

Religious leaders push for kidnapped bishops' release

by [Michele Chabin](#)

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JERUSALEM (RNS) Religious leaders from around the world have stepped up their pleas for the safe return of two Syrian bishops who were kidnapped April 22 by armed men as they were driving near the war-torn city of Aleppo.

The kidnapers, who have not been identified, abducted Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Boulos Yazigi and Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Youhanna Ibrahim, both of Aleppo, while they were undertaking a "humanitarian mission" to help Syria's Christian minority, according to Syrian Christian expatriates in the U.S.

The bishops' Syrian Orthodox driver was killed in the attack.

Since 2011, more than 70,000 Syrians have died in fighting in the bloody civil war between forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Assad and rebels seeking to oust Assad's strong-arm regime.

In a statement over the weekend, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation called for the bishops' "immediate and unconditional" release.

Such acts, it said, "contradict the principles of true Islam and the (high) status held for Christian clergymen in Islam."

The OIC's statement followed earlier pleas by the Greek, Syrian and Melkite churches, as well as Pope Francis, who asked that the bishops "be returned quickly to their communities."

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the abductions and murder of the driver "weigh heavily on the hearts

of people of good will."

Dolan said the kidnapping of "two men of peace is a sign of the terrible violence that is destroying the fabric of Syrian society," and added that U.S. bishops "will continue to work through all channels" -- the Holy See, the diplomatic and international community -- to help secure the bishops' release and an end to the hostilities in Syria.

Monsignor Jean-Clement Jeanbart, the Greek Melkite bishop of Aleppo, told AsiaNews that the Catholic and Orthodox churches "are doing their best" to bring the bishops home, but did not elaborate. "At present, no one understands the reasons for this act and who is behind these criminals," he said.

Jeanbart said that fighting in Aleppo had intensified this week, and that one of the city's Christian neighborhoods was shelled by mortars that killed four people and destroyed several homes.

"The situation in the city is terrible; no one is safe, not even the Christians," who have remained outwardly neutral during the war, Jeanbart said.

Ibrahim's nephew, Jamil Diarbakerli, who represents the Assyrian Democratic Organization, told the World Watch Monitor watchdog group that the two bishops had chosen to remain in Syria, despite the dangers.

"The two bishops stayed and want their people to do the same -- not to leave the country, not to empty Syria of Christians," he said.