



The Munich Massacre. 5–6 September 1972. Terrorism as an International Issue

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I THE PALESTINIANS, ITALY AND THE CHALLENGES OF TERRORISM

As the 1960s drew to a close, the Arab-Israeli conflict underwent profound changes. After Israel's success in the war of June 1967, the superiority of Israeli forces became apparent to all Arab leaders.¹ While proclaiming that the struggle against Israel would continue and keeping border tensions high with the so-called war of attrition, some Arab capitals such as Cairo and Amman began to adopt a more pragmatic approach based on national interest, taking into account existing power relations. This

¹Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 302–346; Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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approach ended by clashing with the interests of the Palestinians: the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which had acquired greater autonomy after the Egyptian defeat and from 1969 was led by the head of al-Fatah, Yasser Arafat, became a problem even in the eyes of some Arab leaders. On the other hand, some countries, such as Syria and Iraq, entered into relations with the most radical elements of the Palestinian movement, encouraging the development of a number of different factions, often with conflicting strategies: consider, for example, the opposing visions of George Habash, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), who thought that the struggle for Palestinian rights should be resolved through the overthrow of conservative Arab regimes; and Arafat, on the other hand, who was committed to seeking alliances with Arab governments. The PFLP, as well as the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP) led by Naif Hawatmeh, and Fatah itself adopted guerrilla methods that soon impacted on all the countries bordering Israel. Jordan in particular became the territory from where Palestinian militant operations were directed against Israeli targets: as a result, Jordan was particularly exposed to Israeli reprisals and consequently in a state of permanent vulnerability and weakness. The PFLP, however, chose another path as well, later followed by other Palestinian groups: international terrorism ('external operations'), primarily as an instrument of internal competition within the PLO and then for attracting new militants, inspired by the impact of such operations, not least in terms of the media reaction.²

The Jordanian repression of Palestinian resistance, in September 1970, resulted in a bloodbath and the PLO's expulsion from the country, an event that Palestinians would remember as 'Black September' (*aylul al-aswad*).³ It did not take long for the homonymous Black September

²Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 195–216; Samih K. Farsoun, Christine E. Zacharia, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 180–187; Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 2nd ed.), 191–194. For the different Palestinian political elements, cf. Michael Bröning, *Political Parties in Palestine: Leadership and Thought*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). For this 'third wave' of international terrorism, cf. also David C. Rapoport, 'The Four Waves of Modern Terror: International Dimensions and Consequences', in Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Bernhard Blumenau (eds), *An International History of Terrorism: Western and Non-Western Experiences*, (London-New York: Routledge, 2013), 282–310.

³Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 373–375; Nigel J. Ashton, 'Pulling the Strings: King Hussein's Role During the Crisis of 1970 in Jordan', *The International History Review*, XXVIII:1,

organization to spring up from a branch of Fatah. In the following years, this group would be responsible for high-profile actions such as the assassination of the Jordanian Prime Minister Wasfi al-Tall in November 1971.⁴

The new Middle East crisis was observed by Italy, which at that time was experiencing a complex moment in its republican history. The social and generational demands of 1968–1969 were interwoven with the financial crisis of the early 1970s, while in political terms the country seemed to be shifting to the right, especially after the 1972 elections and the formation of a centre-right government led by Giulio Andreotti. Italy was also suffering from a period of unprecedented political violence, with various instances linked to right-wing extremism—for instance the ‘strategy of tension’ which began with the Piazza Fontana massacre in December 1969, followed by the failed Borghese Coup in 1970 and the local revolts in Reggio Calabria in 1970–1971—as well as to the Left, with the birth of the Red Brigades (BR) in late 1970.⁵ In a few years, the Italian view of the conflict had gradually become more pro-Palestinian.⁶ Italy had begun to

2006, 94–118; Joseph Nevo, ‘September 1970 in Jordan: A Civil War?’, *Civil Wars*, X:3, 2008, 217–230; Philip Robins, *A History of Jordan*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 2nd ed.), 136–139; cf. also David Raab’s account, *Terror in Black September: The First Eyewitness Account of the Infamous 1970 Hijackings*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2007.

⁴ Asher Susser, *On Both Banks of the Jordan: A Political Biography of Wasfi al-Tall*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 141–171.

⁵ Aurelio Lepre, *Storia della Prima repubblica. L’Italia dal 1943 al 2003*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 2019), 223–249; Agostino Giovagnoli, *La Repubblica degli italiani (1946–2016)*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2020), 74 ff.; Guido Formigoni, *Storia essenziale dell’Italia repubblicana*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 2021), 91–107; Miguel Gotor, *Generazione Settanta. Storia del decennio più lungo del secolo breve (1966–1982)*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2022), 80–89; on terrorism, cf. Giovanni Mario Ceci, *Il terrorismo italiano. Storia di un dibattito*, (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2013); Angelo Ventrone, *La strategia della paura. Eversione e stragismo nell’Italia del Novecento*, (Milan: Mondadori, 2019), 159 ff.; Riccardo Brizzi, Giovanni Mario Ceci, Michele Marchi, Guido Panvini, Ermanno Taviani (eds), *L’Italia del terrorismo: partiti, istituzioni e società*, (Rome: Carocci Editore, 2021).

⁶ Daniele Caviglia, Massimiliano Cricco, *La diplomazia italiana e gli equilibri mediterranei. La politica mediorientale dell’Italia dalla guerra dei Sei Giorni al conflitto dello Yom Kippur (1967–1973)*, (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2006); Luca Riccardi, *Il ‘problema Israele’. Diplomazia italiana e PCI di fronte allo Stato ebraico (1948–1973)*, (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2006), 389–439; Alessandra Tarquini, *La sinistra italiana e gli ebrei. Socialismo, sionismo e antisemitismo dal 1892 al 1992*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 2019), 207–215; Enrico Palumbo, *Cultura cattolica, ebraismo e Israele in Italia. Gli anni del Concilio e post-Concilio*, (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2020), 261–290; Luca Riccardi, ‘Italy’s Foreign Policy and the Palestinian Question’, in Luciano Monzali, Paolo Soave (eds), *Italy and the Middle East:*

play host to small groups of Palestinians, while organizations had sprung up whose aim was to strengthen bilateral political and cultural relations.⁷ On the Left, alongside the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity (PSIUP), who were noted for their allegiance to the Palestinian cause but did not sever ties with the Israelis, even the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which had been markedly pro-Israeli at the time of the 1967 war, had begun to change its tone, seeking a greater balance between the two sides, with mixed results:⁸ for example, one sign of the sentiments now existing within the party was that some PSI representatives were included among the list of participants in the meeting which took place in Rome in April 1971 to prepare for a ‘conference for peace and justice in the Middle East’.⁹

Middle East issues had also burst onto the national landscape in the matter of public safety: on 4 August 1972 Italy experienced a minor act of terrorism claimed by Black September, when an explosion badly damaged several oil tanks connected with the Transalpine Pipeline at Trieste.¹⁰ Predictably, the intertwining of national and international politics also involved the Middle East.¹¹

Geopolitics, Dialogue and Power during the Cold War, (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 93–107; Enrico Palumbo, ‘Italian Catholics and the June 1967 War: A Turning Point’, *Israel Studies*, XXVIII:3, 2023, 50–75.

⁷ Luca Falcicola, ‘Studenti senza terra: la diaspora palestinese in Italia, tra solidarietà, politica e violenza’, *Mediterranea - ricerche storiche*, XIX:1, 2022, 69–103.

⁸ Claudio Brillanti, *Le sinistre italiane e il conflitto arabo-israelo-palestinese (1948–1973)*, (Rome, Sapienza Università Editrice, 2018), 256–261. Cf. also Arturo Marzano, Guri Schwarz, *Attentato alla sinagoga, Roma, 9 ottobre 1982. Il conflitto israelo-palestinese e l’Italia*, (Rome: Viella, 2013), 47–85.

⁹ Archivio Centrale dello Stato, MI, Gab., AG, 1971–1975, f. Medio Oriente—Avvenimenti vari—Ripercussioni in Italia, s. 2, Conferenza mondiale per il Medio Oriente, *Lista provvisoria dei partecipanti alla riunione preparatoria per la conferenza per la pace e la giustizia nel Medio Oriente*, 5 May 1971. Among those listed as PSI representatives are Luciano De Pascalis, Guido Fubini, Pierlombardo Vigorelli and Alberto Benzoni.

¹⁰ ‘Sabotaggio a Trieste. Brucia Poleodotto’, *Corriere della Sera*, 5 August 1972; ‘I terroristi palestinesi annunciano d’aver compiuto il sabotaggio a Trieste’, *Corriere della Sera*, 6 August 1972; Mimmo Franzinelli, *La sottile linea nera. Neofascismo e servizi segreti da Piazza Fontana a Piazza della Loggia*, (Milan: Rizzoli, 2008), 207; Giuliano Sadar, *Il grande fuoco, 4 agosto 1972: l’attentato all’oleodotto di Trieste*, (Trieste: Mgs Press, 2015); Ariel Merari, Shlomi Elad, *International Dimension of Palestinian Terrorism*, (London-New York: Routledge, 2019), 30.

¹¹ Guido Formigoni, *Storia d’Italia nella guerra fredda (1943–1978)*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 2016), 392–399.

The 1972 Olympic Games in Munich attracted the attention of the international press because of their associated political implications. During the Cold War the Olympics represented a very important symbolic and political battleground, influencing public opinion through the thousands of journalists present and the associated media coverage. Since the Games organized by Hitler in 1936, these were the first to take place in West Germany, defeated in the Second World War but now reintegrated into the community of democracies. The slogan chosen for the Games, *Die heiteren Spiele* ('The Joyous Games'), sought to underline this further. It was also the second time that East Germany was taking part, at a moment when it was engaged in dialogue with Bonn, in the wake of Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. Apart from the established tensions between East and West, the 1972 Games were also the focus of a political controversy surrounding the Rhodesian athletes. Their participation had met with protest from African nations, supported by the Socialist bloc and part of Western public opinion, threatening a boycott in protest against Ian Smith's racist apartheid government. In the end, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided to ban the Rhodesian athletes from participating.¹² In Italy even Aldo Moro, former Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister for Christian Democracy (DC), commented on the IOC's decision in an approving article: 'At least when it comes to fundamental human rights, states are not sovereign and must recognize a superior entity, even in the most jealously guarded sphere of their own internal affairs'.¹³

However, the debate about this important moment in the international affirmation of human rights was soon silenced when the Games were rocked by Black September's attack on the Israeli athletes. Once again,

¹² Christopher Young, 'Munich 1972: Re-presenting the Nation', in Alan Tomlinson, Christopher Young, *National Identity and Global Sports Events: Culture, Politics, and Spectacle in the Olympics and the Football World Cup*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 117–132; Kay Schiller, Christopher Young, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); David Kenrick, *Decolonisation, Identity and Nation in Rhodesia, 1964–1979: A Race Against Time*, (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 120.

¹³ Aldo Moro, 'La coscienza parla più forte dello Stato', *Il Giorno*, 6 September 1972, now in Aldo Moro, *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Aldo Moro*, s. 1: *Scritti e Discorsi*, Vol. 4: *L'Ultima fase (1968-1978)*, t. 1: *Al ministero degli Esteri e all'opposizione nel partito (giugno 1968-maggio 1973)*, ed. by Guido Formigoni, Agostino Giovagnoli, edition and historical-critical note by Enrico Palumbo, (Bologna: University of Bologna, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.48678/unibo/aldomoro1.4.1.279>.

this one event combined many subtexts: for some years, Israel had proposed taking upon itself the legacy of international Judaism and the tragedy of the Shoah suffered in Europe before the birth of the Jewish state;¹⁴ now here it was, taking part in Games being held in the country where the project to destroy the Jews had been conceived and carried out.¹⁵

The terrorist act took place on 5 and 6 September, when eight Palestinian Black September militants burst in on the Israeli athletes' lodgings and took them hostage, after killing two of them. The terrorists demanded the release of over 200 Palestinians detained in Israel and the 2 leaders of the German terrorist group Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Fraktion, also known as the Baader-Meinhof Gang). When the Israelis refused to negotiate, the German authorities agreed to Black September's request to transfer the hostages to Egypt and continue the negotiations there. However, the German plan to strike at the terrorists during the transfer failed, ending in a bloodbath. The overall toll of those killed was eleven Israeli athletes, five terrorists and a policeman; a further three terrorists were arrested. Besides receiving the huge media attention that Black September had hoped for, the incident sparked controversy and criticism of the poor quality of the security measures put in place by the German authorities, their failure to free the hostages and the IOC's decision to continue with the Games despite the circumstances. Afterwards Israel mounted a wide-ranging operation to target those allegedly responsible for initiating and organizing the Munich massacre, which led to sustained attacks on PLO bases in Lebanon and Syria, with disastrous consequences for Palestinian civilians.¹⁶

¹⁴Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁵Carole Fink, *West Germany and Israel: Foreign Relations, Domestic Politics, and the Cold War, 1965–1974*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 185–201.

¹⁶Schiller, Young, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany*, 187–220; Simon Reeve, *One Day in September: The Full Story of the 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre and the Israeli Revenge Operation 'Wrath of God'*, (New York: Arcade, 2011); David C. Large, *Munich 1972: Tragedy, Terror and Triumph at the Olympic Games*, (New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2012); Fink, *West Germany and Israel*, 203–213. For the Israeli response, cf., among others, Ian Black, Benny Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Service*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 269–277.

2 LEFT-WING AND PROGRESSIVE CATHOLIC ATTEMPTS AT AN EXPLANATION

In interpreting the Munich massacre the Italian media broadly interwove both its international and its domestic aspects. The attempt to position the event on a long-term trajectory, taking account of the complexity of the ongoing Middle East conflict, sprang from Italy's close attention to that situation, to the point of outweighing most other international issues: thus politics and the press had settled into a kind of interpretative pattern that appears not to have changed over time: in the ensuing weeks all the newspapers maintained the position they had adopted the day after the massacre, convinced they already had at their disposal all the means with which to make sense of the event. This was reflected in thorough historical reconstructions to aid the public's understanding, stretching back as far as the Nakba of 1948 and the rise of the Zionist movement at the beginning of the century.¹⁷ On an international level there were two dominant views: some, especially on the Left and in the most progressive Catholic circles, saw the event in terms of a global north-south axis, in line with an interpretation that had emerged in the late 1960s, which viewed the Palestinians as a subaltern people clashing with an Israel that represented First-World colonialism,¹⁸ in other quarters, especially on the Right and in more pro-West circles, the conflict centred on the confrontation between East and West, in which Israel represented a bastion of the West in the Middle East.

The left-wing media basically condemned Black September's terrorist act because it ultimately damaged the Palestinian cause. They also criticized the Israeli government's retaliatory response and sought to place the accent on the global inequalities and injustices that fed the violence. In *Avanti!*, the PSI daily paper, Alberto Ninotti wrote that Black September's terrorist act was not a struggle for freedom: Vietnam showed that guerrilla warfare could only succeed by combining both nationalist and social struggle. Black September was the product of heavy-handed tactics, having arisen from the actions of the 'terrorist and murderer Hussein [king of Jordan]', who had blocked the emergence of a genuine Palestinian

¹⁷Tito De Stefano, 'Le ragioni dell'odio e dei crimini terroristici', *Il Giorno*, 6 September 1972; 'Un popolo che non vuole soccombere', *l'Unità*, 7 September 1972. Cf. also Enrico Palumbo, 'Tra guerra d'indipendenza israeliana e Nakba palestinese. La storiografia sul 1948', *Ricerche di Storia Politica*, XXIII:2, 2020, 165–182.

¹⁸Starting with Maxime Rodinson, 'Israël, fait colonial?', *Les Temps Modernes*, XXII:253 bis, 1967, 17–88.

guerrilla movement, just as all Arab regimes had always prevented their peoples' emancipation,¹⁹ a stance that was in fact not very far from that of Habash's PFLP. The PCI paper, *l'Unità*, compared Black September's action with the 'noble battle' of the Vietnamese, adding that 'not even desperation can in any way explain, much less justify acts such as this, which above all backfire against Palestine's nationalist cause and against the broader cause of emancipation and progress for the Arab people'.²⁰ On 10 September Enrico Berlinguer, leader of the PCI, condemned not only the violence of terrorism but also the enthusiasm for reprisals in certain quarters. In Berlinguer's view these problems needed to be addressed at their roots, firstly by listening to the demands of the 'new peoples' who were beginning to exert pressure, and secondly by acknowledging the decline of capitalist societies, which were increasingly inclined to pursue 'inhuman' ends.²¹ It was only on 13 September that *l'Unità* published an official communiqué from the PCI leadership on the situations in the Middle East and Vietnam, in which Black September's terrorist act was condemned but Israel's conduct was also criticized.²² In exchanges among the party leaders, Jewish Senator Umberto Terracini asked for a change to the proposed wording, from 'the Israeli government fuels an endless spiral of hate and violence' to 'contributes to fuelling'. 'It could give the impression that the spiral is fuelled only by Israel', Terracini explained at the time. Luciano Barca also asked that communist condemnation of the attack be emphasized.²³ In *Rinascita*, the PCI magazine, Alessandro Natta underlined the fact that Black September's terrorist act, reflecting the aims of a very narrow elite, was incompatible with a popular revolution, citing Marx and Lenin and their opposition 'to the failure and error of corporatism and sectarian putschism, of direct and violent action, whether nihilist or anarchist'. Condemnation apart, it was important to reflect on the hasty remedies that had ended in aligning Israel with 'the cause of humanity and the West', legitimizing 'new race fanaticism, new crusades against the "spirit of evil" within the Arab world'. Instead, it was necessary to address

¹⁹Alberto Ninotti, 'Il Vietnam dà loro torto', *Avanti!*, 6 September 1972.

²⁰'Aberrazione', *l'Unità*, 6 September 1972.

²¹Enrico Berlinguer, 'Alle radici del male', *l'Unità*, 10 September 1972.

²²'Lottare perché l'Italia contribuisca ad una giusta pace nel Vietnam e nel M.O.', *l'Unità*, 13 September 1972.

²³Fondazione Gramsci, Archivio Partito Comunista Italiano, Direzione 1972, f. 7, mf. 032, 12 September 1972. On Terracini's long-term position, cf. Marta Nicolo, *Un impegno controcorrente. Umberto Terracini e gli ebrei (1945-1983)*, (Turin: Zamorani, 2018).

the root cause of the problem, which concerned ‘the conditions of backwardness, underdevelopment and hunger faced by so much of humanity’.²⁴

Within the Left, the communist paper *il manifesto*—expressing the views of a radical faction outside the PCI—took a different position, writing in an initial editorial that ‘this was not an act of revenge or blind violence. It was an act of war which did not seek to harm innocent victims but to force, without the need for bloodshed, a negotiation for the release of two hundred of the thousands of Arab prisoners in Israeli jails; everyone knows why they are there and how they are treated’. *Il manifesto* emphasized that the Palestinians had been forced into the shocking act to make the world aware of the reasons for their struggle.²⁵ It later reasserted that it had been ‘a political act, although in the context of a war, whose goal was the exchange of prisoners, which to succeed required a peaceful, negotiated solution’.²⁶

In *Settegiorni*, a Catholic left-wing weekly paper, Ruggero Orfei maintained that the isolation of the Palestinians, who had ‘become serfs in their own lands, or exiles shunned elsewhere, may not justify all they do, but explains some of the deep reasons for their actions’.²⁷ More cautiously, *Avvenire*, the daily paper of the Italian Episcopal Conference, described the actions of the ‘Arab guerrillas’ as a criminal act, which removed ‘that semblance of legality and veneer of false heroism that could also be conveyed by a struggle for freedom and for the lofty ideals of defending one’s own lands’. But the finger of blame was pointed at all those who were silent in the face of the many daily acts of violence around the world: from oppression in the socialist world and in Latin-American dictatorships to the ongoing war in Vietnam.²⁸ The concern was that Israel would use the Munich events to justify harsh military action against Palestinian targets in neighbouring Arab countries.²⁹ And when that happened, *Avvenire* had no hesitation in making the point strongly: ‘Today it is the Palestinians who are weeping for their dead. The world can only be aghast at this new tragedy’.³⁰ There was also an attempt to put the issue into perspective, citing the ‘reasons of a million Palestinians who have lost their homes’. In

²⁴ Alessandro Natta, ‘Il perché delle violenze’, *Rinascita*, 15 September 1972.

²⁵ ‘Una guerra terribile’, *il manifesto*, 6 September 1972.

²⁶ ‘I disperati, i cinici, gli ipocriti’, *il manifesto*, 7 September 1972.

²⁷ Ruggero Orfei, ‘La guerra arriva a Monaco’, *Settegiorni*, 10 September 1972.

²⁸ Giorgio Basadonna, ‘Nessuno si senta innocente’, *Avvenire*, 7 September 1972.

²⁹ ‘Pace più lontana’, *Avvenire*, 9 September 1972.

³⁰ Massimo Ranghieri, ‘I giorni del terrore’, *Avvenire*, 10 September 1972.

the face of these problems, the newspaper levelled its accusations at the Arab governments (such as Jordan and Egypt) who had used the Palestinians for their own ends, abandoning them when it suited them.³¹ It went further: ‘To kill is a crime, whether it is in Munich or Lebanon or Syria, whether the victims are young athletes caught up in the interminable Six Days’ War or Palestinian refugees fed up with so many years of homelessness. To kill is always a crime, even when the killing is done by someone giving orders from afar or dropping bombs on poor folk in built-up areas’.³² The Catholic weekly paper *Famiglia Cristiana* came to similar conclusions: ‘The civilized world cannot be party to the elimination of a people because “no one knows where to put them”. The Munich massacre [...] is the offspring of other massacres’.³³ Pope Paul VI himself gave his support to the views expressed in the Catholic community: in the Angelus Address of 10 September he stated that neither terrorism nor revenge were paths to follow and that every response to violence should also bear justice in mind.³⁴ This was basically an echo of his 1967 encyclical letter *Populorum Progressio*.³⁵

In fact, these analyses were also presented by Guido Valabrega, in more measured tones but with conclusions that were not dissimilar, in *Relazioni Internazionali*, the magazine of the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) in Milan. Attempting to explain Israel’s actions, Valabrega’s view was that the Tel Aviv government had profited from the situation to carry forward a plan which was not linked to the events in Munich and to strengthen the ‘home front’ at a time of great economic and social difficulties. What is more, the reprisals in Lebanon and Syria had given Israel another opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of its military might. Conversely, the terrorist act had weakened the Palestinian position, triggering further divisions within the Arab world.³⁶

The public broadcaster RAI-TV also contributed an in-depth analysis, aired on the national channel on 9 September: ‘Olimpiade nera’ (Black Olympics), produced by Servizi Speciali del Telegiornale (Special News

³¹ ‘La fine delle Olimpiadi’, *Avvenire*, 12 September 1972.

³² ‘Soltanto giustizia’, *Avvenire*, 13 September 1972.

³³ ‘Non verrà dalle rappresaglie la soluzione per il Medio Oriente’, *Famiglia Cristiana*, 1 October 1972.

³⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Angelus Domini*, 10 September 1972.

³⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 26 March 1967.

³⁶ ‘Il Medio Oriente dopo la strage di Monaco’, *Relazioni Internazionali*, 16 September 1972.

Services). The introductory documentary presented a historical reconstruction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, giving the condition of Palestinian refugees as the main reason for the emergence of various elements of the liberation movement and describing the refugee camps as ‘ghettos in the desert’. Several contributions from Italian and international journalists supported this view. However, among the interviewees was the conservative journalist Indro Montanelli, who distanced himself from the principal line taken by the programme and said: ‘I do not believe that we have a duty to understand when we are faced with murder on this scale—so heinous, so bestial—but above all I reject the implication of such understanding. The implication is that Israel must be accused for keeping the fedayeen, the Palestinians, in the state in which they are said to be held. [...] The responsibility does not lie at all with Israel’.³⁷ This stance echoed the views he had expressed in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy’s leading daily newspaper, which at that very time was in the midst of a period of editorial change, although some of the most conservative voices were retained.³⁸ Montanelli had challenged the use of the word ‘guerrillas’ for those he described as ‘gangsters’ and had called for repressive measures by Western governments, adding: ‘[W]e have to ask questions about the nature and extent of underground collusion between [Arab terrorism] and the gangsterism which is already undermining and bloodying our society, or at least to what extent its example is contagious’.³⁹ *Avanti!* accused Montanelli of racism and pointed out that there was no argument about condemning the terrorists’ act: ‘Nothing justifies terrorism, *any* kind of terrorism, whether it be ideological, social or political. It must therefore be condemned in all its forms: from the kind that involves hijacking aircraft, or sending dissident writers to mental institutions, or driving tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees to despair, to the kind that is dressed up as being in the national interest’. Montanelli’s words, in the view of the newspaper, encouraged ‘the hounding of Arabs that is happening, sadly, more or less everywhere’.⁴⁰ The reference was to a series of police operations and instances of racism targeting communities of Arab origin in Europe; the newspaper *Il Giorno*, taking a progressive stance, denounced forms of ‘lynching’.⁴¹

³⁷ ‘Olimpiade nera’, Rai Teche, 9 September 1972.

³⁸ Pierluigi Allotti, Raffaele Liucci, *Il ‘Corriere della Sera’. Biografia di un quotidiano*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 2021), 323–325.

³⁹ Indro Montanelli, ‘Sostituzione d’imputato’, *Corriere della Sera*, 7 September 1972.

⁴⁰ Aldo Lualdi, ‘Il terrorismo del *Corriere*’, *Avanti!*, 8 September 1972; ‘Caccia ai terroristi (ma anche agli arabi)’, *Avanti!*, 9 September 1972.

⁴¹ ‘Tentativi di linciaggio contro “stranieri dalla pelle scura”’, *Il Giorno*, 7 September 1972.

3 ACCUSATIONS FROM THE RIGHT AND THE REDEFINING OF ANTI-JEWISH CLICHÉS

In Italy the ‘hounding of Arabs’ had its epicentre in the city of Perugia, home to numerous communities because of its international university (Università per gli Stranieri). *Avanti!* reported that the youth branch of the Italian Republican Party (PRI) had warned that ‘one of the headquarters of Palestinian terrorism in Europe’ was based in Umbria’s capital,⁴² while the Umbrian edition of *Il Messaggero* likened the students to fedayeen. This was the line that was taken by the more conservative press. In a long article in the right-wing Roman paper *Il Tempo*, Francobaldo Chiocci decried Perugia’s infiltration by ‘fedayeen, camouflaged as university students’.⁴³ The magazine *Epoca* described Perugia as ‘a real marshalling centre for Arab terrorist groups operating in Europe’. Furthermore, the reasons for the university town’s popularity among Arabs could clearly be laid at the door of the left-wing Umbrian government, ‘just as most of the Arab states bordering the Mediterranean tend to be left-wing’.⁴⁴ In the conservative news magazine *Gente*, Piero Poggio published an investigation into the Palestinians’ Italian contacts, beginning with their special relationship with one of the theorists of armed struggle, the publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli,⁴⁵ described as the main inspiration behind the spread of the Palestinian struggle into Europe. The magazine associated Black September firmly with the extreme Left, citing an anonymous informant who had reported that the organization had bases in Italy and received financing from Libya and countries in the Soviet bloc. As for the students in Perugia, the journalist wrote that ‘at least 60% of the entire Arab group support the Palestinian idea, fanatically and fervently’. However, the investigation made it clear that nothing had emerged to suggest their involvement in operations supporting terrorism.⁴⁶

⁴² Marco Renzini, ‘Gli universitari arabi contro il terrorismo’, *Avanti!*, 8 September 1972.

⁴³ Francobaldo Chiocci, ‘Gli “studenti” arabi abbandonano Perugia’, *Il Tempo*, 12 September 1972.

⁴⁴ Marzio Bellacci, ‘La Palestina di Perugia’, *Epoca*, 24 September 1972.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Galli, *Piombo rosso. La storia completa della lotta armata in Italia dal 1970 a oggi*, (Milan: Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2013), 19–33.

⁴⁶ Piero Poggio, ‘Terroristi arabi in Italia: come vivono e chi li finanzia’, *Gente*, 23 September 1972.

The accusation that the Left was not only complicit but had in some cases fomented the massacre was fairly widespread on the Right. *Secolo d'Italia*, the newspaper of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI), made the right's views clear straight away: 'Communist hatred has torn Olympic tranquillity apart and violated the peaceful harmony, real and unchanging, that has been perpetuated in the world for three thousand years'. The terrorists had been seen wearing red shirts.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, responsibility for the rise in terrorist activity in Germany was linked to the Social Democratic Party's arrival in government.⁴⁸ Franz Maria D'Asaro's editorial decried 'the rage and impotence of Marxist theories [which] continue to destroy man as a creature of God and to plunge the world into the darkest inhumanity of a new and certainly more ungodly Middle Ages. It had to happen in Munich, where the inspiring human values that sport represents had already suffered the insult of odious discrimination against the Rhodesian athletes, to smug and vulgar applause from an increasingly racist communism, exemplified by the Soviet Union's abject "state larceny" and trials persecuting the Jewish minority'. The massacre was of the same stamp as the Calabresi assassination in Italy⁴⁹ and the solution, according to the author, was to bring back the death penalty.⁵⁰ Lumping together different (and sometimes opposing) regimes, he decried 'a

⁴⁷ 'Insanguinate dall'odio comunista le bianche bandiere di Olimpia', *Secolo d'Italia*, 6 September 1972.

⁴⁸ Italicus, 'La matrice rossa di "Settembre nero"', *Secolo d'Italia*, 6 September 1972. The pseudonym 'Italicus' probably concealed a very well-known figure, with a direct connection to the editor, Nino Tripodi: according to sources within the newspaper, it could even have been Guido Giannettini, an agent for the Italian secret services, implicated in the trial for the Piazza Fontana bombing. I am grateful to Alessandra Cavaterra (Fondazione Ugo Spirito e Renzo De Felice) for her research.

⁴⁹ This reference was to the murder of police commissioner Luigi Calabresi on 17 May, which was later attributed, in a ruling that was the subject of wide political debate, to persons associated with the extra-parliamentary left-wing group Lotta Continua. Cf. Galli, *Piombo rosso*, 34–36. It seems significant that among the examples of terrorism to be deplored there was no mention of the murder of three Carabinieri in Peteano (Gorizia) on 31 May, whose perpetrators were not yet known; later investigations attributed responsibility to Ordine Nuovo fascists. Cf. Paolo Morando, *L'ergastolano. La strage di Peteano e l'enigma Vinciguerra*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2022).

⁵⁰ Franz Maria D'Asaro, 'Fermare la barbarie', *Secolo d'Italia*, 6 September 1972.

blueprint of death and terror which extends from Moscow to Havana, Beijing and Santiago de Chile, but most significantly is spreading and developing in Rome, Milan and Genoa'. He blamed 'Italy, lurching to the left as the result of a government policy that has always protected the Left's irresponsible extremism, as the recent revelation of socialist complicity with Greek subversives has amply demonstrated'.⁵¹ In the view of the neo-fascist weekly magazine *Il Borghese*, the 'moral accomplices' of the terrorists were 'all those who sought to bring an element of violence and overbearing abuse of power to this sporting event'. It was therefore the expulsion of the Rhodesian athletes, demanded by the 'African tribes present in Munich', which opened the way for the Black September terrorists, here too defined as 'Communists'.⁵² Terrorism was thus equated with the Italian Resistance's struggle against Nazi-fascism.⁵³

In *La Nazione*, the conservative paper of Florence, Domenico Bartoli noted, as a piece of important news, the twelve-hour delay before the Soviet news agency Tass reported the Munich tragedy. He accused 'the mindless lapdogs of communism and lovers of the Third World (who are blind, like all lovers)' of mythologizing the Palestinian fedayeen.⁵⁴ *Il Tempo* maintained that 'for the Communists, whoever wields a weapon against the West and what the West represents, is a friend who must be defended and applauded'.⁵⁵ Even *La Voce Repubblicana*, the PRI's mouthpiece, which was not on the right but promoted the most fervent Italian Atlanticism, criticized the Communists and Soviet support for the Arab world.⁵⁶

In many of these articles, the expression of the newspaper's own views was accompanied by debates with other publications, often heated, their arguments being batted backwards and forwards. Opinions also varied over Black September's underlying ideology—the Left saw it as right-wing and the Right saw it as left-wing⁵⁷—and encompassed references to the

⁵¹ 'Contro il terrorismo insorge il mondo civile', *Secolo d'Italia*, 7 September 1972.

⁵² 'Monaco 1972: Olimpiadi della viltà', *Il Borghese*, 10 September 1972.

⁵³ 'I padri (rossi) del terrorismo', *Il Borghese*, 24 September 1972.

⁵⁴ Domenico Bartoli, 'Le radici del dramma', *La Nazione*, 6 September 1972.

⁵⁵ 'I gesuiti moderni', *Il Tempo*, 7 September 1972.

⁵⁶ 'L'escalation del massacro', *La Voce Repubblicana*, 7 December 1972.

⁵⁷ For example: 'Che cos'è "Settembre nero"', *Avanti!*, 6 September 1972; F.M.D. [Franz Maria D'Asaro], 'Sciacalli', *Secolo d'Italia*, 7 September 1972; Domenico Bartoli, 'C'è da noi chi vorrebbe una pista nera anche a Monaco', *Epoca*, 17 September 1972. Black September was considered to have an 'unclear ideology' by Bernardo Valli, 'I terroristi di "Settembre nero"', *Il Giorno*, 6 September 1972.

history of the Jewish people and past persecutions. *Il Giorno* published a comment by Jesse Owens, the Olympic hero of Berlin 1936, who claimed that he saw the same hatred for Jews in Munich that he had seen in Hitler's Games.⁵⁸ The most significant element was a semantic shift: after 1967, turns of phrase used to describe traditional European antisemitism were increasingly applied to the Palestinians and were also used on this occasion, especially on the left and in Catholic spheres, in accordance with the well-established principle of 'Holocaust inversion'.⁵⁹ After the Israeli reprisals, a report in *Avvenire* stated: 'The world can only be horrified by this new tragedy. For every Israeli killed on that nightmare night in Munich, more than ten "fedayeen" have lost their lives to the bombs of Israel's Phantom jets'.⁶⁰ This was perceived as an allusion to the ratios—well known to the Italian public—used by the Nazis in their wartime reprisals against partisans.⁶¹ The author added that the Israeli response might have aggravated the situation by making peace a more distant prospect: 'An eye for an eye: the "slogan" of a cheap rhetoric, recalling the false vigour of years that are thankfully in the past'.⁶² In *Paese Sera*, the *Giuristi Democratici* association, representing the legal professions, likened the Israeli reprisals to Nazi retaliations.⁶³

The socialist magazine *ABC* published an article with the title 'Il palestinese errante'—the Wandering Palestinian, referencing the figure of the 'Wandering Jew'⁶⁴—while the 'hounding of Arabs' in Germany recalled 'other times', a clear allusion to Nazism.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the Socialists of the magazine *Critica Sociale* pointed out the contradiction inherent in the fact that many fascists were defending Israel, 'some of whom were dragging Jews out of their homes and delivering them to their murderers thirty years ago'.⁶⁶ In *Settegiorni*, Ruggero Orfei looked back at Israel's origins

⁵⁸ Jesse Owens, 'I tremendi fantasmi di allora', *Il Giorno*, 7 September 1972.

⁵⁹ Lesley Klaff, 'Holocaust Inversion', *Israel Studies*, XXIV:2, 2019, 73–90.

⁶⁰ Massimo Ranghieri, 'I giorni del terrore', *Avvenire*, 10 September 1972.

⁶¹ Giancarlo Monina, 'Fosse Ardeatine', in Enzo Collotti, Renato Sandri, Frediano Sessi (eds), *Dizionario della Resistenza*, Vol. II: *Luoghi, formazioni, protagonisti*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), 380–383.

⁶² Ranghieri, 'I giorni del terrore'.

⁶³ 'La rappresaglia di Israele come quelle dei nazisti', *Paese Sera*, 14 September 1972.

⁶⁴ George K. Anderson, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew*, (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965).

⁶⁵ Carlo Rovere, 'Il palestinese errante', *ABC*, 20 October 1972.

⁶⁶ 'La strage di Monaco', *Critica Sociale*, 20 September 1972.

and emphasized that ‘the Palestinians today are experiencing the same conditions that the Zionists experienced before the creation of the state of Israel. There is no denying that the Palestinians are without their “Arab home”.⁶⁷ [...]. There is no denying that they were abruptly driven out by a war [...]. There is no denying that they have been placed in desperate circumstances with nothing left to lose’. He compared the terrorist acts of Palestinian groups to those of Zionist organizations, the Irgun and the so-called Stern Gang. Orfei warned about the spread of a rationale assuming ‘might always ends in being right’, reflecting the disparity in the way the massacres in Munich and those in Lebanon and Syria were judged. This was further confirmed by the position Italian fascists adopted after Munich.⁶⁸ In this case too, these positions were heavily loaded with political controversy, but demonstrated the perception that the histories of the two peoples were intertwined even in their founding tragedies, as the most recent historiography has revealed.⁶⁹

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the copious journalistic output of that time the Italian press displayed a consistent tendency to foster debate between newspapers, led by critics from within the world of journalism: alongside attempts to understand the event and to set it in a broader context, the Munich tragedy became the subject of self-referential discussion for a press which tended to focus on itself and on questions of the most topical political interest. However, although we cannot tell to what extent this was conscious on the part of the media, the debates between journalists and political parties, while provincial and short term in their nature, also informed the thinking of the Italian authorities, who were discreetly determined to protect the country from the risks of international terrorism: a process which was hastened by Italy’s involvement in the bloodshed that followed the Munich massacre. On 16 October, the poet Wael Abdel Zwaiter, a Palestinian resident in Italy and spokesperson for al-Fatah, was assassinated in Rome in the first

⁶⁷ The reference is to the expression ‘National home for the Jewish people’ in the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

⁶⁸ Ruggero Orfei, ‘Il terrorismo dei più forti’, *Settegiorni*, 24 September 1972.

⁶⁹ Bashir Bashir, Amos Goldberg (eds), *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Grace Wermenbol, *A Tale of Two Narratives: The Holocaust, the Nakba, and the Israeli-Palestinian Battle of Memories*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

of a series of murders by the Israeli secret services, targeting individuals thought to have been involved with Black September. In this case, there are many doubts as to whether Zwaiter, who was committed to forging closer cultural connections between Italy and Palestine, had played the role that Israel ascribed to him.⁷⁰ Other incidents took place subsequently on Italian soil and before long a scheme was put in place which later became known as the ‘Moro deal’—the ‘lodo Moro’—because Aldo Moro was apparently one of those who had inspired it: this was an agreement made with the Palestinian organizations, allowing them to move militants and arms across Italy in exchange for excluding the country from their terrorist activities.⁷¹

At the same time, while exhibiting a degree of opportunism when used to criticize political adversaries, the many references in the press to other instances of international terrorism—including Italian terrorism—were evidence of a certain awareness of the transnational aspect of a phenomenon that united different countries and peoples. The commentary that recognized this reality seemed to coincide with the moment when European governments fully acknowledged the problem.⁷² Attempts to understand terrorism—and sometimes to justify it—by denouncing the injustices at its root were matched by contrary observations about how to quash it as a passing criminal phenomenon. It is possible to glimpse, in the press commentary of September 1972, not only the demands for progress made by subordinate classes or peoples but also the seeds of reaction against threats to the status quo, which would feature regularly throughout the decade in Italy as in many other parts of the world.

⁷⁰ Janet Venn-Brown, *Per un palestinese. Dedicato a più voci a Wael Zwaiter*, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1979).

⁷¹ Valentine Lomellini, *Il ‘lodo Moro’. Terrorismo e ragion di Stato (1969–1986)*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2022). Aldo Moro apparently wrote about it in a letter to Flaminio Piccoli in April 1978, during his imprisonment following his abduction at the hands of the Red Brigades. Cf. Aldo Moro, *Lettere dalla prigionia*, ed. by Miguel Gotor, (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), 103–107.

⁷² Valentine Lomellini, *La diplomazia del terrore (1967–1989)*, (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2023), 27 ff.

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