

Counter Terrorism Responses and Failures at the 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre

**Jason D. Söderblom
Analyst for the Terrorism Intelligence Centre &
Director www.world-ice.com**

18 / August / 2003

Counter Terrorism Responses and Failures at the 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre

By Jason D. Söderblom

This case study is a commentary on the terrorism and counter terrorism successes and failures at the 1972 Munich Olympic kidnapping, a kidnapping which became a massacre of eleven Israeli hostages, five Black September Organization (BSO) operatives and one West German policeman. I will argue that despite the failure of the BSO to achieve the stated release of 241 prisoners, the assault on the Munich Olympics was successful in raising the plight of the Palestinian issue on the world stage and causing fear for Israel. There were however, practical lessons to be learnt by the BSO, a nationalist and to a lesser extent a religiously motivated Islamic off shoot organisation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).¹ I will elaborate on the lessons learnt on that fateful day of September 5, 1972.

At approximately 0400 hours on September 5, 1972, the "fedayeen" (men of sacrifice) began executing their plan to scale the fences at Kusoczinskidamm and capture the Israeli Olympic athletes residing at the Olympic Village apartments.² The BSO made their way to apartment one, at 31 Connollystrasse, Olympic Village Apartments, and inserted a passkey.³ Yossef Gutfreund, a 275 pound wrestling referee in apartment one, began reacting to the sound of Arab voices behind his door. He quickly alerted his roommates there was danger and pushed his body against the door in an attempt to deny the Arab fedayeen entrance. Gutfreund's efforts were effective for only a few seconds, but allowed one roommate, weightlifting coach Tuvia Sokolovsky, time to break out a window and successfully escape.⁴

By about 0500 hours, the BSO terrorists had killed two Israeli Olympic team members and captured nine.⁵ Due to the unanticipated battle and chaos, the BSO terrorists failed to locate eight additional Israeli Olympic members in apartments two, four and five. Two Israeli athletes had escaped and made their way to safety. Despite the gunfire, the activity at the Village Apartments drew very little notice from other occupants in the area. The two athletes who escaped alerted the authorities to the incident. Within the next hour the BSO terrorists had issued a set of demands, written in English, and had thrown Moshe Weinberger's body into the street.⁶

¹ George Rosie, *The Directory Of International Terrorism*, Mainstream Publishing Company, Mainstream Publishing, 1986, 74-75.

² Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, 70.

³ Alexander B. Calahan, *Countering Terrorism: 1972 Olympic Massacre and Development of Israeli Covert Action Teams*, <http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/calahan.htm> accessed 10/08/2003.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mitchell Bard, *The Munich Massacre*, <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Terrorism/munich.html> , accessed 17/08/2003.

The BSO had claimed responsibility for the actions at the village apartments.⁷ Their demands included the release of 241 prisoners held in Israel and West Germany.⁸ The BSO provided a typewritten list in English language naming the prisoners who they demanded released; these included Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader, the founders and leaders of the German based Baader-Meinhof Gang. The German police had arrested both individuals earlier in June 1972. The BSO also demanded that the police provide three planes for an escape. Upon receiving confirmation on the release of the prisoners, the BSO would select a plane to transport them to a safe destination.

West German police negotiators successfully extended three deadlines set by the BSO. The BSO then demanded a jet to transport them to Cairo where the prisoners they had demanded for release would meet them. However the government of Egypt refused to provide assistance in support of any West German police action during the crisis.⁹ This development, in combination with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir's absolute refusal to negotiate, forced Schreiber to conclude that a rescue attempt was his only option. Schreiber determined that in order to conduct a successful hostage rescue, he must confine the terrorists to Germany. To initiate a rescue, he decided the best option was to isolate the terrorists at Germany's Furstenfeldbruck Airport.¹⁰ At the airfield, German sharpshooters would attempt a hostage rescue operation.¹¹

A diplomatic wrangle arose when the Mossad Chief Zvi Zamir on orders from Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir met with the West German authorities. Meir had directed Zamir to negotiate permission for specially trained Israeli commandos, the 'sayeret,' to conduct the hostage rescue. The sayeret are elite trained reconnaissance forces drawn from the ranks of the Israeli Special Forces and experienced in hostage rescue techniques. Although Chancellor Brandt might have acquiesced, the local state officials refused. Aside from the fact that the Germans might lose in allowing the 'sayeret' to intervene, the German federal constitution dictated that the decision was in the hands of the state officials not the federal.

The BSO had negotiated helicopters to get to the Furstenfeldbruck Airport. After the BSO arrived at the airport the West German Police realized there were eight terrorist members, not the five which intelligence originally alleged. This created a logistical error as the police had only deployed five German snipers to initiate the rescue. This was far short of the sniper requirements for this type of ambush scenario. The German police also placed a dummy Lufthansa Boeing 727 at Furstenfeldbruck Airport, located approximately fifteen miles from the center of Munich. Eight police officers deployed around the jet were dressed as flight attendants and ground service crew. Unfortunately another German error was that the police in the dummy jet were without radio contact with the command post or other police units.

⁷ Alexander B. Calahan, *Countering Terrorism: 1972 Olympic Massacre and Development of Israeli Covert Action Teams*, http://www.totse.com/en/politics/foreign_military_intelligence_agencies/166522.html, accessed 16/08/2003

⁸ Bruce Hoffman, as above n2, 71.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Alexander B. Calahan, as above n3.

As the BSO terrorists moved a set distance from the hostages, Schreiber ordered the police snipers to open fire. Their initial rounds were off-target and a firefight ensued that lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. Throughout this battle the Israeli captives were sitting bound in the helicopters that had transported them to the airfield. The German police initiated an 'infantry' attack to move the terrorists away from the helicopters. As the attack began, one fedayeen tossed a grenade into one of the helicopters holding five of the Israeli athletes. The helicopter exploded, killing all five athletes. Shortly thereafter, another fedayeen member entered the second helicopter and shot and killed the last four hostages.

The police captured three BSO personnel during the firefight. At approximately 0130 hours, the police killed the last of the BSO terrorists. The German investigation that followed indicated a few of the hostages may have inadvertently been shot by the German police during the gun battle, yet a definite conclusion was not possible due to the severely burned bodies.

Conclusion and Outcomes

Whilst the BSO's objective to release 241 prisoners was not achieved, the media attention created by the Munich Olympic attacks was an unmitigated success.¹² Bruce Hoffman, the author of "Inside Terrorism" states that "the Olympic Tragedy provided the first clear evidence that even terrorist attacks which fail to achieve their ostensible objectives can nonetheless still be counted successful provided that the operation is sufficiently dramatic to capture the media's attention."¹³ And the 1967 Israeli invasion of the Occupied Territories was back on the world stage as an issue.

Israeli Mossad initiated an ambitious covert counter-terrorist campaign. Alexander B. Calahan the author of "Countering Terrorism: 1972 Olympic Massacre and Development of Israeli Covert Action Teams" claims that Golda Meir and the Israeli cabinet's top secret 'Committee-X' devised a campaign in retaliation for the Munich attacks. Secret Israeli assassination cells later assassinated many BSO operatives.¹⁴

The West Germans' efforts at managing the 1972 Munich Olympic hostage events were criticised by Israel. In response to this embarrassment the West Germans quickly established a specialist anti-terrorism detachment of their border police known as GSG-9 (Grenzschutzgruppe Neun). Five years later GSG-9 in Somalia GSG-9 proved its efficiency in rescuing eighty-six hostages on a Lufthansa flight hijacked in Mogadishu, Somalia en route from Mallorca by Palestinian and West German terrorists. The Somalia rescue was a great success. No hostages were killed.

¹² Bruce Hoffman, as above n2, 73.

¹³ Alexander B. Calahan, as above n3.

¹⁴ Alexander B. Calahan, as above n3.

GLOSSARY

ANTITERRORISM: Passive and defensive measures; activities such as education, foreign liaison training, surveillance, and countersurveillance, designed to deter terrorist activities.

BLACK SEPTEMBER ORGANISATION: BSO, name utilised from approximately 1971 - 1974, by the Fatah, the military force of the PLO.

Also Known As:

- Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) (*Dom. Name*)
- Fatah Revolutionary Council
- Arab Revolutionary Council
- Arab Revolutionary Brigades
- Revolutionary Organization of Socialist Muslims

COLLATERAL DAMAGE: Severe injury or death of innocents as a result of an operation.

COMMITTEE-X: Special top secret committee within the Israeli Cabinet addressing retaliation methods against the PLO for the killing of 11 Israeli citizens at Munich; chaired by Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan.

COVER: Fictitious background devised to support officers in the conduct of covert operations.

COVERT OPERATIONS: Clandestine activities conducted in foreign countries generally conducted by the military or an intelligence agency.

COUNTERTERRORISM: Active measures; operations which incorporate the direct intervention of terrorists groups or the targeting and assassination of terrorist personnel.

EVIDENCE TRAIL: Any evidence establishing the movements of officers involved in operations; travel records, passports, hotels, phone records, etc.

FATAH: The military arm of the PLO.

FEDAYEEN: Term used by Islamic terrorists to describe themselves. (term used and explained by George Jonas, in his book, *Vengeance*.)

HUMINT: Acronym for human intelligence collection.

KIDON: Specially trained elite assassination unit within the Mossad Metsada.

METSADA: Secret organization in the Mossad which operates combatants.

MOSSAD: Israeli intelligence service.

SAYERET: Elite trained reconnaissance forces drawn from the ranks of the Israeli Special Forces.

SIGNAL: Discrete action by one member of a team sending a predetermined message to another.

STAFF OFFICER: A fully vetted staff employee of an intelligence organisation.

TARGET: Term used to identify the subject of an action.

TRADECRAFT: Special clandestine techniques utilised in covert operations.

Bibliography

Alexander B. Calahan, *Countering Terrorism: 1972 Olympic Massacre and Development of Israeli Covert Action Teams*, <http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/calahan.htm>, accessed 10/08/2003.

Alexander B. Calahan, *Countering Terrorism: 1972 Olympic Massacre and Development of Israeli Covert Action Teams*, http://www.totse.com/en/politics/foreign_military_intelligence_agencies/166522.html, accessed 16/08/2003.

Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Every Spy a Prince* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990)

George Rosie, *The Directory Of International Terrorism*, Mainstream Publishing Company, 1986.

George Jonas, *Vengeance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984)

John P. Wolf, *Antiterrorist Initiatives* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989)

Mitchell Bard, *The Munich Massacre*, <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Terrorism/munich.html> , accessed 17/08/2003.

Nasog.net, *Black September*,

http://www.nasog.net/intelligence/terrorism/organizations/Black_September.htm, accessed 17/08/03.

Pyotr Bely , *This day 30 years ago: Black September in Munich and subsequent Retribution*, Pravda Online, <http://english.pravda.ru/world/2002/09/05/36064.html> , accessed 17/08/2003.

Walter Reich (editor), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998.