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Back to the future: contemporary thoughts and views on sport and terrorism from a global perspective

Yair Galily^a and Ilan Tamir^b

^aReichman University, Israel; ^bAriel University, Ariel, Israel

Fifty years after the massacre of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Summer Olympics at Munich, this tragic event still occupies a fundamental place in the bloodstained history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In almost all respects it was a groundbreaking event that attracted unprecedented media exposure and substantially increased global awareness of the conflict. It also shaped Israel's policy vis-à-vis abductions of its citizens by Palestinian terrorist organisations, which culminated in sweeping refusal to negotiate with them.

Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere, terrorism has far-reaching social, psychological, and political implications.¹ Attacks on athletic personalities or mega-events may also adversely affect the reputation of the political leadership, ultimately undermining the state's authority. Hence, fifty years after the Munich massacre this special issue gathers contemporary scholarly work that explores this topic from a variety of perspectives, including security, sociology, media, history, and public relations, in addition to the political, ideological, and psychological aspects of the nexus of sport and terror.

The current collection contextualises the Munich massacre as one of the factors that contributed to the rethinking of security strategies in the early 1970s, a key juncture in the evolution of modern governments' fight against terrorism. According to Udi Carmi and Orr Levental, the 1972 Munich Olympic Games were an opportunity to show the world the 'New Germany' as it was clear that the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games were bound to cloud their 1972 counterpart at every stage. Their article addresses West Germany's efforts to erase Berlin 1936 from public consciousness and to redesign Germany's image as a cosmopolitan, peace-seeking nation. Reshaping the new German image included an innovative architectural design of the Olympic complex, concealment of prominent landmarks associated with the Nazi regime, visual design of the games that emphasised a cosmopolitan spirit, and an opening ceremony devoid of national pathos. Most notably absent from the Olympic village were armed security personnel due to the fear of association with armed German soldiers. However, reality struck the

West Germans in the face as this 'New Image' failed to mask the political disputes that arose during the games. The event was fraught with scandals with political overtones, and the Games will be forever remembered for the massacre of the athletes by a terrorist organisation and for the numerous scandals that became public at the time.

For his part, James Dorsey argues that the Munich attack has never been replicated in either scale or drama. It introduced a new era in which sporting events, executives, and athletes have been targeted by secular nationalists rather than religious terrorists. This situation might have been different had previous plans for attacks by religious militants not failed or been foiled. Interestingly, and more as a result of local circumstances, successful attacks on sporting events and personalities since Munich have struck a balance between having been perpetrated by secularist and religious terrorists. This is true despite the fact that political violence since the 1980s has increasingly been perpetrated by religious rather than secular militants.

The following two articles looked at assessments of Munich in various media outlets. The first, by Gabriel Weimann, argues that what began as the 1972 Munich Olympic Games quickly became a global media event, a live broadcast of a deadly terrorist attack that changed the future of modern terrorism. Broadcast to an audience of over 900 million, the event marked the beginning of a new relationship between modern terrorism and the mass media. Arguably, only the 9/11 attacks have been a more powerful terrorist event since then. The number of people killed in Munich was not high, seventeen in total, and yet its long-term ramifications exceeded all other terrorist attacks. According to Weimann, the rise of media-focused terrorism motivated scholarly interest in the media strategies and tactics of modern terrorism and in the coverage of its contents, forms, messages and impact. He argues that the impact of the mass-mediated attack on the Munich Olympics was powerful, dramatic, and long lasting. The 'new' terrorism attending the Munich massacre, adapted to the new media-oriented rules of the game. Media-oriented terrorism is the use of pre-planned attacks that are intentionally designed to attract media attention and coverage, and consequently to influence decision-makers and the public at large. Weimann also argues that the strategy and tactics of the media-oriented terrorism that emerged in the Munich attack are still valid today: the platforms changed, the technologies are new, the spread and speed are significantly greater, but terrorism still performs its deadly act on the world scene of modern media. According to Weimann, several questions remain as a future challenge: will the theatre of terror and terrorist media events remain valid concepts in the digital age? Will terrorists and extremists be able to harness the new widespread, decentralised, diversified media platforms to promote their dramatic productions and create the desired global media events?

The second media-oriented article, by Tal Laor, analyzes the coverage of the Munich massacre in the three largest newspapers in Israel at the time: *Yediot Ahronot*, *Maariv*, and *Haaretz*. He found that this coverage was informed by a classic framing of terrorist attacks in which the media elevates a sense of fear and anxiety. In this particular framing, the terrorists were framed as an integral part of the Arab world, with terrorist attacks a widespread global phenomenon. To Laor, the Munich massacre revisited the trauma of the Holocaust due to the fact that it took place on German soil. This was reflected in the framing of responsibility, which focused mainly on the failures of the German security forces with no criticism of the Israeli government.

For his part, Boaz Ganor maintains that the 1972 Olympic Games massacre highlighted the critical need for internal coordination and international cooperation among intelligence, security and enforcement agencies, government ministries, and many other counterterrorism agencies. He presents the security lessons learned from the attack while providing an overview of the counterterrorism coordinator's critical role in coordinating organisations' focused CT operations, policy, and law. Similarly, Ronit Berger Hobson and Ami Pedahzur discuss how Munich was a critical juncture in understanding terrorism as theatre on the one hand, and in the fusion between counterterrorism and special operation forces, on the other. It created path dependency in the way the terrorist threat is perceived and handled. In their view, the attack was one in an ever-growing and constantly changing series of terrorist threats that helped shape Israel's security apparatus and led to the proliferation of special operation forces units within the military, police, and border police. Globally, the attack led to a spurt in the establishment of special operations units with specific counterterrorism and hostage rescuing expertise. Overall, the media coverage of the Munich attack and the failure of the West German security forces in handling the crisis contributed to the survivability of special operation forces units. These units specialised in counterterrorism operations and subsequently appropriated additional types of missions and responsibilities while tightening their political ties and enhancing their public image. Most notable of these was the Israeli General Staff Reconnaissance Unit (*Sayeret Matcal*).

Certainly, organisational changes were made in several branches of Israel's security and intelligence apparatus after the Munich massacre with new units established and strict procedures formulated, which to this day apply to all Israeli officials abroad. Against the controversial conduct of the West German authorities, and in view of the two nations' shared history, the massacre reinforced Israeli beliefs in self reliance ('we can only rely on ourselves'). Yair Galily explores whether the Mossad operation Wrath of God, which followed the massacre, was a successful covert operations

campaign designed to prevent and deter Palestinian terror attacks against Israeli targets or a mission of revenge that failed to fulfil Prime Minister Golda Meir's promise to eliminate all those involved in the massacre.

Indeed, while many lessons have been drawn from the traumatic event, there are scars that have not yet healed. Ilan Tamir describes and analyzes the emotions of the two female athletes of the Israeli delegation, from a perspective of five decades. Interviews with Esther Roth-Shahamorov (sprinter) and Shlomit Nir-Tur (swimmer) reveal complex attitudes and frustration directed towards Germany, the International Olympic Committee, and even the Israeli delegation itself. At the same time, the interviews demonstrate the power of sport as a tool of rehabilitation and commemoration.

Perhaps surprisingly, the massacre of 11 members of the Israeli delegation to the 1972 Munich Olympics received its first official commemoration only in the summer of 2021, at the opening ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. For 49 years, the International Olympic Committee vehemently opposed any memorial service for the slain athletes, arguing that sports should not involve politics. The Israeli delegation held a memorial service during each Olympic Games, but it was held at the Israeli ambassador's house rather than the Olympic Village due to the International Olympic Committee's opposition.

Finally, it is hoped that this collection, half a century after the Munich massacre, will not only shed fresh light on developments that followed but will also inspire much-needed research on terrorism and sport. As discussed here, sports mega-events, like Olympic Games or Soccer World Cups, remain ideal targets for terrorist attacks due to their visibility, size, and number of people involved. In that respect, we choose not to be cynical as Sidney Harris puts it ('a cynic is not merely one who reads bitter lessons from the past, he is one who is prematurely disappointed in the future') but look for (much) brighter forthcomings and better preparedness for them.

Note

1. Galily et al. "From Munich to Boston."

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributors

Ilan Tamir is Professor of Communication and the Head of the School of Communication, Ariel University, Israel.

Yair Galily is Associate Dean of the Sammy Ofer School of Communications, Reichman University, Israel.

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