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## 'We can only trust ourselves': Operation Wrath of God in perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This article contextualises the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre as an important factor in the advent of state counterterrorism strategy aimed at foreclosing the next terrorist outrage. While Mossad's Operation Wrath of God failed to trace all culprits of the massacre, it nevertheless killed its mastermind Ali Hassan Salameh alongside scores of key PLO terrorists. This led to the effective demise of Palestinian terrorism in Europe and its return to the old *modus operandi* of attacking targets inside Israel. Fifty years after Munich, Israel needs to formulate an up-to-date strategy vis-à-vis Palestinian and Islamic terrorism that takes heed of the obstacles and opportunities presented by the current international system.

**KEYWORDS** Israel; deterrence; Mossad; counterterrorism; Munich massacre; Palestinian-Israeli conflict; PLO; Black September; Ali Hassan Salame

From the blood-drenched history of the Jewish nation we learn that violence that begins with the murder of Jews ends with the spread of violence and danger to all people, in all nations. We have no choice but to strike at terrorist organisations wherever we can reach them. This is our obligation to ourselves and to peace.

*Prime Minister Golda Meir, 1972*

In the early 1970s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization's Fatah and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine factions sought to raise international attentiveness to the Palestinian cause through a string of terrorist attacks on Jordanian and Israeli targets around the world. One of Fatah's surreptitious branches, known as Black September, was established in 1971 to avenge Jordan's bloody expulsion of the Palestinian terror organisations from its territory the previous year. No less importantly, Black September was designed to provide a buffer that would give the PLO plausible deniability of its international terrorist attacks. By way of achieving that goal, as well as securing the release of over 200 Palestinian terrorists incarcerated in Israel, Black September plotted the 1972 Munich Olympics as a public

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platform. On 5 September, ten days into the Olympic Games, the organisation apprehended eleven Israeli athletes as hostages, drawing the world's complete attention. Failed negotiations and rescue attempts resulted in the death of all hostages in what came to be known as the Munich Massacre. Almost immediately, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir ordered a retaliatory response to the atrocity under the name Operation Wrath of God.<sup>1</sup>

## Response and uncertainties

To this day, the Munich massacre occupies a fundamental place in the bloody history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In almost every respect it can be considered a ground-breaking event. Due to the unprecedented media coverage of the Olympic Games, it brought the conflict to world awareness more than any single event that preceded it. It also shaped Israel's policy regarding abduction/hostage-taking of its citizens by terrorist organisations and provided final reaffirmation of the sweeping refusal to negotiate with them.

Following the Munich massacre, organisational changes were made in several branches of security and intelligence: new units were established and strict security procedures regarding Israeli representatives abroad (which apply to this day) were formulated. Against the backdrop of the problematic conduct of the German authorities, and in view of the common tragic history of the two peoples, the event reinforced Israelis' conviction that 'we can only trust ourselves'. Yet for all its importance and far-reaching implications, the Munich massacre remains partly shrouded in mystery. To this day, for example, it is unclear who actually killed some of the Israeli hostages in the battle that ensued at the airport, with reports over the years suggesting that the West German security forces were culpable for these deaths. Nor is it clear whether and to what extent the various intelligence services had prior knowledge of the existence of the Black September terrorist cell and its intentions. Thus, for example, an Israel intelligence report written a month before the massacre stated that 'Black September is preparing an international operation'. This was followed two days later by a warning that 'Black September is planning an attack on Israeli institutions and individuals' and ten days later by a report that 'six Black September men came to Rome to carry out an attack'. Yet the outpour of terror alerts into the security services at the time might have made it difficult to ascertain the information's reliability and to anticipate the attack.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, while the West German authorities refuse to date to open their investigation files, media outlets around the world have published confidential German reports and documents regarding the episode. In 2012, for example, *Der Spiegel* magazine presented a large number of documents that revealed, inter alia, the extensive ties forged between the Bonn

government and key Black September figures after the massacre, in an attempt to prevent terrorist attacks in West Germany and/or against German citizens (especially during the 1974 football World Cup games held in the country).<sup>3</sup>

For its part, the PLO sought to hide and obscure the identity of those involved in the massacre, though Black September proudly took responsibility for the atrocity within days of its occurrence. As the coffins of the five dead terrorists arrived in the Libyan town of Tripoli, the Voice of the Palestinian Revolution in Cairo broadcast a radio statement, allegedly written by the cell members prior to the massacre: 'We do not intend to kill innocent people. We fight above all against injustice. We do not want to disturb peace, but we want to draw the world's attention to the abominable Zionist occupation, to the real tragedy that our people are suffering from'. 'It doesn't matter to us where we will be buried, and the enemy can desecrate our bodies', the statement continued. 'But we hope that the Arab youth will continue to be willing to sacrifice their lives for the people and the homeland'. This defiant statement notwithstanding, the broadcast stated that 'the names of the dead or their photos will not be published for security reasons'.

This caution is not difficult to understand given Mossad's launch of Operation Wrath of God, with the stated goal of preventing and deterring Palestinian terrorist attacks in Europe. According to Alexander Calahan, Mike Harari, commander of Mossad's Caesarea unit (later realigned under the name Kidon) that carried out the operation, was keenly aware of the need for an out-of-the-box thinking that would enable a highly efficient team to carry out multiple operations across Europe at short notice without getting bogged down by bureaucratic and logistical hurdles. It was evident that standard operating procedures (e.g. new orders for every stage, advances of funds, travel coordination, notification of regional stations, endless justification of spending) would doom the operation, which was to remain as covert and compartmentalised as possible so as to create a plausible deniability screen for both the Israeli cabinet and the public at large.<sup>4</sup> The use of imaginative and dramatic assassinations was also intended to discourage membership in the Palestinian terror organisations, as well as to force active terrorists to dedicate their time and energies to survival attempts rather than to planning new attacks. Within this framework, Mossad subjected the hunted Black September terrorists to psychological pressure aimed at increasing their sense of persecution by sending threatening clues and publishing fictitious newspaper obituaries in the names of the wanted terrorists while they were still alive.

The outbreak of the October 1973 War forced Israel to suspend the hunt for the Black September terrorists and six months later Meir resigned her post due to massive popular criticism of her government's failure to anticipate the war. It is unclear whether she passed the directive to revive

Operation Wrath of God to her successor, Yitzhak Rabin, not least since Black September was dissolved in December 1974. By this time, Mossad had killed a string of the organisation's key operatives (as well as other PLO terrorists), though it is not entirely clear whether and to what extent all were involved in the Munich massacre. These included

- Adel Hir Zoiter, a senior Black September operative, who was shot dead on 16 October 1972 in Rome.
- Mahmoud Hamshari, Black September's No. 2 person, was severely injured on 2 December 1972 by a bomb hidden in his Paris flat and died of his wounds in hospital a few days later.
- Hussein Abdel Khair, Black September's liaison officer with the Soviet Union, was killed in an explosion in a hotel room in Cyprus on 24 January 1973.
- Said Mukassi, Abdel Khair's successor, was killed on 7 April 1973 in Cyprus.
- Basel Qubisi, in charge of Black September's weapons stockpiles and distribution in Europe who had been implicated in numerous terrorist acts, including the planning of the May 1972 massacre at Israel's international airport, was shot dead on 6 April 1973 in Paris.
- Yusuf Najjar, a Black September operations and intelligence officer, was killed in his Beirut flat in April 1973.
- Muhammad Bodiya, a member of the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front) terrorist group, who had greatly assisted Black September operations, was killed in a car explosion in the Latin Quarter of Paris on 28 June 1973.

As part of Operation Wrath of God, Mossad collaborated with the IDF in the highly successful April 1973 Beirut raid (Operation Spring of Youth) that killed scores of terrorists and several senior PLO commanders. Yet, in July 1973, it suffered a tremendous operational (and PR) setback when it killed an innocent Moroccan waiter in the Norwegian town of Lillehammer, having mistaken him for Black September's chief of operations and Munich massacre mastermind Ali Hassan Salameh.

Probably Black September's best-known figure, Salame's evasion of the Israeli assassination campaign was Operation Wrath of God's greatest setback (in addition to the failure to kill some other key culprits of the massacre, notably Abu-Daoud). It was not before January 1979 that Mossad managed to kill Salame and members of his security detail by detonating a car bomb as they were travelling in Beirut. Another late casualty was Atef Bseiso, Black September's liaison officer to European intelligence agencies at the time of the Munich Massacre, who was killed in a 1992 attack (though Mossad has never taken responsibility for the assassination).

## Revenge or pre-emption?

While Operation Wrath of God failed to eliminate all culprits of the Munich massacre, let alone to curb Palestinian terrorism altogether, there is little doubt that it slashed Palestinian terrorism in Europe and dealt Black September a body blow. This most probably played a key role in the PLO's December 1974 decision to disband the organisation, not least since it had outlived its usefulness for its parent organisation that embarked on a feigned charm offensive. In June 1974, the PLO adopted the 'phased strategy' that sought to disguise its genocidal intentions vis-à-vis Israel, and five months later PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat became the first non-state leader to address the UN General Assembly; soon afterwards the United Nations granted the terrorist organisation an observer status.<sup>5</sup> In these circumstances of growing international legitimacy (in October 1974 the Arab League recognised the PLO as the 'sole legitimate representative' of the Palestinian people), the PLO was loath to highlight its murderous side through the Israel-Black September infighting in Europe.

So, was Operation Wrath of God a successful covert campaign to thwart and deter Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israeli targets in Europe, or was it a revenge mission that failed to achieve its purported goal of eliminating all culprits of the Munich massacre?

In a 2006 interview with Israeli journalist Yossi Melman, Mossad's director in the early 1970s Zvi Zamir dismissed out of hand the pervasive depiction of Operation Wrath of God as primarily driven by revenge sentiments. In his account, not only was there no order by PM Meir or anyone else 'to take revenge on those responsible for Munich' but the counterterrorist campaign unleashed in its wake 'was not related to the planning or execution of the murder of the Israeli sportspersons at the 1972 Munich Olympics'. Rather, Munich was the culminating point of a prolonged process of realisation regarding the need for a proactive counterterrorist strategy that would undermine the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure in Europe. This was because 'there was no protection of Israeli citizens and facilities abroad, and even when the European authorities captured terrorists, they caved in to threats and demands by their friends and released them. As far as the terrorist organizations were concerned, they had no risk in attacking Israeli targets [in Europe]'.<sup>6</sup>

According to Zamir, Mossad concluded already in the late 1960s or early 1970s that the Palestinian organisations viewed international terrorism as an effective and rather cost-free means to hurt Israel and promote the Palestinian cause, but it failed to persuade Meir of the need for pre-emptive counterterrorist measures abroad. 'Golda blocked all our proposals', he said.

She didn't wish to be swayed by us, though there were ministers like [Defense Minister] Moshe Dayan and [Deputy PM] Yigal Alon who supported us. Up to Munich, the government's position was that the European governments had to

be enticed into taking responsibility. Golda believed that the European states would awake to the terrorist offensive on their territories and take action . . . [but] they failed to do so until Munich . . . there were states that even refused to allow El Al security guards to carry arms. The European intelligence services had no idea what was going on in the Arab states, they didn't know and didn't understand. They had no [intelligence] sources [there] and didn't speak the language. They had also lost their deterrent posture. Even when they exposed and arrested terrorists, they hastened to release them the moment an airliner was hijacked or threats were received. I recall a conversation with a European security personality who told me: "General Zamir, you are trying to drag us [into your problems]. We don't want to be party to your struggle."

'Munich was a shock for us, a turning point', Zamir added.

What we had anticipated just happened. It was clear to all - to our opponents [in government] and to Golda Meir - that the Europeans would not do what was required of them. A cabinet meeting deliberated what to do. I told the meeting that we at the Mossad would do our utmost to integrate in the defense of Israeli facilities and citizens abroad . . . [and] there is no defense without an offensive component. We knew the terrorist organizations' modus operandi and decided to hit their liaising persons, their offices, their representatives, and their means of transportation in Europe - but viewed this as part of the defensive and deterrent effort that would terminate the overt Palestinian terrorism in Europe. And I think that in the ensuing war after Munich we managed to put an end to this kind of terrorism . . . Little by little it transpired to the local states that it was incumbent upon them to fight terrorism and put an end to it. It was a goal shared by us and them.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Deterrence is a strategy that seeks to prevent an enemy/adversary from a certain course of action by indicating that its costs will outweigh its anticipated gains. In this respect, Operation Wrath of God (and its offshoot Operation Spring of Youth) restored much of the Israeli deterrent posture, weakened by the internationalisation of Palestinian terrorism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For, while Israel had widely retaliated against Arab states that had served as springboards of terrorist attacks – Egypt and Jordan in the early 1950s, Jordan in the wake of the 1967 war – this was the first time it took the counterterrorist fight to Europe, where the terrorist organisations had operated with virtual impunity. As a result, Palestinian international terrorism dropped to a fraction of its former self with its most salient representative, the Black September organisation, disbanded.

No less importantly, Operation Wrath of God's daring and sophisticated nature captivated the hearts of many people throughout the world and glorified Mossad's reputation as one of the world's best, if not the best, intelligence services. Until the 1960s, Mossad's name had rarely been

mentioned with media coverage of the organisation being largely implicit. And while the daring abduction of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann from his Argentinian hideout to Israel (in May 1960) brought Mossad wide international exposure, Operation Wrath of God not only made ‘the Israeli Mossad’ a household name throughout the world but also made it a popular culture subject. This in turn built the Mossad brand as a highly effective secretive organisation demonstrating wisdom, toughness, sophistication, boldness and even cruelty against the enemies of Israel and the Jewish people, and this image was further consolidated in subsequent decades following a string of daring operations, notably the sustained covert war against Saddam Hussein’s and Iran’s nuclear weapons programs. Naturally, it is the secrecy attending Mossad’s operations (like those of other intelligence organisations) that contributes to the brand name, which becomes a source of speculation and is surrounded by a kind of romantic aura, strengthened with the help of films, books, and journalistic cloak and dagger accounts.

In today’s world, with the proliferation of violent non-state actors on the one hand, and the changing international norms and rules of the game on the other, intelligence organisations confront a new set of challenges in their counterterrorism efforts (e.g. countering Islamist radicalisation, locating terrorist epicentres of gravity, difficulty to assess the point of diminishing returns). In the Israeli case, these difficulties are further compounded by the massive de-legitimisation campaign, which has paradoxically gained considerable traction over the past decades as the PLO has exploited its growing international legitimacy following the Oslo ‘peace’ process to divert the fight against Israel from the terrorist to the political and diplomatic arenas. This in turn necessitates Israel, fifty years after Munich, to formulate an up-to-date strategy vis-à-vis Palestinian and Islamic terrorism, as well as other lethal threats to its national security (notably Iran’s nuclear weapons program and regional expansionism), which takes heed of the obstacles and opportunities presented by the current international system.

## Notes

1. Klein, “*Striking back*”; Reeve, “One day in September.”
2. Fogelman, “*Extensive research reveals.*”
3. *Der Spiegel*, “Officials Ignored Warnings.”
4. Calahan, “Countering terrorism: The Israeli response,” p.47
5. Karsh, *Arafat’s War*, 46–8.
6. Melman, “Golda didn’t give the order.”
7. *Ibid.*

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



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