

Eye for an Eye: Israel's Swift and Devastating Response to the Munich Massacre at the 1972 Olympic Games

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Ben Mapes, an undergraduate History major, wrote this paper for Dr. Roger Beck's HIS 2500 course, Historical Research and Writing, in spring 2009.

"From the blood-drenched history of the Jewish nation, we learn that violence which 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 organizations wherever we can reach them. That is our obligation to ourselves and to peace."

-Golda Meir, 1972¹

Israeli participation in the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, Germany was a global statement of momentous proportions. The world was still in shell-shock from World War II and the Holocaust, but when the Olympic committee decided to have Germany host the Olympics in Munich, it appeared as if the world had forgiven Germany for the atrocities committed by a select group of its citizens, and Israel's participation served as the Jewish pardon. Forgiveness aside, however, all eyes were on Germany with collective lips bitten in anxiety for fear of a repeat of the events only three decades prior. Therefore, when an Islamic extremist group, calling themselves "Black September," took eleven members of the Israeli team hostage, the world's fears were realized: another horrific and public assault on the Jewish nation.

Since the state was founded in 1948, Israel has engaged in countless armed conflicts to save its own existence. Dealing with such difficulties on a day-to-day basis forces Israel to adopt an intense response policy to any kind of aggression. The 1948 and 1967 wars demonstrated how relentless an Israeli response could be. In the years following these wars, Israeli ferocity in repelling foreign and terrorist violence increased, culminating in its response to the events of September 5, 1972. Since that time, Israel's anti-terrorism policy has unarguably been "an eye for an eye."² The responses to the "Munich Massacre" were the best possible responses to a terrorist action Israel could have taken.

¹ Golda Meir, 1972, from Aaron J. Klein's *Striking Back: The 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre and Israel's Deadly Response*, translated by Mitch Ginsburg (Random House: New York) 2005, p. vii.

² Terrence Smith, "The Planes' Message: 'An Eye for an Eye,'" *New York Times*, September 10, 1972.

Two Books: *Striking Back vs. Vengeance*

This paper owes a great deal to the work of two scholars of Israel's response to Munich: Aaron J. Klein's *Striking Back: the True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team* and George Jonas's *Vengeance: the 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre and Israel's Deadly Response*. Due to Israeli policy toward the release of government documents, especially those dealing with covert operations, these two books, based off interviews with Mossad agents, officers, and operatives, present the most detailed and reliable evidence and facts regarding *Operation: Wrath of God*. Neither book has been recognized by the Israeli government as an accurate account, but, at the same time, neither has been discredited by Israel or academia. A majority of both accounts coincide with each other, giving both accounts amazing credibility. There are, however, some variances between the two accounts. For instance, *Vengeance* is based almost solely on the account of Alias: Avner, a man claiming to be a Mossad operative in charge of one of the assassination teams, and he is personally responsible for many of the killings; in *Striking Back*, however, Klein's main operative is a man named Michael Harari who organized a number of teams which killed the numerous targets.

In Klein's book Harari was responsible for the death of Wael Zu'aytir, the first target to be killed, but in Jonas's book, it is Avner that pulled the trigger on Zu'aytir. This would lead many to believe that Harari is Avner, but as Klein's book progresses, Harari becomes involved in a number of activities that Avner is not involved in, including the Lillehammer incident. Further inconsistencies between Avner and Harari include their ties with Mossad after being given their mission. Avner rarely spoke with Mossad or his case officer, Ephraim, during the operation; Harari, however, was in constant contact with Mossad and, at his request, had General Zvi Zamir, chief of Mossad, on location for almost all the operations with the strange exception of the one in Lillehammer.

September 5, 1972

September 4th seemed to be a relatively normal day for the Israeli Olympic team. That night, however, none of them could have expected what would happen. At approximately 4:00 am local time September 5th, several terrorists broke into the apartment complex housing the Israeli athletes and coaches and proceeded to enter apartment number one which housed: track coach Amitzur Shapira, fencer Andrei Spitzer, rifle coach Kehat Shorr, weightlifting judge Yacov Springer, wrestling referee Yossef Gutfreund, and weightlifting coach Tuvia Sokolovsky.³ Gutfreund had been awake at

³ Alexander B. Callahan, "Countering Terrorism: The Israeli Response to the 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre and the Development of Independent Covert Action Teams," (master's thesis, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1995).

the time of their entry, and, upon seeing the door open and an assault rifle, likely a Soviet-made AK-47, he threw himself into the door and alerted his roommates. Sokolovsky managed to break a window and escape, but the rest of the roommates, including Gutfreund, were captured.

The terrorists proceeded to investigate the rest of the complex and captured six others on the Israeli team. One Israeli, wrestling coach Moshe Weinberger, attacked the terrorists, knocking two unconscious before a third opened fire and killed him. During the raid, Yossef Romanno and David Marc Berger attempted to escape through a window; Berger escaped successfully, but Romanno, unable to climb out the window, found a knife and attacked the terrorists. Romanno managed to kill one assailant before being shot down. By the end of the raid, the terrorists had killed two Israelis and captured nine more.

The terrorists immediately released a list of demands to the authorities that included the release of several political prisoners and safe passage to an airport with helicopters ready to evacuate them. While the terrorists were en route to the airport, German police set up a sniper task force to intercept them on the runway. When the terrorists arrived, they put the hostages into two helicopters, which were standing by as per their request. The terrorist found, however, that the German police had set up an ambush for them. German snipers opened fire and a firefight ensued. During the shooting, the terrorists executed the remaining hostages. One terrorist threw a fragmentation grenade into one of the two helicopters while another opened fire at close range with an assault rifle on the other. After the shooting ended, only three terrorists remained and were captured.

The German rescue effort was and continues to be heavily criticized. First, Mossad chief Zvi Zamir and his aide were both on the scene during the attempted rescue, but neither was consulted as to the manner in which the situation would be handled.⁴ Second, the German police were completely unprepared to handle a terrorist situation. The snipers were not trained as sharpshooters. The riot police were not equipped to handle 7.62mm rounds. Armored vehicles were not ordered to the airport until ten minutes into the shooting. Most tragically, the helicopter that was grenaded was left to burn until all terrorists were neutralized. Upon investigation afterward, autopsy results show that David Berger was not killed as a result of the exploding grenade, but from smoke inhalation from the burning helicopter.⁵ It was a massive embarrassment for the German people being the first public incident between the Germans and Jews since World War II and ended in a massive failure.

(There are many conflicting reports as to why he was awake, but the most popular account is that he had heard voices and woke up to ask them to be quiet).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Klein, *Striking Back*, pp. 71-76.

This event had repercussions for the rest of the Olympics and beyond. First, the games were suspended for the first time in recorded Olympic history for one day. Second, the remaining Israeli athletes were rushed out of Germany for safety reasons, and all Jewish athletes, including American swimmer Mark Spitz, were either forced back to their home countries, or put into protective isolation for the remainder of the games. Third, Israel made a strong lobby to the Olympic Committee to have all nations that support terrorist organizations to be banished from further games.⁶ Fourth, the Olympic community greatly increased their security measures as was evident at the Innsbruck Winter Olympics in the winter of 1974.⁷

Black September

The Black September Organization (BSO) was a radical Palestinian organization with unclear origins and connections. A telegram from the US State Department to the capitals of NATO participants suggests that BSO was a child of Fatah, the PLO faction controlled by Yasser Arafat.⁸ This document suggests two critical things: number one, it suggests that America supported Israel's retaliation because the American State Department decided to investigate for origins of the BSO; and two, it suggests that Black September was a secretive organization: its connections and possibly even existence were to be kept secretive. The second point suggests that while Yasser Arafat disavowed a connection to the organization the US State Department found evidence linking the BSO to Fatah.⁹

The name "Black September" was taken from the event known as Black September. In September of 1970, different factions of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) attempted to seize the Jordanian throne. In response, King Hussein of Jordan declared martial law and expelled the PLO, including Yasser Arafat, from Jordan.¹⁰ The deaths and expulsion of thousands of Palestinians became known as Black September and supports the belief that BSO was a wing of the PLO. It is believed that the actions taken by BSO at Munich were fueled by obvious anti-Semitic sentiment of a Palestinian terrorist organization sparked by King Hussein's actions.

It is clear, from the numerous accounts of the event, that it was not the terrorists' intent to kill the hostages. In fact, no hostages were killed before the terrorists were attacked in any way; the hostages killed in the

⁶ John Husar, "Calls for Ban on Sports Terror," *Chicago Tribune*, 22 Feb., 1973, C1.

⁷ "Innsbruck Plans Tighter Security," *Chicago Tribune*, 8 Jan., 1976, C2.

⁸ US Department of State, 13 March 1973, *Telegram to all NATO Capitals*, from www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Terrorism/plobso.html

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Black September: The PLO's attempt to take over Jordan in 1970," Eretz Yisroel, <http://www.eretzyisroel.org/~samuel/september.html>.

apartments attacked the terrorists personally, and the final hostages were killed after the botched German police rescue. The true motives of the BSO may never be fully understood past the events in Munich, but the final outcomes will live on in infamy.

Wrath of God and Spring of Youth

On September 12, 1972, Prime Minister Golda Meir appeared before a special session of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. She addressed the Munich incident and assured the parliament that Israel would respond.¹¹ And Israel did respond in one of the most well known anti-terrorist actions in history. Two operations were chosen to retaliate against the BSO and PLO. *Operation: Spring of Youth*, an aerial assault on suspected terrorist camps, and *Operation: Wrath of God*, a precision assassination program.

Spring of Youth was a massive air strike program targeted at all suspected terrorist camps from southern Lebanon to northern Jordan. Through a variety of means, from interviews to interrogations to aerial surveillance, Mossad found a number of camps that they targeted for destruction. Prime Minister Meir is quoted as saying, "Wherever a plot is being woven, wherever people are planning to murder Jews and Israelis – that is where we need to strike."¹² A series of bombing raids pounded southern Lebanon, western Syria, and northern Jordan. These strikes began before Meir addressed the Knesset, the first wave being dropped on September 9, just four days after the massacre. The strikes gained worldwide attention. *New York Times* reporter, Terrence Smith, claimed that the strikes were a clear signal to the Arab world that Israel's anti-terrorism policy is "an Eye for an Eye."¹³ While America continued its silent support of Israel's activities, other nations voiced their disapproval of such aggressive actions. A Chinese newspaper claimed that the Chinese people were strongly against such aggressive behavior from Israel.¹⁴ Although, China, as a communist nation with a government controlled newspaper, spoke out against the Israeli attacks, the government refused to make an official comment on the events in Munich a few days earlier.

Spring of Youth stunned the Arab world. In an almost reflexive manner, Israel essentially carpet-bombed terrorist camps from Lebanon to Jordan. The airstrikes produced extreme confusion, rage, and embarrassment in the Arab nations. First, Arabs were confused by the precision of the Israeli assaults; by all accounts, not one of the targets was a false target, every casualty was confirmed to be an Arab guerilla and every encampment had the means to produce a significant assault on Israel.

¹¹ Klein, *Striking Back*, pp. 100-101.

¹² Ibid, p. 106.

¹³ Smith, "Eye for an Eye."

¹⁴ "Chinese Denounce Israel for Raiding Syria, Lebanon," *New York Times*, 14 September, 1972, p. 13.

Second, it was a blatant Israeli attack on Arab soil. Third, it angered many Arabs who noticed that Palestinian terrorist groups continued their operations without regard to the retaliation. Many groups began putting pressure on the PLO to cease its activities for fear of further retaliation from Israel and Mossad. Finally, some accounts place some high-ranking PLO leaders within a mile of the targets of the airstrikes, but notes that many, including Yasser Arafat, did not attend the funeral for the men killed in the airstrikes.¹⁵ PLO leaders were running scared; *Spring of Youth* proved that Israel could decimate any significant aggressive camp in the Arabian Peninsula. *Wrath of God* proved that the leaders of the PLO, BSO, and other aggressive organizations could be reached anywhere in the world.

The more well known action taken, thanks to Hollywood, was *Wrath of God*. *Operation: Wrath of God* was a tactical assassination program carried out by multiple Mossad task forces over seven years. The goal of this mission was twofold: to destroy the remnants of the BSO, and to send a message to all other terrorist groups in the form of deterrence and targeted killings. Due to the secret nature of the Israeli government, much is unknown about the actual events. What is known for sure is that, in response to the Munich Massacre, Golda Meir approved the targeted killing of a number of Palestinians believed to be the leadership of Black September. Between 1972 and 1979 many men believed to be on the list were killed, including one Ali Hassan Salameh, the man thought to be the founder of Black September, in 1979.

There have been many dramatizations of *Wrath of God*, most recently in Steven Spielberg's 2005 film, *Munich*. *Munich* showed the operation of one team of Mossad agents operating in Europe. At the end of the film, one of the senior agents alludes to multiple teams being used to assassinate BSO and PLO targets. The most important piece of information gathered from Spielberg's film is the method of assassination used on the targets. The Israeli team used explosives to kill a majority of the targets, in a way countering terrorism with terrorism.¹⁶

The film *Munich* was based on the accounts of two aforementioned works: Aaron J. Klein, author of *Striking Back: The 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre and Israel's Deadly Response*, and George Jonas, author of *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team*. According to several sources, including Klein and Jonas, the first target killed was Wael Zu'aytir who was shot twelve to fourteen times at close range with .22 caliber rounds.^{17,18} From then on, by all accounts, it seems that the teams stuck mainly to explosives whenever possible. Explosives contain a certain

¹⁵ Klein, *Striking Back*, 169.

¹⁶ Eric Bana and Daniel Craig, *Munich*, DVD

¹⁷ Klein, *Striking Back*, 117-120.

¹⁸ George Jonas, *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team* (Simon and Schuster) 2005, from <http://books.google.com>.

ambiguity and message in their nature; anyone can shoot or be shot, while dealing in explosives requires an expertise and shows a general motive to kill instead of a possible botched mugging. An explosion garners national and, at times, international attention. That is what the Israeli government wanted to do. Part of the mission was to avenge the fallen athletes, but most of it was a message to nations and terrorist organizations around the world. A corpse with a few holes in it does not accomplish this, but one in fifty or so pieces does. On April 10, 1973, Israeli commandos took out three high-profile men within the PLO and BSO in their homes in Beirut.¹⁹ This was the largest assassination (measured in manpower) of *Wrath of God*. Rumors persist, and are mentioned in Jonas's book and Spielberg's film, that many future Israeli leaders took part in *Wrath of God*, including future Prime Minister Ehud Barak.^{20,21}

Ali Hassan Salameh was the supposed mastermind of the Munich Massacre and number one on Israel's list of names to be targeted. From 1972 on, Mossad dedicated a significant portion of *Wrath of God's* intelligence team to finding Salameh. Both Jonas's and Klein's books examine multiple attempts at Salameh's life, but it is known with certainty that none of them succeeded until 1979 in Beirut.²² Salameh was, in fact, a difficult target to get to. What had come to be the standard procedure for the Mossad agents would not work on Salameh. His paranoia sparked after *Spring of Youth* and just grew as each assassination occurred. Thus, Salameh enlisted an expansive personal security force to protect him, making the standard procedure, mentioned above for eliminating targets, very difficult. According to Klein's account, Salameh was killed while in his Chevrolet after meeting with his wife on January 22, 1979. The convoy turned down a small side road en route to his destination and passed an empty, parked Volkswagen. This Volkswagen had been rented the day before and fitted "with eleven pounds of hexagene, a plastic explosive equal to seventy pounds of dynamite."²³ When Salameh's car rolled past the seemingly peaceful German car, a Mossad operative detonated the explosive, which could be felt several blocks away. One body was identified by Mossad agents, eyewitnesses, and police as Ali Hassan Salameh.²⁴

¹⁹ "Strike Against Terror," *New York Times*, 11 April, 1973, p. 46.

²⁰ Jonas, *Vengeance*, pp. 182-197.

²¹ Bana/Craig, *Munich*.

²² Jonas, *Vengeance*, pp. 330-332.

²³ Klein, *Striking Back*, pp. 221-222

²⁴ Ibid

Reactions to *Wrath of God*

Wrath of God was supposed to be a covert operation. Even though the targets were killed by a political agency, it was not supposed to be known that these were political assassinations. Naturally though, as known high-profile Palestinian terrorists started being assassinated immediately after Munich, many knew, even though there was no confirmation, that Israel was responsible. This caused major responses among the remaining members of Black September, and the Arab nations.

Members of Black September, though they had created one the most horrific hostage situations in Israeli history, was not ready to back down. Israel responded swiftly and effectively with *Operation: Spring of Youth*, which caused a retaliatory letter-bombing campaign from the BSO. Several letters equipped with plastic explosives were mailed to Israeli embassies around the world. Most of them were addressed from Amsterdam, including one that went to Agricultural Counselor Ami Shachori. Shachori was expecting a delivery of Dutch seeds and never thought twice about the narrow envelope from Amsterdam. This severe misperception cost Shachori his life and temporarily deafened his colleague, Theodor Kaddar, who had also been in the room at the time. After this incident, sixty-four similar letter bombs were discovered before they could be delivered. These were sent to embassies and government buildings all over the globe with several being found in Canada, Paris, Vienna, Brussels, New York, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem.²⁵

Black September also took a role all too familiar to Americans today. On October 29, 1972, several Arabian terrorists took over Lufthansa Flight 615 from Damascus to Frankfurt. The terrorist who took command of the flight controls announced his control of the airplane and identified himself as Abu-Ali. His goal was to have the three Black September operatives captured at Munich released in what came to be known as "Operation Munich." After making his demands public, the German government, without consulting the Israelis, immediately acquiesced to Abu-Ali's demands and sent the three prisoners to Zagreb, Yugoslavia, the agreed upon exchange site. However, the hostages were not released in Zagreb as was agreed upon. Instead, Abu-Ali flew the hostages and newly freed prisoners to Tripoli, Libya where the hostages were released. Israelis were disgusted and enraged by Germany's decision to release the prisoners, and even more so at how quickly the decision was made. Golda Meir claimed that she felt physically sick from the news of their release.²⁶

There are opinions either way about whether *Wrath of God* was the proper response Israel should have taken. Critics make a variety of claims

²⁵ "And Now, Mail-a-Death," *Time*, 2 October, 1972, from <http://www.time.com>.

²⁶ Klein, *Striking Back*, pp. 125-128.

including the credibility of the information used to choose the targets and citing the Lillehammer incident.

Klein notes, in the chapter regarding Wael Zu'aytir, the first target, that information regarding Zu'aytir's guilt and connection to Munich may have been faulty. Klein states that Zu'aytir was not directly involved in the planning or perpetrating of Munich in any way.²⁷ Years later, Aharon Yariv, Golda Meir's advisor on terrorism, commented to the BBC that Zu'aytir was more of a support figure. He aided in funding and transportation of terrorist activities and supplies, but never participated in any form of planning or any action that could be tied with Munich.²⁸ According to Jonas, Zu'aytir was chosen for assassination due to suspected involvement in the hijacking and attempted destruction by tape-recorder bomb of two El Al airplanes.²⁹ Even with these justifications, there still remains controversy over whether Zu'aytir's assassination was necessary or not.

Second, and most controversial, Mossad agents killed an innocent person in Lillehammer, Norway. Ali Hassan Salameh was the number one person on Mossad's list, being suspected of being the mastermind and architect of the events at the Munich Games. Salameh was a close confidant of Arafat and was notorious for being involved in high-profile terrorist activities. Mossad intelligence appeared to have located him in Lillehammer, Norway. The Mossad team located the man, followed him to a secluded enough area, and killed him. The man's wife had been holding his hand as the Israeli assassins shot him down. The plan went perfectly, save for the fact that the man they assassinated was not Ali Hassan Salameh, but a Moroccan waiter named Achmed Bouchiki.³⁰ This incident, which came to be known as "The Lillehammer Incident" became a political and diplomatic nightmare. Several members of the team were arrested by Norwegian police and convicted to sentences of up to five and a half years.³¹ However, due to diplomatic talks, all were released back to Israel before the end of their sentences. It was over thirty years before Israel acknowledged responsibility for the botched assassination.

Was it Effective?

The biggest controversy centered on the Munich retaliation is the question of its effectiveness. Many critics claim that there was no real change in terrorism toward Israel after the completion of the two operations. Were *Wrath of God* and *Spring of Youth* effective? Did they

²⁷ Ibid, 123.

²⁸ Ibid, 122-23.

²⁹ Jonas, *Vengeance*, 105-06.

³⁰ Klein, *Striking Back*, 184-92.

³¹ Ibid, 197.

accomplish anything beyond personally punishing those responsible for a variety of attacks on Israel, including Munich?

Shabtai Teveth, an Israeli journalist who wrote a controversial biography of Moshe Dayan, commented on the effectiveness of Israel's response to Munich. Teveth claims that Israel's eye for an eye policy regarding terrorism causes more severe retaliation from terrorists. Terrorist have found throughout the years, though, that attacks on Israelis within the borders of Israel is futile due to the high level of security on Israeli soil. They therefore started attacking targets outside of the Arabian Peninsula. Teveth believes that terrorists began noticing the high level of security inside Israel in contrast to the relatively low level of security of high-profile Israelis outside the country. He states that terrorism is a natural part of Israel's existence and Jews everywhere need to recognize that there will be people out there that mean to kill them.³²

To the contrary, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Haaretz*, an Israeli magazine, "Fols" believes that Israel's counter-terrorism actions did not go far enough. "Fols" agrees that terrorist governments and organizations are a constant threat, but disagrees with Teveth's statements that Israeli counter-terrorism is not working and terrorism is growing. "Fols" just claims that Israel had not yet proven that terrorism has its costs and should intensify its retaliations to send an even clearer message to terrorists that attacking Jews will not be tolerated.³³

In reality, however, *Wrath of God* was the best course of action for Israel. After 1979, there were attacks on Israel, but none with the impact that Munich had. One can directly attribute this to Israel's retaliations after Munich. This was not the first time Israel went after the proprietors of violence on their soil, but they had never done it with such tenacity, nor on such a broad scale as with Munich. *Wrath of God* was such a world-renowned success, that terrorist organizations refused to make such a bold attack on Israelis again. Instead, attention switched to Israeli allies with stricter policies regarding assassinations and targeted killings such as America and Great Britain. Further, this operation made Mossad one of the most feared government agencies in the world. The speed and ferocity of their retaliation scared PLO leaders and forced them to reconsider their methods in opposing and confronting Israel. Egypt had lost the Sinai; Syria had lost the Golan Heights; and Palestinians had lost the West Bank and Gaza just five years prior to Munich. It is no doubt that these, along with the events of Black September in Jordan, were causes of the Munich Massacre. Essentially, Munich was just an extension of a war that had been ravaging Israel/Palestine since 1948.

³² "After Munich: Israel Debates the Response," *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, 2 (2-Winter, 1973), pp. 142-43.

³³ Ibid, 145.

Conclusion

Counter-terrorism has become more of a preventative measure using techniques as bomb-sniffing dogs, metal detectors, officers trained to notice questionable people, officers trained to handle terrorist situations, and regulations as to what objects can come with you into certain places. Many forget the other side of counter-terrorism, the kind that America's laws prohibit it from using. After Munich, Israel participated in one of the most successful, if not the most successful, manhunts in modern history. All targets were eventually eliminated, the final suspected target falling in 1996, and a majority of them being eliminated by 1975. In fact, in the year of late 1972 to late 1973/early 1974, more men believed to be on the list were killed than in the following twenty-three years. The climax of Israel's operation was, undoubtedly, Ali Hassan Salameh's death in 1979. Since then, terrorism has changed for Israel. It has not stopped, but it has changed significantly. Nasser, one of the three targets eliminated in Beirut, was considered third in the Palestinian network behind Yasser Arafat, leader of the PLO, and Dr. George Habash, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); and Wael Zu'aytir, the first target, was, whether it was known by Mossad or not, Yasser Arafat's cousin. Israel proved that it could strike at anyone, anywhere, anytime and that instilled significant fear in all anti-Israeli organizations. The event at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games was certainly a tragedy. But, in the wake of extremist violence, Israel proved to the world that the Jews would no longer submit meekly to terrorist violence, and has responded forcefully many times in the years since then.