

Paolo Dall'Oglio, his ISIS kidnapping and the decade long search for answers

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5/5

On 29th July 2013, Friedrich 'Fritz' Bokern sat at a riverside restaurant in northern Lebanon, having officially opened 'Relief and Reconciliation's (R&R) first 'Peace Centre' in the nearby village of Bqerzala earlier that day. This marked the beginning of a new chapter, one that would serve thousands of Lebanese and Syrian children over the next decade.

It then became another anniversary for Fritz. Whilst sitting at this restaurant he received a call, informing him that his friend and co-founder, Paolo Dall'Oglio, had not returned from a meeting with Islamic State in Syria. Ten years on, and there is still no confirmation on Paolo's current whereabouts or whether he is alive. Since his kidnapping, 'Father Paolo' has remained an integral aspect of R&R's work and values.

Paolo's values

"He is one of the most important figures in my life... he changed a lot for me," recalls Fritz as he explains how the two of them worked together to create a humanitarian project that would become Relief and Reconciliation.

The key focus of R&R's work centres on the principle of interfaith dialogue and understanding, a mission which was formed through Fritz's research into conflict resolution and Paolo's own understanding and love for Syria.

Dall'Oglio first moved to Syria in the 1980s as a Jesuit priest, restoring a 6th century monastery north of Damascus, Deir Mar Musa el-Habashi. "He made it a place of encounter, with monks and nuns from all denominations but also dedicated to the love of Islam," explains Mr Bokern.



Paolo Dall'Oglio at Deir Mar Musa el-Habashi in the 1980s. The monastery had previously been abandoned for over 150 years before he restored it. Image credit: Relief and Reconciliation

He continues: "Paolo was somebody who knew Syria better than anyone else, The Pope even called him a Catholic Muslim."

In March 2011, the Arab Spring arrived in Syria, with hundreds of thousands taking to the streets to protest long-standing oppression by the Assad government. In response, the government would go on to kill, arrest and torture thousands of demonstrators. By the end of the year, the civil war had begun, as many officials defected and organised into the Free Syrian Army.

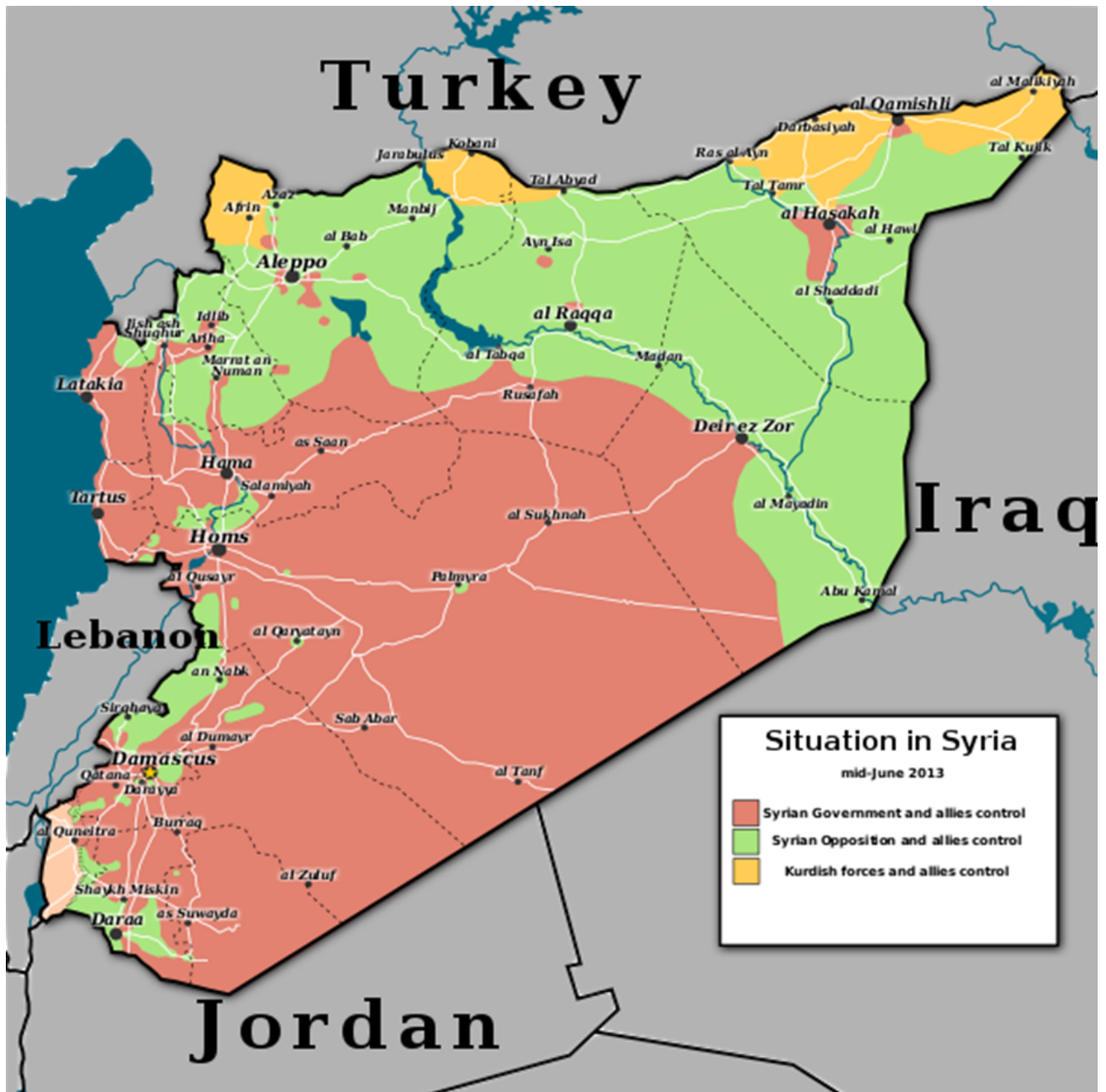
Fritz Bokern explains how this became a turning point for Paolo, who began to speak out against the aggressive government crackdown and the war crimes that followed. "He could not stand by and watch, he was one of the only prominent people in the Church to openly criticise the Assad government," he says.

Disappearance

Because of this stance, Dall'Oglio was exiled by the Syrian government in 2012. It was at this time that Fritz began plans with Paolo to create a humanitarian organisation with these values in mind.

"He is a major figure of the revolution; he is one of the most dangerous figures for the Syrian government because he credibly denounced their narrative," says Mr Bokern. It was this very reputation that led to his kidnapping.

Posing as a threat to the Assad narrative of the civil war, Paolo's denouncements also proved an issue for Islamic State. His message stood against the religious division that IS strived for as they fought to establish control in Syria, starting in Raqqa and the Syria-Iraq border.



Rebel, Kurdish and government territory in Syria on the eve of ISIS' rapid expansion into Syria and neighbouring Iraq. Image credit: Rr016

A few days prior to the 29th July, Paolo headed to Raqqa, hoping to meet with representatives of Islamic State to try and negotiate the release of Syrian Christians and activists. This meeting was finally organised, and Paolo entered IS headquarters. He has not been seen again since. After his kidnapping, numerous claims were made stating that Paolo had been executed, whilst others claimed that he was still alive.

Remembrance

Today, Relief and Reconciliation continues to remember Father Paolo's values, mission, and his contribution to the humanitarian project that has taken place in Lebanon over the last decade. This remembrance began with a nine-day social media campaign building up to the 29th July, consisting of prayers and quotes of Father Paolo.

Come the 10-year anniversary, and a large remembrance event was held in the heart of Beirut at Le Monnot Theatre. Musical performances from Lebanese artist Camille Feghali were layered with readings from some of

Father Paolo's work, followed by a mass and a candle lighting ceremony outside the Jesuit St. Joseph Church.



Young Lebanese students from across Akkar to commemorate Father Paolo at the event on 29th July earlier this year. Image credit: Callum Sutherland

Camille spoke about why he chose to perform at the event. "My values really align with him. Even in music, I was born Christian, but I'm very interested in Muslim hymns.

"For me, we're all part of the same culture. We have to put our differences aside. If we combine our cultures together, it is so rich," Camille continues.

This event has taken place on every anniversary since 2013, but this year held even more importance. Not only was this the 10-year mark, but R&R have also used it as an opportunity to ask questions on Paolo's status.

Looking for answers

Six years ago, Fritz Bokern was told that there were witnesses ready to testify that they had proof of life, as well as evidence that negotiations took place for Paolo's return.

"Through some Syrian friends, I found that there were negotiations for his release between Islamic State and the Italian government. Firstly, they had proof of life as late as 2014. The government never told the family about this.

“I went to Rome to meet his brother, you cannot imagine the shock on his face when I told him,” Fritz remembers.



Father Paolo was fluent in a number of Arabic dialects and knew most of the Quran by heart. He is well known for his love for both Islam and Christianity. Image credit: Relief and Reconciliation

According to intermediaries, negotiations for Paolo’s release went well, with the amount of money, how it would be transferred, and the date all being agreed upon. However, two days before the handover, they were told by the Italian ambassador to Turkey to cancel everything.

“Do not ask questions, close the dossier and abort the mission. They [intermediaries] found this very unusual. It went well and everything was in place. Why did they cancel?” asks Fritz.

With this evidence from first hand witnesses, it was decided that the 10-year anniversary was the prime opportunity to publish a petition, asking the Italian government important questions regarding Paolo’s case.

“I don’t know for sure if Paolo is still alive. After 10 years, what are the chances? 90% chance he is dead, but this 10%? It’s worth fighting for because he was a friend, a mentor, a true inspiration for many,” says Fritz.

Specifically, the petition asks the government to reopen their file into Paolo’s kidnapping, release information about these negotiations and address the possibility that he was traded to the Syrian government in 2019 after the battle of Baghuz-Fawqani. This battle ultimately signalled the end of a solid IS presence in the Middle East.

The Dall’Oglio family has asked for this already, with no response. Mr Bokern firmly believes that, whilst Paolo’s fate may have already been sealed, answers still need to be provided about why these negotiations

were closed and kept confidential.

“I hope it [the petition] will create momentum and that these ten years will be a milestone for pursuing his mission. Something is rotten and something needs to get out,” he insists.