who redeemed them on the Cross and implanted them in this East two thousand years ago, to carry out the joy of his Gospel.

From the moment of the kidnapping to this day, the thousands of attempts and tons of efforts to obtain any information on the fate of the two bishops have remained fruitless. All this amid stacks of data, clues, analyses and inquiries that often complicate and entangle perspectives.
2557 days have passed since, and we have never spared the least effort to bring this cause to a happy ending, and ultimately to the most desired release of the two bishops, when we shall have them among us once more. We have not spared any local, regional, or even international doors to knock, asking governments, organizations, political influences and powerful personalities to enlist this case on the multiple global platforms. This, among so many other efforts. We extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who provided help and promises, offering their efforts and contributions on the humanitarian, media, diplomatic, security or political levels, whether on the official or personal levels. The role of these people shed a light of hope in the black sorrowful night, while the negligence and silence of the international community had overwhelmed this significant humanitarian and crucial cause, undermining any attempt to find solutions.

Today, having set before our eyes the image of the two bishops, our brothers who are in constant prayer for all of us, we ask all the faithful, wherever they are, to pray for them this particular week. We ask them to prayer for the two bishops and for every kidnapped, missing, and displaced person, for any person who was trapped in dire situation, but then found in the Cross of Christ hope and consolation, and was strengthened by His glorious and victorious Resurrection.

The human being in this East is of no lesser value than other humans. This present pandemic that has been ravaging the globe- may God relive us from it-, is a clear proof that, in all circumstances, above any considerations of race, religion, or nation, we are all brothers in humanity, all on the same boat in this East and the whole world.

If only humans could be aware of this. If only the politicians and those who deal with world affairs could realize that human beings are made of the same nature and share the same dignity, regardless of their differences in country, homeland, language, civilization and religion. Despite its bitterness, the epidemic came to say that we share a common existence and one human brotherhood in this wide world. If only this was crystal clear to the eyes of the heart and the perception of those who violate their brother's dignity, unaware that this derision will be turned against them and that their own dignity will be demeaned in the end. First and foremost, we all ought to stand for the true human dignity; we must be aware that our fellow human being's dignity, life and existence, are part of our own heart, existence and being.

As Christians of the Levant, we are deeply rooted since the times of old. Our roots will never wither. Out of these roots stems the great oasis that is the Christian Antiochian presence in the East and in all the world, an oasis flourishing and fragrant with the Christian witness to the Most Glorified Lord Jesus Christ and with love for the neighbor from all walks of life. History has been teaching us all the way that we do not need protection from anyone, neither do we seek anyone's protection. We are an original component of this East with all its meanders and irradiations. Considering our role, the logic of minority versus majority falls apart and is replaced by the logic of meeting and dialogue as well as the pioneer role lead by Christians and others. We are not and will never be a card to be played by anyone. We are rather a message of existence and authenticity, a bridge of communication and encounter between the East and the West, between Christianity and other religions.

We pray today for our two bishop brothers and for every kidnapped person, bearing in mind that we will spare no effort to advocate for this cause and bring it to the desired outcome, much awaited by every Christian heart, every descendant of the Levant, and every well-intentioned person. Saying this, we confirm that the path of the Cross ended by a dawn of Resurrection.

Today we pray to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Resurrection and the Master of Life, may He roll the tombstone by His Cross and delight our eyes with the Light of the Resurrection. We pray for the peace of the world suffering from the epidemic. We pray for this East in all its

countries, which seeks the dawn of Resurrection from the Golgotha of the Cross. We pray for our children in Aleppo, to whom we particularly extend the peace of Pascha, asking the Lord of the Resurrection to revive hope in their hearts and ours.

With you, brothers, our souls bow in prayer, our hearts are lit as oil lamps in the corners of our homes before the Lord Christ Who is risen from the tomb. We pray for world peace and for the return of all the kidnapped, while we illuminate our hearts and souls with Paschal hope, singing:

“Christ is risen from the dead trampling down death by death and to those in the tomb He gave life”.

Damascus, April 22, 2020

His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East and Supreme Head of the Universal Syriac Orthodox Church

His Beatitude John X
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East of the Greek Orthodox Church