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STAYING HUMAN AMIDST INHUMANITY

Gaza: Stay Human, by Vittorio Arrigoni. Preface by Ilan Pappé. Translated by Daniela Filippin. Leicestershire, UK: Kube Publishing, 2010. xvii + 118 pages. Timeline to p. 120. Background Notes to p. 130. \$12.95, paper.

Reviewed by Edda Manga

Vittorio Arrigoni (1975–2011) was an Italian journalist and peace activist who lived and reported from Gaza for the Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto* from 2008 until his death in April 2011. His book contains a day-by-day inside account of Operation Cast Lead, Israel's three-week military assault on the besieged and densely populated Strip.

Arrigoni ends every section with "Stay Human," an urgent request to remain responsive to his detailed descriptions of wanton violence and human suffering. He documents what he sees as he volunteers to defend ambulances and important buildings as a human shield: "more often than not in very precarious conditions, often scribbling about the inferno all around me in a tattered notebook while crouched in an ambulance screaming down the street" (p. xv). His "Instructions for Use" demands: "store this volume somewhere safe, within the reach of the young, so that they may immediately learn of a world not so far from them, where indifference and racism tears [*sic*] their peers to little bits" (p. xvi).

Having been deported by Israel, Arrigoni reentered Gaza shortly before the attack. His first chronicle depicts the start of the attack seen from his apartment by the sea: "[H]ell broke loose outside my window. We woke up to the sound of bombs dropping, many of them falling a few hundred meters from my home. Some of my friends have fallen under them" (p. 1). While frustrated with Western media alleging

that "the attacks only targeted Hamas's terrorist dens with surgical precision," Arrigoni feels unable to use his video camera. He writes, "I can't bring myself to film mangled bodies or faces drenched in tears. I just can't. I start crying myself" (p. 3). This inability to detach from what he witnesses gives the short and plain dated entries a particular quality.

He recounts how terrified pregnant women gave birth prematurely because of stress. "One of these, Samira, seven months pregnant, gave birth to a beautiful, tiny baby called Ahmed. Rushing to the Al-Auda Hospital on board the ambulance with her and leaving behind in our rear-view mirror the scenarios of death and destruction (the places where just a moment before we'd been picking up corpses), I thought for a moment that this new life, on the point of blossoming, could be a harbinger for future hope and peace. But the illusion melted away with the first rocket from the centre of Jabalia falling by the side of our ambulance" (p. 27).

He describes how residential neighborhoods, schools, mosques, hospitals, and ambulances were targeted. How people who had lost their homes gathered in UN buildings, only to be killed there. And while the Israelis distributed leaflets to the Palestinians stating that "the terrorists and those who launch rockets against Israel represent a threat to your lives," bombs were dropped in places that hardly were military targets: "the orphanages, have become a favourite nesting place for a species of Israeli mechanical bird. It's there that the fighter planes go and lay their bombs" (p. 63). Arrigoni calls this "unnatural catastrophe" devastating the people of Gaza a "massacre," while the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, who wrote the introduction to the English edition, calls it a "genocidal policy" (p. ix).

Pappé's introduction contains a shocking story of a "dummy Arab city" built in 2004 in the Negev Desert in the size of a normal city complete with mosques, public buildings, and cars. Pappé recalls that Israeli Chief of General Staff Dan Halutz visited the site in 2006 after the Lebanon war, informing the press that soldiers "were preparing for the scenario that will unfold in

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the dense neighbourhood of Gaza city” (p. vii). The soldiers were trained to see Gaza City as a military target, not a place of civilian and human habitation. Pappé contends that both the phantom and the real Gaza city became places for the soldiers to experiment with the most advanced weapons.

Arrigoni’s slogan “Stay Human” addresses in a direct and simple manner the civilized barbarity of this kind of dehumanizing surgical warfare. It has inspired the solidarity movement across Europe and was endorsed by the Freedom Flotilla, which renamed its second voyage “Freedom Flotilla 2—Stay Human.” Arrigoni was among the forty-four “citizens without citizenship”—belonging to what he calls “a sole community of living beings: the human family”—that in the summer of 2008 succeeded in breaking the siege of Gaza from the sea and would have sailed with the Freedom Flotilla had he not been murdered. Despite the horror it describes, *Gaza: Stay Human* is a profoundly loving and inspirational book.