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OBITUARY

Vittorio Arrigoni: A hero for Palestine

Saturday 23 April 2011, by [DURKAY Laura](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2011).

Laura Durkay pays tribute to the life of an International Solidarity Movement activist.

PALESTINIANS AND international solidarity activists around the world reacted with shock and sorrow last week as the news spread that 36-year-old Italian activist Vittorio Arrigoni, a long-time volunteer with the International Solidarity Movement in Palestine, had been kidnapped and killed in Gaza, apparently by members of a fringe Islamist group.

Reports that Vik, as he was known to his friends and colleagues, had been kidnapped began circulating last Thursday afternoon, after a video surfaced online showing him bloodied and blindfolded. The makers of the video claimed to be members of a Salafi extremist group, a branch of political Islam usually linked to al-Qaeda. They threatened to execute Vik by 5 p.m. on Friday if the Hamas government did not release recently arrested members of their group.

But well before the Friday deadline, tips from Gaza City residents led Palestinian police to an abandoned apartment where Vik's body was discovered.

Vik was a well-known and beloved member of the international solidarity community, and to many Gaza residents, he had become an honorary Palestinian. Palestinians in Gaza and around the world reacted with universal outrage and grief at his murder. Memorial Facebook pages have been flooded with tributes to Vik and anger at his killers. Khaleel Shaheen, a personal friend of Vik's at the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, called Vik "a hero of Palestine." Gaza residents held a symbolic martyr's funeral for Vik on Friday, and Gaza City's Unity Street has been renamed in his honor.

The weekly protests in the West Bank villages of Bil'in and Al Masara were dedicated to Vik's memory, and memorial events were planned in Ramallah and Nablus. The Hamas government, Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Islamic Jihad—together representing almost the entire spectrum of Palestinian politics, including armed resistance—have all released statement condemning the killing.

In a move reflecting the new climate in the Middle East, even Egypt's new government led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces felt the need to issue a statement assuring Vik's family members safe and speedy passage through the normally Kafkaesque Rafah crossing in order to retrieve his body.

VIK'S DEATH is a painful loss for the global Palestine solidarity movement. Anyone who traveled to Gaza for any length of time in the past three years soon got to know Vik, with his ubiquitous pipe, infectious smile and tattoos of the word "resistance" in Arabic on his arm.

I met Vik briefly when I traveled to Gaza in 2009. At a meeting with ISM volunteers working in Gaza, he showed us terrifying footage of Israeli naval gunboats firing high-intensity water cannons and live ammunition at small, unarmed fishing boats off the coast of Gaza. ISM volunteers were accompanying these fishermen, who were simply trying to make a living—in the hope that an international presence would discourage violence from the Israeli army.

In November 2008, Vik and several other internationals were abducted from one of these boats by the Israeli military and deported, but Vik found a way back to Gaza only a few weeks later on a blockade-busting Free Gaza Movement boat—the last one to successfully reach Gaza to date.

Vik had participated in nonviolent direct action in Palestine for many years and had survived numerous encounters with the Israeli army. In 2008, he helped organize the maiden voyage of the Free Gaza Movement, successfully running the Israeli naval blockade in a tiny boat that became the first foreign vessel to dock in Gaza's port since 1967. He was part of a small team that reestablished the International Solidarity Movement presence in Gaza after a five-year absence following the murders of ISM volunteers Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall by the Israeli army in 2003.

When Israel began Operation Cast Lead, its barbaric war on Gaza in the winter of 2008-09, Vik was among a handful of internationals who refused to leave Gaza. Throughout the war, he and other internationals repeatedly braved the front lines to document Israeli war crimes and attempt to protect medical workers and civilians. He later wrote a book about his experiences during the war called *Gaza: Stay Human*.

Vik's murder is particularly shocking since violence against internationals is extremely rare in Gaza. There have been no kidnappings of internationals in Gaza since Hamas took control of the Strip in 2007, and there has never been a killing of an international solidarity activist by Palestinians anywhere in Palestine.

Questions continue to swirl concerning the motivations and identity of his killers, especially after the best-known Salafi group in Gaza denied responsibility for the crime. Whatever the intentions of his killers—and whoever those killers might be—the murder of a solidarity activist who risked his life to support the Palestinians can only serve the interests of the Israeli occupation. Already, the *New York Times* and other U.S. media outlets are suggesting that Vik's death should deter solidarity activists.

But if anyone thought that this brutal crime would discourage internationals from coming to Palestine, the reverse has already proven to be true.

On Friday, the European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza announced that the upcoming Freedom Flotilla II, set to sail at the end of May, would be named in Vik's honor. And on Saturday, Vik's mother Agidea Prata declared that she would be sailing to Gaza with the Flotilla. "I want to see Gaza, that my son loved and sacrificed for," Prata told Italian news sources. "I want to meet the good people living there that my son Vik always talked about."

One of the campaigns Vik was working on when he was killed was a renewed effort to protect fishermen being harassed in Gaza's own waters by the Israeli navy. On Wednesday, some of Vik's colleagues will launch a new international solidarity project, the Civil Peace Service Gaza, to continue that work.

Many people who knew Vik far better than I did have written moving tributes in his honor. But the continuation of international solidarity work in support of the Palestinians, the cause to which Vik dedicated his life, seems to be the most fitting memorial to someone who embodied many of the qualities that draw people to Palestine—immense bravery when confronting incredible violence and

an unwavering determination to stay human in the face of inhumanity.

P.S.

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<http://socialistworker.org/2011/04/18/hero-for-palestine>