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Palestinians rally to mourn kidnapped Italian activist murdered by extremists

Gaza braces for crackdown from Hamas authorities after hasty killing of Vittorio Arrigoni, 36

Conal Urquhart *in Jerusalem*

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Hamas is expected to launch a crackdown on Islamic extremists in Gaza after the murder of an Italian peace activist who was strangled shortly after being kidnapped.

Vittorio Arrigoni, 36, was killed on Thursday after being abducted in an apparent attempt to force Hamas to release the leader of the Tawheed and Jihad group, Sheikh Abu Walid-al-Maqdas, who was arrested last month. Tawheed and Jihad later claimed it was not responsible for the murder.

About 2,000 people attended a rally to honour Arrigoni yesterday. Reports suggested Hamas police found his body on a mattress in an empty Gaza City apartment. According to a witness interviewed by the New York Times, he had been strangled with a plastic cord. The kidnappers killed him 24 hours before a deadline they had set for the release of their leader and several other prisoners. Killing him so early suggests they feared they were about to be discovered. Two men are being held in connection with the murder.

Arrigoni, known to friends as Vik, lived apart from fellow volunteers in the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). News of his abduction was posted via a video on YouTube in which he appeared blindfolded with a bruised face while a man held his head by the hair. Accompanying Arabic text said: "The Italian hostage entered our land only to spread corruption." It described Italy as "the infidel state".

He was last seen at a Gaza City gym on Wednesday, from where he ordered food by phone but never went to pick it up.

Nathan Stuckey, a volunteer from the US, said Arrigoni spent most of his time working as a journalist but was involved in promoting the right of Gazan fishermen to work without hindrance from the Israeli navy. "At the moment he was particularly focused on the launch of our new boat, which we will use to monitor the navy's violations of the rights of the fishermen. He often said that he now felt more at home in Gaza than in Italy and he was strongly committed to the Palestinian cause," Stuckey said.

At the rally in honour of Arrigoni on Friday, Mahmoud Zahar, a Hamas leader, said the Italian and other foreign activists were "our friends" and the perpetrators would be punished. He indirectly accused Israel of engineering the killing to intimidate foreign

activists seeking to sail to Gaza to protest against a naval blockade of the territory. "Such an awful crime cannot take place without arrangements between all the parties concerned to keep the blockade imposed on Gaza," Zahar said.

While many view Hamas as a radical Islamist group, the responsibility of being in power has forced it to sacrifice ideology for a pragmatism that has alienated many of its supporters. Some have rejected Hamas's brand of nationalist Islam and embraced fundamentalist Salafi Islam, which aims to create a single Islamic commonwealth in place of nation states. Tawheed and Jihad means oneness of God and holy war or struggle.

Mkhamir Abusada, a professor of political science at An-Najah University in Gaza, said such groups began to emerge after Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. "Most of the members of the Salafi groups were previously members of Fatah or Hamas. They are dissatisfied with Hamas's failure to fight Israel and Islamise Gaza," he said. "They cannot compete with Hamas but they are a source of annoyance. The killing of Arrigoni attacks the credibility of Hamas as the source of stability and law and order of which they are so proud. Hamas will respond very harshly to ensure there is no repeat."

Palestinian communities usually regard foreigners as allies against Israel, but Salafi groups are less likely to distinguish between non-Muslims.

The Army of Islam split from the Popular Resistance Committee. It initially carried out operations with Hamas such as the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006. When relations between it and Hamas broke down, the Army began kidnapping foreigners, including two people from Fox TV in 2006 and the BBC's Alan Johnston in 2007. Johnston was released unharmed after four months.

Since then Hamas has worked hard to ensure the security of foreigners in Gaza. Many of the leaders of the Army of Islam, who were mostly from the Dogmush family, were killed or arrested by Hamas and others were killed in Israeli air attacks. In 2009 Sheikh Abdel Latif Moussa, the leader of Jund Ansar Allah, proclaimed an Islamic emirate from his mosque in Rafah. Hamas forces surrounded the mosque and killed the sheikh and 23 of his followers.

Another group called Sword of Truth has bombed internet cafes and beauty parlours. It is believed to have carried out the murder of a Christian bookseller in 2007.

Arrigoni's death comes just over a week after a gunman shot dead Juliano Mer-Khamis, an Israeli actor who ran a theatre in the West Bank city of Jenin. It is not clear why Mer-Khamis was shot but his views about freedom of expression had generated some opposition in Jenin.

Rachel Corrie from the United States and Tom Hurndall from London were both killed by Israeli forces in Gaza in 2003 and 2004 while volunteering for the ISM.

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