

Nine million bucks and no raid

By Enrico Piovesana

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“**T**hat house at 17 Zaitun Street in Baghdad had been vacant for at least two months. Monday night [June 7], at about 11, we heard noises. I live at 13 Zaitun Street, and I saw some cars stop in front of that house. Some people entered. It was dark, I couldn't see well. In a short while, they left, and everything was quiet.

“The next morning, at about 9.30, five American military vehicles arrived. They stopped in front of that house. Some guys in civilian clothes and dark glasses got off. They certainly were American mukhabarat. [Mukhabarat is Arabic for secret service.] They opened the door of the house, they did not kick it in, as if it had been left unlocked, and left right away with four men, who we later found out were the three Italian hostages and the Polish one.

“They put them in a white van and they all left. The entire job was done with the greatest calm. Not one shot was fired. In the house there was no one, apparently, except the hostages. There was no raid, as was reported three hours later. Your government has paid a ransom: nine million dollars. Everyone here knows it. That's enough, it's not safe to talk on the phone.”

The witness' name is Mr. Fahad. He was reached on the phone by Peace Reporter. Together with two of his neighbors, Mr. Mohammed and Mr. Ibrahim, he saw the liberation of the kidnapped Italian hostages Agliana, Cupertino, and Stefio with his own eyes. Mr. Fahad is speaking from his home in Abu Ghraib, a western suburb of Baghdad, where the anonymous prison – widely known for the torture scandal – stands.

His version is confirmed by another Iraqi source, near to the political organization of the guerrillas, also contacted by Peace Reporter. This source preferred to remain anonymous, when he gave his version of the events. This source begins naming Salih Mutlak. “Mutlak, he says, is a wealthy Iraqi businessman who made his fortune in financial speculation and smuggling during the years of the embargo. Many call him a mafioso. He is the key to the liberation of the three Italian hostages, together with Abdel Salam Kubaysi, teacher at

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Baghdad University, who became popular on international television networks for his role in the ransom release of the Japanese hostages.

According to that source, the Italian government negotiated for weeks in order to obtain the release of Agliana, Cupertino, and Steffio, were detained on April 12 together with Quattrocchi, who was killed on April 14. In his pocket he had a weapon permit signed by the British military and a Coalition pass.

The negotiations between our [Italian] secret service, and the intermediaries began soon after those tragic days, and on April 20, news began to leak out about the agreement with the Italian government for the payment of a nine million dollar ransom.

On April 22, the Italian governor of Nassiriya, Barbara Contini, observed that it would not be surprising if the government were to pay a ransom. She said, "That's the way it's always been done." Afterwards, she denied the statement, and [Italian] Foreign Minister Frattini called such reports "unfounded rumors." On the same day, a reliable source from the Italian secret service was quoted by ANSA, the Italian news agency, as saying that "The negotiations have been going on for days. We did what we had to do."

At that point, SISMI [the Italian secret service] protested against the leaks, which risked sabotaging the negotiations, and the [Italian] government imposed silence on all media.

According to our source, the negotiations continued, and Salih Mutlak flew to Rome, "on a business trip." He remained in the Italian capital for about three weeks, and returned to Baghdad at the end of May with a suitcase containing five million dollars. The remainder of the nine million dollar ransom was to be delivered after the hostages were released.

On Sunday, June 6, Vatican representatives in Iraq said they were certain that the liberation of the three was only hours away.

The three Italians were left in a house in Abu Ghraib and their location was communicated to the Italian secret service. The plan was to make it appear like a military raid, but it didn't work out.