

Munich Massacre

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Palestinian militant on the balcony of the Israeli hostel at the Olympic village

The **Munich Massacre** occurred at the [1972 Summer Olympics](#) in [Munich, Germany](#), when members of the [Israeli amateur wrestling](#) team were taken hostage by the [Palestinian](#) group [Black September](#), an organization designated "terrorist" by the [United States](#) and [Israel](#). The attack led directly to the deaths of 11 Israeli athletes, five of the eight kidnapers, and one [German](#) police officer.

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The kidnapping

According to the [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation](#) (CBC), the Israeli athletes had enjoyed a night out on [September 4, 1972](#), seeing a performance of [Fiddler on the Roof](#) before returning to the Olympic Village. At 04:30 on [September 5](#), as the athletes slept, eight members of the Palestinian group [Black September](#), clad in tracksuits and carrying guns and grenades in duffel bags, scaled a two-metre chain-link fence surrounding the compound to enter two apartments being used by the Israeli team at 31 Connollystrasse.



Two of the Israeli team's apartments were broken into by the kidnappers.

Israeli wrestling referee Yossef Gutfreund heard a faint scratching noise at the door of the first apartment. When he investigated, he saw someone had opened it by a few inches. He shouted "Hava tistalku!" (Take cover, boys!) and tried to hold the door closed against the weight of the Palestinians who were forcing their way in. In the confusion, two athletes escaped and another eight managed to hide. According to the CBC [\[1\]](http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-41-1289-7332/sports/olympics_cbc/clip5) (http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-41-1289-7332/sports/olympics_cbc/clip5), weightlifter Joseph Romano grabbed an intruder's gun but was shot and killed, as was wrestling coach Moshe Weinberg, when he tried to attack one of the kidnappers with a fruit knife as the hostages were being transported.

After Weinberg's death, the Palestinians were left with nine hostages: David Berger, Ze'ev Friedman, Joseph Gottfreund, Eliezer Halfin, Andrei Schpitzer, Amitsur Shapira, Kahat Shorr, Mark Slavin and Yaakov Springer.

The kidnappers were subsequently reported to be members of the Palestinian *fedayeen* from refugee camps in [Lebanon](#), [Syria](#) and [Jordan](#). They were: the leader, Luttfif Afif ("Issa"), born in [Nazareth](#) to a wealthy Christian businessman and his Jewish wife (three of Issa's brothers were also reportedly members of Black September, two of them in Israeli jails), Yasuf Nazzal ("Tony"), Afif Abmed Hamid, Khalid Jawad, Ahmed Chic Thaa, Mohammed Safady, Adnan Al-Gashey and his nephew Jamal Al-Gashey.

The group demanded the release and safe passage to [Egypt](#) of 234 Palestinians jailed in [Israel](#), and an additional two in German prisons. Israel's response was immediate and absolute: there would be no negotiation. The German authorities, under the leadership of Chancellor [Willy Brandt](#) and Minister for the Interior [Hans-Dietrich Genscher](#) rejected Israel's offer to send an [Israeli special forces](#) unit to Germany. The German police who took part in the operation had no special training in hostage rescue operations.

According to journalist [John K. Cooley](#), the attack was a particular nightmare for the Germans because the hostages were Jews. Cooley writes that the Germans offered the

Palestinians an unlimited amount of money if they would release them. They also offered to substitute high-ranking Germans for the Israeli athletes. Both offers were refused (*Green March Black September: The Story of the Palestinian Arabs*, London 1973).

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Failed rescue

Execution deadlines shifted first by three hours, and then by five more as German authorities attempted to negotiate. German police chief Manfred Schreiber and Ahmed Touni, head of the Egyptian Olympic team, negotiated directly with the kidnappers, repeating the offer of an unlimited amount of money. According to Cooley, the reply was that "money means nothing to us; our lives mean nothing to us." The Tunisian and Libyan ambassadors to Germany also helped try to win concessions from the kidnappers, but to no avail.

The kidnappers demanded transportation to [Cairo](#). The authorities feigned agreement and at 10.10 p.m., two helicopters transported both the kidnappers and their hostages to nearby [Fürstenfeldbruck](#) airbase, where a [Boeing 727](#) aircraft was waiting. The kidnappers believed they were on their way to [Riem](#), the international airport near Munich. The authorities planned an assault on the kidnappers at the airport.

Five German snipers were chosen to shoot the kidnappers, none of whom had any special training. All had been chosen simply because they shot competitively on weekends;^[2] (<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/2002/0902/munich/story5.html>) in the later German investigation an officer identified as "Sniper No. 2" stated "I am of the opinion that I am not a sharpshooter."^[3] (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/05/world/main520865.shtml>) The snipers were positioned at the airport but the authorities were surprised to discover that there were eight kidnappers. No tanks or armored personnel carriers were at the scene. According to Cooley, either one or two Israeli officers assisted with the operation. A [New York Times](#) report that Israel's Defence Minister [Moshe Dayan](#) was personally present has never been confirmed. During the ensuing 75-minute shoot-out, the German police belatedly called for armored support but it took more than thirty minutes for the tanks to arrive due to traffic congestion in the area.

The helicopters landed just after 10:30 pm, and the four pilots and six of the kidnappers emerged. While four of the Black September members held the pilots at gunpoint, Issa and Tony walked over to inspect the jet, only to find it empty. Knowing they had been duped, they jogged hastily back toward the helicopters, and at approximately 11:00pm the German authorities gave the order to the German police snipers positioned nearby to open fire.

The five German snipers did not have radio contact with each other and were unable to coordinate their fire. As well they did not have precision rifles, and their rifles were equipped with neither scopes nor night-vision devices. In the ensuing chaos, two

kidnappers standing near the pilot were killed, and a third was mortally wounded as he fled the scene. The three remaining exposed kidnappers scrambled to safety, and began to return fire and shoot out as many airport lights as they could from behind the helicopters, out of the snipers' line of sight. A German policeman in the control tower was killed by the random gunfire. The helicopter pilots fled, but the hostages, who were tied up inside the craft, couldn't. A stalemate developed.

Around midnight the armored personnel carriers finally arrived, breaking the stalemate. According to Cooley, at four minutes past midnight, by now into September 6, one of the kidnappers jumped out of the first helicopter. He then turned, threw a grenade back into the cockpit, and sprayed the hostages with gunfire, killing Springer, Halfin and Ze'ev Friedman and wounding Berger.^[4] (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/05/world/main520865.shtml>) While the first helicopter was burning, writes Cooley, the surviving kidnappers kept fire trucks at bay by shooting at them.

Before the fire from the first helicopter explosion could reach the gas tank of the second helicopter, Issa and another kidnapper emerged from behind it and began firing at the German police; police killed him and a second fedayeen with return fire. The five hostages in the second helicopter died of gunshot wounds during the battle. A German police investigation indicated that a few of the hostages may have been shot inadvertently by the German police. However, a Time reconstruction of the long suppressed Bavarian prosecutor's report indicates that a third kidnapper raked the remaining five hostages — Gutfreund, Schorr, Slavin, Spitzer and Shapira — with fatal gunfire. Berger, though he taken two nonlethal bullets in his lower extremities, would die last, of smoke inhalation.^[5] (<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/2002/0902/munich/story5.html>) A definitive conclusion was not possible because the hostages' corpses were burned in the explosions and subsequent fire.

Three of the remaining kidnappers, alive and relatively unhurt, lay on the ground (two feigning death), and were captured by German police. Tony, the final kidnapper, was tracked down using dogs and tear gas 40 minutes later, and shot dead after a brief gunfight. By around 12:30 pm the battle was over.^[6] (<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/2002/0902/munich/story5.html>)

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Impact on the Games



Casket of one of the Israeli victims

The Olympic competition was suspended on [September 5](#) for one full day. The next day, a memorial service by 80,000 spectators and 3,000 athletes was held in the Olympic Stadium. IOC President Avery Brundage made no reference to the athletes during a speech praising the strength of the Olympic movement. The Israelis and many others who listened were outraged, according to CBS News. [\[7\]](#)

(<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/05/world/main520865.shtml>) Many of the 80,000 people who filled the Olympic Stadium for West Germany's soccer match with Hungary carried noisemakers and waved flags, but when several spectators unfurled a banner reading "17 dead, already forgotten?" security officers removed the sign and expelled the offenders from the grounds. [\[8\]](#)

(<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/2002/0902/munich/story6.html>)

Willi Daume, president of the Munich organizing committee, at first wanted the remainder of the Games called off, but in the afternoon [International Olympic Committee](#) (IOC) president [Avery Brundage](#) and others prevailed, stating that they could not let terrorism halt the games. [\[9\]](#)

(<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/2002/0902/munich/story6.html>). Brundage stated "the Games must go on", a decision that was endorsed by the Israeli government. [\[10\]](#) *(http://encarta.msn.com/text_761562380__1/Olympic_Games.html)*

On [September 5](#), the Israeli team announced they would leave Munich. All Jewish sportsmen were placed under guard. The Egyptian team left the games on [September 7](#), stating they feared reprisals. [\[11\]](#)

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/fromthearchive/story/0,12269,1298214,00.html>)

The families of some victims have asked the IOC to establish a permanent memorial to the athletes, but the IOC has declined, saying that to introduce a specific reference to the victims could "alienate other members of the Olympic community," according to the

BBC. [12] (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3581866.stm>) Alex Gilady, an Israeli IOC official, told the BBC: "We must consider what this could do to other members of the delegations that are hostile to Israel."

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Aftermath

On [September 5](#), [Golda Meir](#), then Prime Minister of [Israel](#), appealed to other countries to "save our citizens and condemn the unspeakable criminal acts committed". [13] (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/campaigns/middle_east/midmun.xml) The attack was widely condemned around the world, with King Hussein of [Jordan](#) calling it a "savagely crime against civilization . . . perpetrated by sick minds," (Cooley 1973).

The German authorities imprisoned the three surviving kidnappers, and soon formed a counter-terrorism unit [GSG 9](#) to provide a more robust hostage rescue response in future.

On [September 9](#), Israeli war planes bombed [PLO](#) bases in Syria and Lebanon in retaliation (Morris 1999), an attack that was condemned by the [UN Security Council](#). A U.S. resolution deploring the Munich massacre was not considered. [14] (<http://www.jafi.org.il/education/jafi75/timeline6c.html>)

On [October 29, 1972](#), a German [Lufthansa](#) jet was hijacked and demands were made for the release of the three [Black September](#) members being held for trial. The men were subsequently released by Germany.

Within days of the Olympic attack, Golda Meir and the Israeli Defense Committee made a secret decision authorizing the Mossad to kill Black September and [PFLP](#) operatives wherever they could be found (Morris 1999). The Mossad set up a special hit team to locate and "eliminate" them, aided by the agency's stations in Europe. Morris writes that, using information from "turned" PLO personnel and friendly European intelligence services, the Mossad compiled its target list, placing at the top Wael 'Aadel Zwaiter, a suspected member of Black September and the official [PLO](#) representative in Italy, who was shot and killed on October 16. [Abu Iyad](#), the PLO's deputy-chief and chief of intelligence until his death in [1991](#), later wrote that Zwaiter was not connected to Black September and had "fiercely opposed . . . all forms of terrorism," (Abu Iyad 1983). Zwaiter's death was followed by non-fatal letter-bomb attacks on PLO representatives in [Algeria](#) and [Libya](#), on Palestinians in [Bonn](#) and [Copenhagen](#), and on a [Red Cross](#) representative in [Stockholm](#), writes Morris.

On [December 8](#), 1972, the PLO's representative in [Paris](#), Mohammad Hamshiri was killed by a radio-detonated bomb under his desk. Over the next three months, writes Morris, four PLO, PFLP and PFLP-GC operatives were killed in [Cyprus](#), [Greece](#) and [Paris](#). On [April 9, 1973](#), Israel launched Operation Springtime of Youth, a joint Mossad-IDF operation in [Beirut](#). The targets were Mohammad Yusuf al-Najjar (Abu Yusuf), head

of [Fatah's](#) intelligence arm (which, Morris writes, ran Black September); Kamal Adwan, who headed the PLO's so-called Western Sector, which controlled PLO action inside Israel; and Kamal Nassir, the PLO spokesman. A group of Israeli commandos were taken in nine missile boats and a small fleet of patrol boats to a deserted Lebanese beach, before driving in two cars to downtown Beirut, where they killed Najjar, Adwan and Nassir. They also killed Najjar's wife, who tried to shield him. Two further detachments of commandos blew up the PFLP's headquarters in Beirut and a Fatah explosives plant.

On June 28, 1973, the Algerian-born director of operations for Black September in Europe, Mohammad Boudia, was killed by a car bomb in Paris.

On [July 21, 1973](#), in the so-called [Lillehammer affair](#), a team of Mossad agents killed Ahmed Bouchiki, a Moroccan man unrelated to the Munich attack, in Lillehammer, [Norway](#), after an informant mistakenly said Bouchiki was Ali Hassan Salameh, a Black September operative. Five Mossad agents, including two women, were captured by the Norwegian authorities, while others managed to slip away (Morris, 1999). The five were convicted of the killing and imprisoned, but were soon released and returned to Israel.

On January 22, 1979, the Mossad found and killed Salameh in Beirut using a remote-controlled car bomb.

Of those believed to have planned or executed the Munich massacre, only Mohammed Daoud Oudeh, the man who says Munich was his idea, remains alive in [Amman, Jordan](#). He was shot on July 27, 1981 in a Warsaw coffee shop, but survived the attack. In his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Palestinian Terrorist*, [\[15\]](#)

(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1559704292/102-5475444-5782553?v=glance>) first published in France in 1999, and later in a written interview with *Sports Illustrated* [\[16\]](#)

(http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/si_online/news/2002/08/20/sb2/), Daoud, now 74, stated that funds for Munich were provided by [Mahmoud Abbas](#), Chairman of the PLO since November 11, 2004. [\[17\]](#)

(http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=32292) [\[18\]](#)

(<http://www.israellawcenter.org/press.shtml?1700528700#april29>) [\[19\]](#)

(<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Abbas.html>) "Though he didn't know what the money was being spent for, longtime Fatah official Mahmoud Abbas, a.k.a. Abu Mazen, was responsible for the financing of the Munich attack," Daoud wrote.

Daoud, who lives with his wife on a pension provided by the [Palestinian Authority](#), has said that, although [Yasser Arafat](#) was not involved in conceiving or implementing the attack, "the [Munich] operation had the endorsement of Arafat." Daoud claimed in his autobiography that Arafat saw Daoud off on the mission with the words "Allah protect you." Daoud provided no evidence to support his claims and Arafat never responded to them.

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- [List of massacres](#)
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External Links

- [The Israeli Response to the 1972 Munich Massacre](http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/calahan.htm) (<http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/calahan.htm>) – Includes an extensive overview of the Munich Massacre
- [One Day in September](http://imdb.com/title/tt0230591/) (<http://imdb.com/title/tt0230591/>)
- [21 Hours at Munich](http://imdb.com/title/tt0074085/) (<http://imdb.com/title/tt0074085/>)