

Setting the Record Straight

Dec 22, 2005



Articles & Testimony

This week in Washington, I attended a preliminary screening of Steven Spielberg's film, *Munich*, and I emerged with a very uneasy feeling. The film deals with Israel's response to the murder of its athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics by Palestinian terrorists. According to the film, Israel decides to take revenge by assassinating those involved in the murder. For that purpose, the Mossad sets up a hit squad headed by "Avner," the hero of the film. From one assassination to the next, the members of the team increasingly question the justness of their behavior, up the point when "Avner" is so overcome by doubt that he decides to abandon the mission and sever ties with the country that sent him.

Spielberg raises question relating to methods of combating terror in general, and the Israeli methods in particular: Is it ethical to kill people without a trial? Isn't Israel causing a cycle of bloodshed that feeds on itself, thus perpetuating the conflict?

And these are questions that every enlightened society should ask itself. So what then is the source of my severe unease after viewing the film?

First of all, Israel and the terrorists are presented on a similar ethical plane. The Palestinians are fighting to establish a national home; Israel is fighting to preserve its national home. Both sanctify killing as a means to the end. The ethical judgment is actually harder on Israel—not only as a political entity, but as the entity ostensibly violating the Jewish ethic on which it was founded. This is an extreme judgment; it does not distinguish between taking the lives of civilians and taking lives—whether deliberately or unintentionally—in order to prevent harm to civilians.

Judgment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot ignore such distinctions (not, God forbid, in order to justify wrongful acts); and to this end, a precise clarification of the facts and the circumstances is required. Here is an additional source of discomfort with the film: It presents an ethical and political judgment based on a shaky historical background. Its creators define it as "fictional history." But in the consciousness of the millions of viewers who will see it, it will probably be etched in memory as the epitome of history.

Munich is supposedly based on the book, *Vengeance*—by Canadian journalist George Jonas—that was published in 1984. According to Jonas, the main source for his book was an Israeli named Yuval Aviv, who presented himself as the head of the Mossad hit squad. Now, he has become Spielberg's "Avner." On the other hand, everyone in the know in Israel who has been questioned on the matter vehemently insists that Aviv has no background in the Mossad, and that his stories are a figment of his imagination. The film, in any case, is full of imaginary episodes.

It is difficult not to sense that the film contains a contemporary political message. Its creators do not deny that it is directed at the international agenda, in which the fight against terror occupies a place of importance both in the United States, since the attack on the Twin Towers, and in Israel, since the outbreak of the intifada.

We should not relate with equanimity to a film that is liable to shape the consciousness of a generation. But it would also be a mistake to embark on a frontal attack against a highly praised director such as Spielberg. We should take a middle road and deal with the crux of the matter, setting the historical record straight, and sharpening the ethical

distinctions.

The writer is a visiting military fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He served in the past as military secretary to the defense minister.

Haaretz

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022

◆
Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley
(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-
analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-
analysis/israel)