



# Languages of Discrimination and Racism in Twentieth-Century Italy

Histories, Legacies and Practices

*Edited by*  
Marcella Simoni  
Davide Lombardo

palgrave  
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Marcella Simoni • Davide Lombardo  
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# When Conflict Spills Over: Identities, Memories, Politics and Representations of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Italy— The 1960s

*Marcella Simoni*

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been fought also outside the Middle East, reverberating into the domestic political and social dynamics of many countries. Even considering the European scenario alone, individual states (and later the European Union), political parties and leaders, civil societies, Diaspora communities, and the media have all been engaged with this conflict and with the many questions it keeps raising. In past decades, European capitals have been the theatre of terrorist attacks specifically connected to this conflict, while a few others have hosted peace summits and conferences that were hoped to be conclusive, like Madrid in 1991 and Oslo in 1993. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to be

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punctuated by recurrent outbreaks of armed violence in the Middle East, in Europe (and elsewhere) the Jewish, Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab Diasporas also became involved, bringing into this already complex international picture questions of religious belief, of national and political belonging, and of individual and collective ethnic identity. The riots in the Parisian immigrant neighborhood of Belleville in June 1968 between Muslim and Jewish residents are a case in point (Mandel 2014: 100). And so are the responses on conflicting mutual perceptions collected more recently among Jewish and Muslims residents in the UK (Egorova 2017).

Considering Italy, alone or in comparative perspective, scholarly literature has covered extensively how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been represented in left-wing or in the general press in the second half of the twentieth century (Scherini 2009–2010, 2010; Marzano 2011; Zanier 2018), and the changing attitudes of Italian political parties (Riccardi 2006; Marzano 2010; Tarquini 2019); Marzano and Schwarz (2013) have looked at the convergence of historical and new forms of anti-Semitism during the Lebanon war of 1982. Considering the eventful decade of the 1960s until about 1975, in this chapter I discuss how the unfolding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict affected the social and political positioning of the Diasporic communities involved, their collective identities, and their mutual relations. By investigating these dynamics, and therefore the cultural and political aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Italy, I analyze how this conflict came to be inextricably connected with political and existential questions of local relevance, and therefore with the lives, the memories, and the positioning of Italian Jews on the one hand, of Palestinians living in Italy (and/or Palestinian Italians) on the other, and with Italian politics in general. Inevitably, I also investigate how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict interlocked with anti-Semitism and, in part, also with Islamophobia. These phenomena should be understood as part of a European broader picture; for reasons of space and internal coherence, here I limit my analysis to the Italian case, while other European experiences remain on the background.

I have divided this chapter into four distinct parts. First, I provide a general introduction on the many ways in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has resonated in Europe, with greater emphasis on the Italian case. Second, I focus more directly on the Italian situation, looking at how the Italian press reported on the Six Day War, especially at the stereotypes it used that stigmatized both Jews and Arabs in different (but compatible) ways. Third, analyze how the Palestinian narrative gradually entered the



Italian public discourse in universities, civil society, and politics—before, during, and after the Six Day War (1967)—also thanks to the grassroots work of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS). Finally, I conclude considering the reaction of some young Italian Jews to this state of affairs, how their identity changed throughout the decade, and why some decided to relocate to Israel at the end of the 1960s.

### THE EUROPEAN FRONT

The 1960s was a crucial decade in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict spilled over into Europe, including Italy. The decade opened with the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem (1961) and ended with the Six Day War (1967) in the Middle East; in Europe (and elsewhere) 1968–1969 was the year of the student barricades, with protests on university campuses and in the squares. In this short period, the spillover from the Middle East to Europe took a least four different forms, only one of which was armed. The others concerned the individual and collective memory of Jews and of Palestinians in the Diaspora, their political and national identity, and how the generations born after 1945 imagined their future. The spillover also led political parties—and especially left-wing ones—to reorient their support towards Palestinians rather than towards the State of Israel, and saw European cities becoming the theatre of actual terrorist actions and war-like situations, especially during the 1970s and 1980s.

*a) Memories and identities.* The connection between individual and collective memories of the Holocaust on the one hand and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the other represents one of the complicated and toxic cores of this spillover. In line with what happened in Jewish communities (almost) all over the world, in the postwar years Jewish identity progressively consolidated around the two poles of the Holocaust on the one hand and of the State of Israel on the other (Bashir and Goldberg 2018). These became central for obvious reasons of chronological proximity, and because most Jews in the Diaspora (and therefore also in Italy) had been involved directly in both experiences, as victims of persecution, as visitors to Israel, or as family members of *Italkim* (Italian Jews immigrated to Israel, Hebrew). In part, this polarization also responded to the narrative—which the State of Israel transferred onto Diasporic Jewish communities since the 1950s—of the Diaspora as a site of collective destruction, and of the old-new Homeland as a site of rebirth and redemption. Not everyone subscribed to it: in the words of Prof. Luciano Segre,

who had joined the Resistance during the Second World War, who later volunteered in the War of 1948 and then settled in Milan,

It was right to join the fight to help the newly founded State of Israel in 1948, but not to subscribe to the idea of an ethno-national state, as that type of political entity was what we had been fighting against until a few years earlier.<sup>1</sup>

And although Segre's words only bring the testimony of one, they show that structuring a collective identity between the two poles of genocide and rebirth was a process that some tried to resist. The short period between the Eichmann trial (1961) and the Six Day War (1967) de facto put an end to any such resistance and Jews (in Italy as elsewhere) gradually shifted towards it.

As it is well known, one of the unintended consequences of the Eichmann trial was the emergence into the public sphere of the traumatic memories and public testimonies of Jewish survivors, whose voices had remained buried in the private—if not in the intimate—sphere until then (Cesarani 2005). This concerned Italy too (Consonni 2004); here, moreover, the Italian responsibilities for the extermination of the Jews had not been acknowledged in the public discourse, neither as a specific crime per se, nor for the active role that many Italians had played in it (Focardi 2010: 20). In Italy the few trials that had been celebrated for collaboration with Nazism before the general amnesty of June 1946 did not even acknowledge the racial aspect of the crimes committed (Flores and Galimi 2010); moreover, the State proved particularly slow in translating into law various pieces of international legislation which could help indict persons that were guilty of racial persecution. A good example is the International Convention Against Genocide, to which Italy had adhered in 1952, that was fully adopted only in 1967. Even slower were the decrees that allowed for the compensation of the surviving victims from the State's coffers; in 1955 the State recognized the possibility that individuals persecuted on grounds of political opinion or race would receive monetary compensation, but the actual process was set in motion only in 1980 (De Cristofaro 2010, 2011). There could be many other examples; obviously this context did not help acknowledge Jews as victims of racial persecution nor did it help making their voices heard.

<sup>1</sup>Interview of the Author with Prof. Luciano Segre, Milan, 2 October 2010.

*b) Jewish youth politics.* Another factor that connected the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after the Second World War came from the experiences of Jews born after 1945. Inevitably, this generation took it upon themselves to maintain and transmit the memory of the Holocaust that their parents had experienced (Volkan 2001); at the same time, in constructing their postwar Jewish identity, they also started to look at the State of Israel as a new determining factor (Schwarz 2004; Simoni 2010, 2018). In the 1950s and 1960s many of them had travelled to Israel, to visit relatives or on trips that had been organized by Jewish schools and youth movements. In general, and with very few exceptions, their reaction had been nostalgic and enthusiastic, and later prompted many of them to leave for Israel as volunteers when the Six Day War started (Simoni 2010, 2018; Lederhendler 2000).

Two Jewish youth movements had been established in Italy after 1945: *Hechalutz* (The Pioneer) in 1946—that encouraged the immigration of those youths who had survived the war and wanted to start a new life in Palestine/the State of Israel—and the Youth Jewish Federation of Italy (Federazione Giovanile Ebraica d'Italia, FGEI) that had been founded in 1948. Unlike the former, the latter was not Zionist, and its membership was made of young Jews that were “strongly anchored to Italian reality and at the same time tied in various degrees to their Jewish identity” (Schwarz 2012: 83). Youth associationism also meant a whirlwind of parties and summer camps, but questions of post-Holocaust collective identities were central in these associations: on the one hand, the FGEI’s newsletter was entitled *Ha-Tikvah* (Hope), which explicitly recalled the title of the State of Israel’s national anthem; on the other, the association challenged the approach of the Union of the Italian Jewish Communities (UCII), questioning the Zionist normative vision of its older leadership. Like many of their non-Jewish peers, this generation had grown up politically on the legendary narratives of the anti-Fascist struggles and of the Resistance, and their political orientation leaned towards those (left-wing) parties that best embodied this legacy. In 1953 FGEI defined its identity as based on the “indissoluble bond uniting of Judaism and anti-Fascism” (Schwarz 2012: 88), thus forgetting that many Jews had also been supporters of Fascism until 1938 (Stille 1991).

Since the mid-1950s two international Zionist Jewish youth movements started to be active on the Italian scene, the *Bene’ Akiva* (Sons/Daughters of Akiva, religious, BA) and the *Hashomer Hatzeir* (The Young Guard, socialist, HH). Though coming from different ideological backgrounds,

both promoted an active Zionist identification among teenagers, setting up a process that helped transform the local/national/Italian identity of young Jews into an ethno-national one that placed national identification (also) with the Zionist call, and therefore, with the State of Israel.

*c) Institutional politics.* Until the Six Day War, left-wing parties had considered the State of Israel, which had been established on strong socialist features, as the miraculous living proof of the victory against Nazi-Fascism; this also helped older and younger Jews find a new political home after 1945. After the simultaneous and smashing military victory of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) against three armies and the creation of another million Palestinian refugees nineteen years after 1948, the anti-Fascist paradigm that the left had applied to Jews—and therefore also to the State of Israel—shifted from the latter to Palestinians, who were now seen as the new resisters (Simoni and Marzano 2010; Mendes 2014: 117–126). When the generation of Italian Jews born after the war came of age at the end of the 1960s, they found it particularly difficult to identify with (and vote for) those left-wing political parties that they had so strongly believed in as teenagers. From here began the slow but sure estrangement of many Italian Jews with Italian left-wing politics, which led them to extend their support to center-right, and later to right-wing parties (Marzano 2010). In the 1970s and 1980s this slow political shift of the Jewish electorate was also favored by the events taking place in the international arena, which in the following two decades made Europe one of the armed fronts of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

*d) Terrorism.* Beyond memory, identity, youth, and politics, another factor helped consolidate the core connection between the memory of the Holocaust and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since the late 1960s, and more markedly in the 1970s and 1980s, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was fought in Europe (and in Italy too) also through terrorist attacks, transmitting to European Jewish communities a deep sense of insecurity *vis-à-vis* the country in which they lived, and the security arrangements that their states had put in place to protect them.

The terrorist season opened at the airport of Rome in July 1968, when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) hijacked to Algiers a plane of the national Israeli airline El Al; it continued in August 1969, again from Rome, when the PFLP hijacked TWA flight 840, believing Israeli PM Itzhak Rabin was on board; the airport of Rome was again the stage of two more hijackings in 1973 and one major attack in 1985.

Only considering airports, Zurich, Athens, Munich, London, Paris, and Vienna were also sites where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict spilled over. Beyond airports and airplanes, in the 1970s Palestinian terrorist attacks were conducted against Israeli targets like embassies and El Al offices. As it is well known, one of the peaks of this first wave of terrorist attacks took place at the beginning of September 1972, when the still unknown terrorist group Black September massacred eleven Israeli athletes at the 20th Olympic games in Munich (Klein 2005; Large 2012). Six days after the massacre, on 11 September 1972, it was confidentially reported to the British Foreign Office that Israeli “counter-terrorist actions” were to be expected especially in contexts “where the Israelis have fairly comprehensive knowledge of Arab activities, like West Germany and Italy” (...) “the aim being to terrorise the terrorists.”<sup>2</sup> This report was an accurate piece of information on operation Wrath of God/Bayonet in which—over two decades—the Mossad assassinated the alleged instigators of the massacre of the Munich Olympics, starting from Wael Zwaiter and Mahmoud Al-Hamsheri in 1972, who acted as the PLO representatives, respectively, in Rome and Paris.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1980s the Israeli-Palestinian conflict saw a new intensification in loco with Operation Litani (1978), the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), and the First intifada (1987). In this context, two Palestinian terrorist groups repositioned their political aims to include also Jewish objectives in Europe. The first was the group of Abu Nidal, who had been expelled from Fatah and the PLO already in 1974 and the other was the already mentioned PFLP. At the hands of these two groups, between 1980 and 1986 the synagogues, Jewish schools, and/or Jewish community centers of Paris, Antwerp, Brussels, Vienna, Copenhagen, and Istanbul all suffered deadly attacks. As for Italy, the group of Abu Nidal attacked the synagogue of Rome on 9 October 1982 (Marzano and Schwarz 2013).

All these attacks—spread over more than fifteen years—left hundreds of civilians dead, citizens of different nationalities, ages, gender, professions, persuasion, and belonging; they obviously also made Jews feel threatened

<sup>2</sup>The National Archives, London (henceforth TNA), FCO 17/1622, NE 1/5, *Acts of Violence by Arab Terrorist Organizations*, 1972, Letter from P.G.H. Harwood to Mr. [Sidney?] Giffard, 11 September 1972.

<sup>3</sup>On Zwaiter see the installation at the Venice Biennale of 2007 by Emily Jacir, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/material-film-retracing-wael-zuaiter-part-1/7054> and <https://electronicintifada.net/content/material-film-performance-part-2/7053>, accessed 3 July 2021.

in Europe, while at the same time feeding a narrative of mutual exclusive victimhood, in which both the terrorists and the victims represented themselves as part of an exceptional and unique history of persecution. In the case of Jews—given that they had been targeted again *qua Jews* on European soil—these attacks also renovated a sense of insecurity and the fear that institutions were incapable, or unwilling(?), to protect them and their rights. For the generation of Jews that had been born after 1945, this feeling of insecurity had started a few years before, with the Six Day War. A brief examination of how the Italian press presented and discussed these events will show why.

### THE TURNING POINT OF THE SIX DAY WAR: THE PRESS

Marianna Scherini (2009–2010) has analyzed how the general and left-wing press in Europe has helped shape a public discourse on Israel in various moments of the Arab-Israeli conflict, from 1967 to the early 2000s. Her research discusses the emergence of new forms of anti-Semitism after 1967, and to what extent racial stereotypes on Arabs and Jews were perpetuated (or not) by the main European press reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This process was triggered with the Six Day War and peaked in the 1980s with the Lebanon War and the First Intifada. Here, I will follow her investigation only for 1967.

When Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser expelled the UN Expeditionary Forces from Sinai on May 16, closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships on May 22, and signed a pact of mutual defense with Jordan on May 30, it became quite obvious that a new war was imminent in the Middle East. From here, throughout the war and after its conclusion, the Italian conservative and the left-wing press gave very different readings of the events, constructing, as we shall see, narratives that were based on different premises and, therefore, yielded diverging conclusions. From both perspectives, the stereotypes and the rhetoric used to describe the parties involved only favored the alienation of those who felt that their individual and collective identity was at stake in this war. Following Scherini (2009–2010), my sources for this section are two daily national newspapers: one from the conservative field, the center-right *Corriere della Sera*, and one from the left, *L'Unità*, the official daily of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). A more complete picture that includes other voices within the Italian left can be found in Tarquini (2019).

a) *Corriere della Sera*. As the main national newspaper, the *Corriere* could rely upon a variety of correspondents spread in various European capitals, in Washington and Moscow, and upon special envoys: Dino Frescobaldi was in Cairo, R.A. Segre in Israel, and Alberto Cavallari was in Jerusalem since June 2. The *Corriere* presented the diplomatic crisis that preceded the war in the framework of the Cold War, and squarely placed the blame for the crisis on what it defined “the Arab aggression”, whose reasons were to be found in the choices of leaders that had a *natural* familiarity with violence. Since the beginning of the diplomatic crisis in the Middle East, this newspaper openly sided with the State of Israel (Scherini 2009–2010: 44); however, it did so filling its narrative with stereotypes that were altogether evenly distributed among Arabs and Jews/Israelis: the former (at times called Egyptians, but otherwise rarely defined in ways other than a general “Arabs”) were described as “backward”, “blood-thirsty”, “barbaric”, and as a “huge danger” (*immenso pericolo*) to a “little people” (*piccolo popolo*). The latter were alternatively described as gifted with plenty of intelligence, as Holocaust survivors, as potential victims of a likely and imminent new Holocaust, or by making reference to the biblical theme of David against Goliath, a comparison that obviously emerged after it had become obvious that the Israeli army had won the war. On a psychological plain, the newspaper underlined the irrationality of the Egyptian president, followed by the *natural* excitability of (non-otherwise specified) Arabs, who were depicted as having a natural propensity towards violence and to waging war. With an orientalist outlook, Egyptians were also represented as an anonymous crowd with no individuality, and were included in the descriptions as supporting voices for their leader. Jews and Israelis were also described as Europeans, as this identification was functional to build a juxtaposition between a civilized “us” and an uncivilized Arab “Other”.

When on May 30 Egypt and Jordan signed an alliance of mutual defense (which implied the encirclement of the State of Israel, given that Egypt and Syria were already politically united in the United Arab Republic), the *Corriere* described it as a “complete siege” for Israel in which “tens of millions of Arabs, overexcited by frenetic racial hate propaganda, besiege two million Jews, locked up in a long and narrow strip of land” (*Corriere* 1967a).

This type of rhetoric sparked a series of toxic analogies, the most obvious being the one between Arabs and the Nazis, and the idea that the State of Israel was inhabited mainly/only by Holocaust survivors, which also brought to the direct comparison between Nasser and Hitler. In the

words of Augusto Guerriero, one of the most distinguished pens of the *Corriere* at the time,

There is no peace in the Middle East. And how could there be, if Nasser is in Cairo? Could there have been peace in Europe as long as there was Hitler? And so, there can be no peace in the Middle East as long as there is Nasser. The western world has been slow to understand this character, his ambitions, his politics. He is a little Hitler. Not for nothing does he keep around him a phalanx of Nazi criminals, to whom he has entrusted delicate or criminal services: espionage, propaganda, organizations of attacks. (Guerriero 1967)

These misleading historical analogies were meant to raise sympathy for the State of Israel; they should also be understood within the anti-Communist political agenda of the newspaper: if left-wing parties and press supported Nasser as an allied of the Soviet Union, the argument went, then they should also take responsibility for indirectly supporting the likelihood of a new Holocaust. This logic was made explicit by Manlio Lapinacci on May 26: the support that the PCI had extended to Nasser was “even at risk of becoming, God forbid, moral accomplices in a resumption of the ‘final solution’ of the Jewish problem according to the models of Colonel Eichmann”, as “the small State of Israel is threatened by war and destruction” (Lapinacci 1967).

As Scherini (2009–2010: 47) has duly noted, the sympathy towards the State of Israel derived from a series of false analogies and from a misleading series of identifications: on the one hand, Israelis were equaled (only) with Holocaust survivors, an identification that was extended also to the Jews of Rome. Reporting on May 30 on the demonstration that the Jewish Community of Rome had organized in support of the State of Israel, Giovanni Russo, another important contributor to the *Corriere*, reported:

The Jewish people [*popolo ebreo sic*] of Rome found themselves spontaneously united. At the windows and in front of the doors there were old ladies, still dressed in mourning [for the Holocaust], whose faces expressed shock for the tragic memories. There were families of the old neighborhood—the ancient ghetto—the merchants, the second-hand dealers, the witty shopkeepers, people who are working hard to rebuild a life (...) and perhaps they thought of how many could not be there, or of their families who had left Rome and are now in Palestine [*sic*], hoping to finally have a homeland, where they can live free from hatred, and that could give them a future of



peace; and today they feel encircled again and threatened with annihilation. (Russo 1967)

As it is well known, the war started on June 6 with a preemptive attack of the Israeli air force on Egypt and continued involving Jordan and Syria until June 11. After six days, the State of Israel had tripled its territorial extension, had conquered the territories known today as the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the Sinai peninsula from Egypt, and about one million Palestinians had been made refugees. When it became clear that the State of Israel had won, the reporting gave way to a triumphalism that incorporated most of the stereotypes mentioned above, with a Biblical tinge:

The whole world is still incredulous because the biblical legend has been realized: little David has landed the gigantic Goliath (...). Nasser, overrun by hatred, by the demon of violence and war, does not want to resign himself to defeat, which covers him with ridicule and shame. He had sworn to destroy the state and the people of Israel; he had excited the unsuspecting Egyptian crowds to the extermination of the Jews; he had provoked and offended Israel with words and aggressive acts: invectives, challenges, blockade of Akaba [sic], concentration of the army at the borders. He promised Israel only destruction and death...now he has seen all its air force destroyed on the ground without having been able to fight, his tanks captured, his army in pieces, on the run. (*Corriere* 1967b)

Seen from the left, the picture was very different.

b) *L'Unità*. The official daily of the PCI had a foreign desk in Moscow and, from June 1, sent Arminio Savioli to Cairo as a special envoy. Its reading of the events stands in stark contrast to that of the *Corriere*, as should be expected, given the different ideological orientation, political affiliations, and readership of the two newspapers. *L'Unità* too framed the beginning of the crisis within the dynamics of the Cold War, but substantially reproduced the interpretation that the desk of the newspaper in Moscow transmitted to Rome. Broadly speaking, this remained its interpretative line in terms of contents, language, and tone throughout the whole period. From Moscow, the situation appeared as follows:

The aim of Johnson is clear: he wants to drag the rebellious [Atlantic] partners towards a greater commitment in support of his aggressive policy. Behind the groups that in the Republic of Israel foment the aggression

against Syria stand large oil companies (...), large American groups—starting from the CIA—that organized the coup in Greece, and are preparing a similar one in Cyprus and that, finally, are hoping to achieve NATO unity in the Mediterranean on offensive positions. (*L'Unità* 1967a)

In this newspaper the words “aggression” and “threat” were usually used in connection to the State of Israel or to the role of the United States in the area; the former was presented as “the spearhead of American imperialism”, and the decision of Nasser to close the Straits of Tiran as “an essential right of Egypt” (*L'Unità* 1967b), given the global appetites of American foreign policy, that “years of aggression in Vietnam” had already shown (Ferrara 1967).

As in the case of the *Corriere*, on *L'Unità* too, most of the correspondences published during the war itself reproduced official war bulletins; given that *L'Unità* was relying on Egyptian sources, it was slower in realizing Israel's victory, which the *Corriere* had already understood on June 8, the day after the IDF had captured Jerusalem. Indeed, while the *Corriere* was speaking of David and Goliath, *L'Unità* continued to praise the “heroic resistance of Egyptian soldiers in Sinai” (Savioli 1967).

Rather than following the (rather lacking) coverage of this newspaper, it is interesting to look at a few themes that emerged from its pages in the final days of the war and in its immediate aftermath, as some of them continue to be relevant today.

One of the main questions was the “expansionism” of the State of Israel; this theme was not only connected to the military conquests of the IDF, but called into question the immediate and long-term intentions of its ruling class; it also took issue with the nature of Zionism as the nation(ist) ideology that had led to the establishment of the State, and with the complicated relationship of all this with the Holocaust.

*L'Unità* started to pull these strings together starting from the iconic Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan. As the days went by, Dayan was first mistakenly credited with the success of the military campaign (Jacoviello 1967), whose planning and realization had been of Chief of Staff Itzhak Rabin instead. He was then constructed as the architect of Israel's foreign policy, variously defined as “expansionist”, “aggressive”, “imperialist”, and “colonial”. For Antonello Trombadori, for example, “the attack in force on all fronts by Moshe Dayan” had been the one factor that had crushed any hope to carry out a “diplomatic initiative” aimed at the pacific resolution of the crisis. His words were echoed by Alberto Jacoviello, who

spoke of “Moshe Dayan’s bloody blitzkrieg [or. in Italian *guerra lampo*], planned in secret in every detail (...) and carried out with overwhelming superiority of means” whereby defensive pretexts were used to justify an “expansionism that had been theorized with candid arrogance” (E.P. 1967). From Dayan, the newspaper moved on to criticize the whole Israeli ruling class, which was no longer presented as a “mere pawn of the US or the UK” but as a “leadership that expresses an expansionist logic within Israeli society, that converges with the general actions of the world imperialist front” (Ledda 1967). The ultimate conclusions of this reasoning indicated in Zionism the root of all evils, as an expansionist nationalist ideology, that represented the real reason why the State of Israel could not be integrated in the Middle East and as the ultimate expression of European colonialism against (non-otherwise specified) Arabs. Already on June 11, as the war was closing, *L’Unità* defined the establishment of the State of Israel

only as a colonialist initiative, undertaken under the English protectorate (sic) at a time when the world was in the hands of the happy “capitalist civilization” (...) and did not have the slightest consideration for the interests and rights of “colonial” peoples, or “colored”, or whatever else they used to call them at the time. (*L’Unità* 1967c)

And while the idea of the establishment of the State of Israel as a colonial/ist enterprise had been a matter of historiographical and political debate even before 1967, and continues to be discussed today, the really problematic term in the quote above is the opening term “only”, as if persecuted Jews all over Europe did not count among those oppressed peoples whose cause a communist newspaper would consider taking up. Despite these complicated premises, *L’Unità* claimed its right to criticize Zionism as a national(ist) ideology; indeed, in this understanding, relinquishing this right *because* of the persecutions that Jews had suffered in recent times and before the Second World War would have been worse. As Romano Ledda explained, it would be absurd “to equate the cause of Israel with that of the State of Israel because of the moral reparation that the Jewish people (*popolo ebreo* (sic)) still awaits from Europe” (Ledda 1967). The ideological dimension that permeated these debates once again revealed the geographical, cultural, and political distance of these intellectuals from the Middle East in general and from an understanding of the (indistinct) Arab, Palestinian, or Jewish Diasporic experience.

In the very last hours of the Six Day War, the local police of Parma transmitted to the Ministry of Interior a mimeographed leaflet found at a rally organized by the local branch of the PCI.<sup>4</sup> This appears to be the first document that revealed the existence in Italy of the first local branch of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) in Italy, even though this student association had been established informally already in 1965, becoming a registered association in 1971. In the same way as young Jews had been designing a future for themselves as both transmitters of their group's collective (traumatic) memory and as identity activists through their youth organizations and dedicated press, through meetings, conferences, and youth camps, also some Palestinians that had arrived as students in Italian universities in the early 1960s started to organize themselves from the grassroots. It is to them that I now turn.

### THE GENERAL UNION OF PALESTINIAN STUDENTS IN ITALY

The 1960s proved a fateful decade for the Palestinian Diaspora too. As it is well known, the Six Day War, the ensuing War of Attrition and the battle of Karameh (1968), as well as Black September in Jordan (1970), came to constitute the new core of events that re-founded Palestinian political activism (Terrill 2001), starting from the reestablishment of the PLO (1969) as the main organization that would represent Palestinians and lead the (armed) struggle for the liberation of Palestine under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. These very same events pushed many young Palestinians out of the areas that Israel had occupied in 1967 and out of Kingdom of Jordan after 1970, and new migration waves strengthened the Palestinian presence in the Gulf (Roulevu and Paul 1985; Smith 1986) and in Europe (Shiblak 2005), including Italy. The historic Palestinian secular party Fatah became the dominant party within the PLO while other factions were the already mentioned Revolutionary Socialist PFLP, the Marxist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command (PFLPGC), and the group of Abu Nidal (El-Rayyes and Nahas 1976).<sup>5</sup> These well-known details are only a reminder that the internal political dynamics that regulated the PLO leadership in exile also found a

<sup>4</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome (Central State Archive, henceforth ACS), GAB, 0162/PS, Telegram from the Prefecture of Parma to the Ministry of Interior, 9 June 1967.

<sup>5</sup> [https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping\\_palestinian\\_politics/](https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/), accessed 3 July 2021.

correspondence in youth and student politics in the Diaspora. On a smaller scale, Palestinian students in Italy also followed some of these political divisions, mitigated by the small numbers and by a sense of mutual solidarity.

The history of GUPS in Italy has roots in the Middle East: GUPS emerged out of Palestinian student associations in Cairo, Alexandria, Damascus, and Beirut. Between 1952 and 1956 the chapter of Cairo had been chaired by Yasser Arafat; in 1955 it had been accepted to the International Student Congress as an observer and, in 1958, it had become a full member of the International Union of Students (Shemesh 2018: 146). The (re)foundation of GUPS in 1959 in Cairo by young graduate students who had also been among the founders of Fatah was a moment in which Palestinian students redefined their national and political aims, with special attention to the role that youth and education would play in “taking action to regain [their] stolen homeland, using all means permitted by the articles of this [GUPS] charter” (Shemesh 2018: 151n). In this context, GUPS took on several aims: to represent all Palestinian students in the Diaspora, to differentiate their political and national identification from the more general (pan-Arab) one that was gaining ground among Arab students, and to provide practical assistance to Palestinian students wherever they were.

For Italy, Laura Castellini (2013–2014) has recorded the voices of many former Palestinian students who came to Italy, established the Italian GUPS, remained in the country after graduating, and often played some official role for the PLO or other Palestinian organizations at some point in their lives. These interviews provide us with a picture of the early beginnings of GUPS in Italy, the structure of the organization, and their political activities between 1965 and 1995, the year in which many local chapters closed. We will follow them only until the early 1970s.

*a) Establishment and organization.* Generally speaking, Perugia was the town where the first Palestinian students landed when they arrived in Italy at the beginning of the 1960s, usually to study architecture or medicine. In Siena and Perugia were (and still are) located the two public universities where foreigners obtain/ed the language certification to enroll in other Italian public universities. The number of Palestinian students in Italy had remained altogether small until the end of the 1960s, when the Six Day War and Black September led to a peak in new arrivals. Wasim Dahmash—whose family originated in Lydda (Lod), who immigrated to Italy in 1965 to study literature, and who later became an instructor of Arabic at the

University of Rome and Cagliari—remembers that before 1967 there were only two or three groups of Palestinian students in Italy: “about a dozen studied arts in Rome and another small group in Florence also studied arts and architecture. Another very small group was based in Perugia where they studied medicine” (interview Dahmash). Amin Nabulsi—who was born in Nablus and later established himself in Padua where he worked as a high school teacher and where he became the consul for the PA for the North East (2000–2009)—confirmed that the numbers of Palestinian students arriving in Italy through Perugia began to peak after 1967 (interview Nabulsi). Such an increase had also been favored by a new orientation in the cultural policies of the Italian governments of the mid-1960s, which decided to actively promote the enrollment of foreign students in Italy and thus made use of its cultural institutes abroad and embassies in Arab countries for student recruitment (Caruso 2009: 55). Indeed, Yusef Salman—also from Nablus, who arrived in Italy in 1972 to study medicine (Bologna and Pavia), and who later became the representative of the Palestinian Red Crescent in Italy, and more recently the spokesperson of Fatah in Italy—confirmed:

in the 1970s the number of Palestinian students was very high; the highest number of Palestinian students organized in GUPS was at the beginning of the 1970s, when we had between four and five thousand students, for example in 1972, 1973 and 1974. (interview Salman)

When Palestinian students first arrived in Perugia, they were helped by the Arab Students’ League (*Lega degli Studenti Arabi, LSA*): they met in the rooms of this association, their members were offered an initial place to stay, some Middle Eastern food, and also received practical help, to find a home, for example, and/or with classes of Italian or other subjects (interviews Dahmash, Qaryouti, Tamimi). However, as Samir Qaryouti—from the area of Nablus, who arrived in Italy in 1968 from Jordan to study political science in Bologna, then headed the PLO press office in Italy (1975–1978) and has since worked as a journalist for many Arab printed media and television—explained, it did not take long for Palestinian students to realize that they needed an association of their own. This separation differentiated the Palestinian path from the religious and political activities of the LSA. According to Qaryouti, many Arab students in the LSA were sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood, which, in the Italian political scenario, were close to the right-wing university student

association Fronte Universitario d'Azione Nazionale (University Front of National Action FUAN). In the radicalized political context of the 1960s, moving away from right-wing student politics meant coming closer to left-wing ones and, at the same time, remarking the uniqueness of the Palestinian situation. The words of Samir Qaryouti found an echo in most of the interviews with other members of GUPS in Italy:

There is an exceptionalism of our cause, of our problem, that cannot be compared to that of anyone else; we do not have a State, we do not have a Ministry, we do not have a passport; one has a document here, another has a *laissez passer* for refugees there, and we belong to different social groups. (Interview Qaryouti)

On May 25, 1971, the Questura (Police Headquarters) of Perugia sent an urgent telegram to the Ministry of Interior, informing them that on 14–15 May the first congress of GUPS in Italy had taken place in Perugia.<sup>6</sup> The Statute of the association explained that GUPS in Italy was going to be a students' union that would work to improve students' life and help them acquire the necessary tools to be successful in their studies. GUPS also aimed at strengthening relations with “Arab, Asian, African students, and with those of all national and international student organizations”. Finally, the third aim of GUPS in Italy was to

explain the Palestinian question, the situation of the Palestinian refugees and people and the national liberation struggle that Palestinians lead in order to create a free democratic state in Palestine where Jews, Christians and Muslims will coexist.<sup>7</sup>

Perugia thus became the springboard of the political activities of GUPS throughout the peninsula in the following two decades. After obtaining their language certification, from here students departed to enroll in other universities throughout the country, bringing with them their Diasporic identity, the traumatic loss of Palestine, the experience of being refugees in Syria or in Jordan and the imperative to transmit the individual and collective memory of these events (Volkan 2001). In line with the general political trends of the period, they also embraced the belief that collective

<sup>6</sup> ACS, MI, PS, Cat. G, b. 381.

<sup>7</sup> *Statute of GUPS in Italy*, in ACS, GAB, 443/205801/V, General Affairs Foreigners' Service [AA. GG. Serv. Stran.] to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 June 1971.

political action could define successful political struggles and bring changes. In the context of the radical battles of the times—anti-imperialism and the Vietnam War, support for the Cuban revolution, the battles of Che Guevara in Africa and so on<sup>8</sup>—the struggle for the liberation of Palestine also found a space, though in the 1960s and 1970s it had not yet acquired the prominence it would gain the following decades (Marzano 2016; Falciola 2020). Wherever they moved on from Perugia to continue their studies, they established local chapters of GUPS, thus creating a national network made of local units.

Amin Nabulsi established the first GUPS unit in Padua in 1968; Samir Qaryouti pioneered the establishment of GUPS in Bologna (interviews Nabulsi, Qaryouti, Tamimi); in 1971 Khader Tamimi established a GUPS unit in Parma and Hani Geber—who immigrated to Italy in 1971, studied political sciences in Milan and later became the PLO representative in Italy, and more recently, the Palestinian diplomatic envoy for Northern Italy—established the GUPS unit in Pavia (interview Gerber). The GUPS branch of Perugia, which functioned as a sort of central unit, was transferred to Rome in 1974 (interview Tamimi); the unit of Naples was one of the last to be established in 1977, also thanks to the initiative of Omar Suleiman, who arrived in Perugia in 1977 and then moved to Naples with a scholarship by the Italian Ministry of Education (interview Suleiman). This local and national (Italian) structure was then represented in the National (Palestinian) Congress of GUPS, which comprised “directly elected representatives of all Union branches”. This was the highest organizational, legislative, and policy-setting body of the GUPS.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the Second World Conference on Palestine that took place in Amman between 2 and 6 September 1970 discussed the aims and structure of GUPS, indicating the special role of Palestinian students in the national struggle throughout the Diaspora. In the founding document that emerged from that assembly, students were defined as “a revolutionary pillar”, as the backbone of the Union; their role was to recover the dignity of the Palestinian people, and their education would have provided experts to the Palestinian cause; the Union would have enlisted as many

<sup>8</sup>Unione Generale degli Studenti Palestinesi in Italia, *Vietnam-Palestina* <https://www.palestineposterproject.org/taxonomy/term/570/poster-imaged-full?page=1>, accessed 31 July 2021.

<sup>9</sup>International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (henceforth IISH), *General Union of Palestine Students—L'union Generale des Etudiantst (sic) de la Palestine*, n.p.h., n.d., n.p. [p. 4].



students as possible for the armed struggle.<sup>10</sup> And while, broadly speaking, GUPS remained a student political association, at least one of its members, Osama Abdel Al-Zomar, a student in foreign languages at the University of Bari, was involved in the terrorist attack at the synagogue of Rome on 9 October 1982. Captured in Greece, he was never extradited despite Italy's requests, and the trial closed with a "life sentence in absentia for manslaughter" (Marzano and Schwarz, 2013: 188–89).

*b) Politics and narratives.* Palestinian students enrolled in Italian and other European universities put in place a system of mutual help which saw them go through their studies, and also maintain an active political agenda. Remembering their history and telling their narrative became an individual and collective political exercise, and one of the means to connect to local student activism. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to make the headlines, it became a way to attract the interest of the general public too, and of institutional (mainly leftwing) parties, trade unions, and politicians. Leaflets, booklets, posters, and manifestoes were central in this strategy<sup>11</sup> and so were public meetings and discussions. Bassam Saleh remembered how leaflets were printed mainly on anniversaries, to construct a chronology of Palestinian history with which Italian students and the general public could become familiar (interview Saleh). Among the dates that were commemorated periodically were 2 November (1917, anniversary of the Balfour Declaration): in a leaflet produced and distributed by GUPS of Pavia, this was described as "one of the worst aggressions made by Zionists and imperialists against Palestine", as the source "of infinite evils, tragedies and a threat to world peace", and as the single factor that brought the "dispossession of the Palestinian Arab people of its homeland, of all of its legitimate rights and of its properties, turning them into refugees without the right to self-determination" (Castellini 2013–2014: 48). Other dates were 9 April (1948, massacre of the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin during the War of 1948) and 15 May (1948, proclamation of the State of Israel), described as the day in which

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, [p. 1].

<sup>11</sup> Ivi; Fayege A. Sayegh, *A Palestinian View*, General Union of Palestine Students, n.p.h., n. d. [1970]; Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Milano, Affiche, Manifesti e caricature, Italia, *Al Karameh*, [https://patrimonio.fondazionefeltrinelli.it/new-feltrinelli/storico/detail/manifestiaffiches/FF0000003681/al-karameh.html?jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:%22query%22:%22GUP%22,%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22\\_perPage%22:20}}#!prettyPhoto](https://patrimonio.fondazionefeltrinelli.it/new-feltrinelli/storico/detail/manifestiaffiches/FF0000003681/al-karameh.html?jsonVal={%22jsonVal%22:%22query%22:%22GUP%22,%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20}}#!prettyPhoto), accessed 28 July 2021.

“British imperialism, by ending its mandate on Palestine, gave power to the terrorist Zionist bands” (Castellini 2013–2014: 50); 5 June (1967, outbreak of the Six Day War), 21 March (1968, battle of Karameh), 17 September, (1970, beginning of the Black September). And, as the conflict spilled over to Europe, 16 October (1972) and 9 January (1973) were included in this Palestinian chronology, as they commemorated the already mentioned assassinations of Wael Zweiter in Rome and of Mahmoud Al-Hamsheri in Paris.

As the following examples will show, the linguistic register that GUPS adopted in this material was that of anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism. In this framework, Jews, that were always understood and presented as a collective entity, were portrayed as colonial and racist towards Palestinians, who saw and represented themselves as the new victims of racism. A leaflet entitled *Another link in the terrorist chain of Israeli Zionism*, that was mimeographed by GUPS on 15 January 1973, after the assassination of Al-Hamsheri, stated:

Once again, this act denounces in front of public opinion the racist and imperialist nature of the State of Israel, that recurs to all kinds of crimes to eliminate physically anyone that tries to unmask with their political activity the anti-Arab works of the regime of Golda Meir [Israel’s PM 1969–1974] (Castellini, 2013–2014: 55)

The GUPS conference that took place in Perugia on 18–19 December 1971 produced a document in nineteen points that set the political agenda for GUPS in Italy for the following years. Here the PLO was considered the only representative of the Palestinian people, which made GUPS the only spokesman of Palestinian students; after Black September, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was presented as a reactionary regime that “aimed at liquidating the Palestinian revolution”, and Palestinians saw themselves as the vanguard in the “fight against Zionism and world imperialism headed by the USA”. In this context, GUPS appealed to revolutionary forces worldwide, including Italian, to support the Palestinian struggle.

*c) Supporting Palestinians in Italy.* Between 1967 and 1969, many associations, groups, and committees had already embraced this cause, and a plethora of initiatives, public debates, and encounters started to take place all over the country, in universities, on television, as informal meetings, and in political conventions. These activities grew exponentially in

the 1970s and 1980s, peaking during the Lebanon war in 1982 and the First Intifada in 1987. For obvious reasons of space, I only provide here a few examples of events that took place at the end of the 1960s, when protesting against the State of Israel in the aftermath of the Six Day War was adjoined to several other anti-imperialist and anti-American themes that were popular at the time and that converged in the youth and student protests of 1968.

Many left-wing Italian associations and parties—among them the PCI and its youth federation the FGCI (Federazione Giovanile Comunisti Italiani, Youth Federation of Italian Communists), as well as the PSI—and groups from civil society that shared a broadly conceived anti-imperialist agenda mobilized in this direction. As shown by institutional correspondences, only in June–July 1967 local demonstrations and rallies that dealt with the question of Palestine, the Middle East, and the Arab peoples had taken place in the Italian province as well as in large industrial cities, in Modena, Torre del Greco, Parma, Rome, Turin, Pisa, Bologna, and Perugia, and Italian authorities were evidently monitoring this new phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> The year 1969 saw the establishment of the very first pro-Palestinian committees that were not officially tied to any political party, whose aim was also to raise funds for Palestinians, involve Italians in grass-roots projects, and mobilize public opinion in this direction. In March 1969 a joint initiative of the PCI and of the small socialist party PSIUP (Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity) led to the establishment of a Committee for the Solidarity with the Palestinian People (Comitato per la Solidarietà con il Popolo Palestinese) in Rome, whose aim was to “promote initiatives that would help Italians get to know the real conditions of Palestinians in the territories occupied by the Israeli troops”.<sup>13</sup> Other

<sup>12</sup> ACS, GAB, 0230/PS, Registered mail from Prefecture of Modena to Ministry of Interior, 15 June 1967; ACS, GAB, 071236, Registered mail from Prefecture of Naples to Ministry of Interior, 13 June 1967; ACS, GAB, 0162/PS, Registered mail from Prefecture of Parma to Ministry of Interior, 9 June 1967; ACS, GAB, 3122/12, b. 16, Registered mail from Prefecture of Bologna to Ministry of Interior, 27 June 1967; ACS, GAB, 015222/67-Stranieri, Registered mail from Prefecture of Rome to Ministry of Interior, 10 June 1967; ACS, GAB, 2914/12B/5–6, Reserved registered mail from Prefecture of Turin to Ministry of Interior, 30 June 1967; ACS, GAB, 03402/PS, Telegram from Prefecture of Pisa to Ministry of Interior, 15 June 1967; ACS, GAB, 3114/12, b. 16, Registered mail from Prefecture of Bologna to Ministry of Interior, 27 June 1967; ACS, GAB, 10/3752 PS, Registered mail from Prefecture of Perugia to Ministry of Interior, 31 July 1967.

<sup>13</sup> ACS, GAB, 443/184368/IV, General Affairs Foreigners’ Service [AA. GG. Serv. Stran.] to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 March 1969.

similar committees were established in Pisa in May 1969 “in solidarity with Arab peoples,” in Milan and then in Padua in November of the same year.<sup>14</sup> By August 1969, the Committee that had been established in Rome had already published four issues of its new journal entitled *Rivoluzione Palestinese* (Palestinian Revolution) and had “established a center to collect medical material for the Arab populations engaged in the war against Israel.”<sup>15</sup> It had also organized a solidarity day for Palestine on 30 November, which saw the participation of about three hundred people and which received coverage in *L'Unità* and in the weekly *Akhbar el-Yom* from Cairo and various Libyan newspapers, as reported by the Italian embassies in Egypt and Libya.<sup>16</sup>

Among the various initiatives, students in Palermo organized a conference entitled *The Palestinian question and its origins* which saw the participation of about fifty Italian and foreign students.<sup>17</sup> Some of these debates were attended also by Jewish students. In Turin, according to police records, the Jewish community encouraged Jewish students to participate to “prevent inaccurate information from being expressed” and to “oppose adequate truthful information.” In front of 200 students, a student of Syrian provenance explaining to the public “the Arab point of view on the conflict in the Middle East” was followed by speeches of Jewish students. The police reported that the atmosphere had remained generally calm and that during this conference FGEI had distributed a leaflet entitled *Outline for a discussion on socialism in the Middle East*. Here young Jews brought into the conversation the “particular and dramatic historical contingencies” that “determined a maturation of the Jewish popular consciousness”, of its transformation into the “will of self-determination of the people” and of its realization “through national independence, in the land linked to the historical past of the people themselves”.<sup>18</sup> With similar if not

<sup>14</sup> ACS, GAB, Telegram from Prefecture of Pisa to Ministry of Interior, 17 May 1969; ACS, GAB, 441/012909-G-5/12/36 Very urgent reserved registered mail from General Affairs Foreigners' Service [AA. GG. Serv. Stran.] to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 November 1969.

<sup>15</sup> ACS, GAB, 443/184368/TV, double reserved file from General Affairs Foreigners' Service [AA. GG. Serv. Stran.] to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 August 1969.

<sup>16</sup> ACS, GAB, 441/012909-G.5/12/36, very urgent registered mail—reserved from General Affairs Foreigners' Service [AA. GG. Serv. Stran.] to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 November 1969.

<sup>17</sup> ACS, GAB, 443/184397/V, from General Affairs Foreigners' Service [AA. GG. Serv. Stran.] to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 June 1969.

<sup>18</sup> ACS, GAB, 1110/12B/5.6, reserved registered mail from the Prefecture of Turin to Ministry of Interior, 10 May 1969.

identical words, students from GUPS were expressing the same attachment to the same land as their source of current and historical identity. Things took a different turn in Pisa where a representative of GUPS and the President of the Jewish community clashed in “a lively manner, though without incidents”.<sup>19</sup>

The list could go on into the 1970s and 1980s and, often, these initiatives led to the foundations of new committees in support of Palestinians, as in Padua, Pavia, Florence, and Rome,<sup>20</sup> and to numerous other initiatives they in turn sponsored. With the already mentioned first conference of GUPS in Perugia on 14–15 May 1971, and with the official registration of GUPS in Italy, pro-Palestinian activism further increased in the number of initiatives, in the more direct agency of GUPS itself and in the support that this organization succeeded to mobilize beyond student activism, through left-wing parties and trade unions, thus reaching out to a much broader audience and base for support (Castellini 2013–2014; Tarquini 2019).

Needless to say, this had inevitable repercussions on how Italian Jews perceived that their narrative—and the individual and collective identity that was based on it—was being distorted, making them feel misunderstood and often rejected in a public discourse where the terms Jew, Zionist, and Israeli were often used interchangeably (Yehoshua 1996), for example, in the media and in public debates. Such a confused and politicized climate had a strong impact on the existential and political choices of many of them, and especially on those who had been born after 1945 who decided to leave for Israel as volunteers during the Six Day War. Among them, some eventually moved permanently to Israel, while others came back. Whatever their final choice, for all of them that experience was life-changing in various respects. In the next and final section of this essay, I will leave space to the stories, narrative, and voices of some of them that I collected in a series of interviews conducted in Israel and in Italy. Though not statistically representative of the 110 who left Italy as volunteers in

<sup>19</sup> ACS, GAB, telegram from the Prefecture of Pisa Ministry of Interior, 17 May 1969.

<sup>20</sup> ACS, GAB, 441/0932/G5/12/36, from General Affairs Foreigners’ Service [AA. GG. Serv. Stran.] to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 April 1970; ACS, GAB, 1/216 registered mail from the Prefecture of Pavia to Ministry of Interior, 22 January, 1970; ACS, GAB, 638/12.b.1, reserved registered mail from the Prefecture of Florence to Ministry of Interior 6 March 1970; ACS, GAB, 11200/94, from General Affairs Foreigners’ Service [AA. GG. Serv. Stran.] to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 July 1970.

Israel during the Six Day War, or immediately after (“The Volunteer”), the stories that eleven of them generously shared with me are still telling of the collective response of a generation and of the construction of an identity structured between a *here* and a *there*.

### YOUNG ITALIAN JEWS AND THE SIX DAY WAR

The collective expression *young Italian Jews* hides more complexity than it seems. Within this broad category we find a generation of individuals born in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, whose parents originated from different geographical contexts (within Italy and in a broader sense), who grew up in families of different economic and social backgrounds, who attended both Jewish and non-Jewish public schools, and who had attained different levels of education. Those who were university students in 1967 were in the midst of their careers, and those who worked at the time were in the midst of their jobs. Almost all of them still were, or had been, active members of national youth movements like FGFI or of transnational ones, like the already mentioned BA and HH. Others had been engaged in national politics: Marina Ergas from Milan, for example, was very politically active; she used to “hang up *dazibaos* outside factories for the strikes at the age of fourteen” (Interview Ergas). Others were more moderate, though they still identified with the left, with the communist, socialist, or social-democratic parties. Fewer leaned towards smaller parties at the center of the political spectrum, like the Partito Repubblicano, or the Partito Liberale Italiano (PRI and PLI). The *kibbutz* attracted many, as the “only utopian experiment that did not fail” (Buber 1949) and as the ultimate realization of the socialist idea. Avner (Piero) Calò from Florence/Milan said, “immigration to Israel meant immigration to a *kibbutz* as the perfect realization of my own ideal of a shared and collective life; the socialist idea par excellence”. Marina Ergas too said, “the *kibbutz* was one of the things that brought me to Israel. There was no need to make the revolution here [in Israel], because the *kibbutz* already existed”. And even if Miriam Toaff Della Pergola from Rome did not share the same mythical regard for this secular institution, she went to a religious one when she left Italy on June 5, 1967 (interviews Calò, Ergas, Toaff Della Pergola). Regardless of all these differences, the dynamics of the Six Day War and the complex political climate that had developed in Italy before, during, and after the war prompted many of them to take direct action vis-à-vis their complex Italian and Jewish identity.

a) *The Holocaust and Jewish education.* Most of those who left for Israel as volunteers during the Six Day War responded to an inner call cultivated for years. Umberto Di Gioacchino from Florence summarized this feeling: “I don’t know what it was precisely, something that pushed me. They were looking for civilian volunteers to substitute those who had left for the front and I said: I am going” (interview Di Gioacchino). For a few, the Holocaust and the silences that surrounded it represented a heavy weight that played a role in the decision to leave: the extended family of Marina Ergas had been deported to Auschwitz while her immediate family had managed to escape; she remembered the silences of her father on the subject, and her parents urging each other “not to show to the girl the magazines with pictures of the concentration camps”, as well as her mother crying in her sleep “the Gestapo is coming, the Germans are coming, the stadium is full of Jews that will be deported, they are here to take us away!” One of the reasons for her boarding the first plane to Israel at the outbreak of the war rested in the belief that “should there happen something terrible and should they exterminate us now with this war, I would never forgive myself if I don’t go” (interview Ergas). Umberto Di Gioacchino described the silence that surrounded this subject at home as a “curtain of iron”; his grandmother had been betrayed for money and had been deported from Milan, his mother could never watch films on the Holocaust, and his father had eventually joined the Resistance (something that he learnt by chance a few years after the end of the war) (Interview Di Gioacchino). Miriam Toaff Della Pergola considered more relevant in her decision to leave Italy the Zionist education that she received in youth movements, but spoke of the “tremendous impression that her family history made” on her as a young girl, how her father Elio, who, at the time was Chief Rabbi of Ancona, “saved all the Jews of Ancona, then went to Leghorn to bring to safety his own father, the Chief Rabbi of Livorno”, was captured, managed to escape, and later joined the Resistance (interview Toaff Della Pergola). The family of Lia Pacifici Millul had been hiding in Florence and then in 1944 escaped to Switzerland; so did the family of Avner (Piero) Calò and the mother of Roberto Osimo, who managed to cross the border nine month pregnant. On the contrary, the parents of Marina Finzi Norsi from Milan did not succeed in crossing the border with Switzerland with two small children. Heading South from Trieste, the family of Piero Steindler was intercepted in Venice, where they “remained hiding for twenty-two terrible months, guests of a family of gondoliers.” (interviews Di Gioacchino; Pacifici Millul, Osimo, Calò,

Finzi Norsi, Steindler). All of them could tell different, yet similar, stories of persecution and/or rescue, but all grew up with the weight of their families' silences; as mentioned above, when the Eichmann trial opened up some space for these memories to emerge, all them followed it with great interest. Marina Finzi Norsi explained why in very essential and logical terms: "I followed the trial because it was closely connected to the history of my family" (interview Finzi Norsi).

Despite the weight of the Holocaust on their families and on their individual biographies, more relevant to their choice of leaving for Israel as volunteers in June 1967 had been the Zionist education received in Jewish schools or, more significantly, in the BA or HH. In 1961, Miriam Toaff Della Pergola had been to Israel for a month on a trip from the Jewish school of Rome; for her Zionism came "more from the BA than from school. The summer and winter camps had a pioneering character, and the aim of the movement was that its members would make *alyia* [immigrate to Israel] at eighteen years old. And this was my idea too" (interview Toaff Della Pergola). Marina Finzi Norsi expressed a similar view in reference to the Jewish school of Milan, "that did not push its pupils towards Israel; I did not feel this drive; it was a Jewish, but not a Zionist education" (Interview Finzi-Norsi). Almost all of them had already visited the country in their teens with trips organized by the BA, the HH, FGEI, the Italian branch of WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization), or to visit family members. During these trips that took place throughout the 1960s, that usually lasted between twenty days and one month, they all developed a sentimental and nostalgic attachment to Israel as a state and as a society, which they nourished when they came back to Italy. Umberto Di Gioacchino, who at the time worked in education at the Jewish community of Florence, had accompanied a group of school-age children that was invited by the State of Israel after the flood of Florence of 1966 (Interviews Ergas, Steindler, Ventura, Calò, Pacifici Millul, Di Gioacchino).

The collective memory of the Holocaust, the weight of the silences that surrounded that dramatic period, the involvement in organized Jewish school or community life, participation in FGEI, and the Zionist education received mainly in BA and HH can be considered as different seeds that became active when, in May 1967, the buildup to the war started. Not for everyone the same factors carried the same weight, but their combination is what prompted many to suspend their studies/jobs and to leave as civilian volunteers for Israel for a period comprised between one



and three months. Some then went back to Israel a few years later in a more permanent fashion, while others remained in Italy.

*b) The buildup to war (22 May to 5 June 1967).* During this short and extenuating time, the most widespread fear among Jews—regardless of their age—was that the State of Israel would disappear. As we saw, center-right and left-wing press certainly did not help defusing the alarm, nor did institutional or grassroots politics. Lia Pacifici Millul remembered, “before the war, at the Jewish community of Florence we were all mobilized, to see what we could do to help” (Interview Pacifici Millul). As we saw above, Marina Ergas would not have forgiven herself not to be there should a new Holocaust take place. Piero Steindler was a medical student living in the Morgagni student residence of Padua where “the general orientation was not in favor of Israel, though some students had been more supportive when Egypt had closed the straits of Tiran.” In general, he was “convinced that Israel would disappear” and turned to the Jewish community to ask how he could leave [for Israel]” (interview Steindler). Miriam Toaff Della Pergola too feared

that the State of Israel would cease to exist. During the weeks of the diplomatic crisis, the atmosphere was that of the end of the world; looking at the press, the situation was very serious, every day there was something new. (...) Watching the television, it seemed that the State of Israel was seriously running the risk of disappearing. It was a very sad period. (Interview Toaff Della Pergola)

Piero Steindler too kept himself informed through the press and television. In his memory the television correspondences by the well-known Jewish journalist Arrigo Levi represented a main factor that ultimately shifted public opinion in favor of the State of Israel:

In our student residence we had a little room for watching tv that was full only on two occasions: when Arrigo Levi was speaking and for football matches. Arrigo Levi was great, his wonderful correspondences were broadcast on the news of the first channel [RAI 1]. We were all surprised that RAI 1 [connected to the Christian Democratic Party, some currents of which had long-established relations with Arab countries, as in the case of Enrico Mattei and others *note of the A.*], had assigned such delicate correspondences to Arrigo Levi” [i.e. a Jew, *note of the A.*]. (interview Steindler)

Still, those who described the period that preceded the war—and therefore their departure—spoke with a sense of urgency that was not only connected to the fate of the country to which they felt an emotional attachment, but pointed to the fact that one of the poles on which their identity stood might disappear. As Miriam Toaff Della Pergola explained:

I wrote to my brother Ariel that I did not want to stay in this situation, with one foot in Italy and one in Israel, I had to do something, you cannot just watch with one foot here and one there. I wanted to be here [in Israel] and not there [in Italy]. I did not want to be a spectator but a participant. I knew that, not being Israeli I could only work in a kibbutz. But I wanted to be in Israel and not in Rome, and we ended up on some newspaper under the headline “The son and daughter of the Chief Rabbi [of Rome] are leaving!” which really bugged us because we would not have ended up on the newspaper had we not been the son and daughter of our father, but this makes you understand that the general feeling was that one was a hero, that was leaving to go die. But indeed, when we left, the situation did not appear very rosy (interview Toaff Della Pergola).

c) *Departure and returns.* This is not the place to follow the path of each of these young Italian Jews once they arrived in Israel as the war was still going on, or immediately after for those who reached Israel by boat. The students of medicine—Steindler, Finzi Norsi, Lio Beniamino Gross (from Trieste, already an MD), and a few others—were assigned to various hospitals in the country. The others who did not have a specific training that could be put to use during the war were directed to different religious or secular *kibbutzim*, where they worked in various agricultural or other jobs. Many of them were quickly disillusioned about the real contribution they could give to the country that they had rushed to help. Some of them recalled the prejudice against Italians as spoiled and lazy workers; others felt some resistance towards them as non-Ashkenazi Jews and the surprise of the authorities in charge when they realized that none of them understood *Yiddish* (Interview Ergas). Their individual experience was ultimately heavily influenced by the location where they spent this period: some, like Miriam Toaff Della Pergola remembered the heavy work in the vineyards under the scorching sun for a month, especially for someone like her who “had been studying Greek literature until a few days before;” others had no hesitation in defining the whole experience as “a wonderful holiday.” Marina Ergas felt completely misunderstood when, upon arrival to the first *kibbutz*, her group was directed to the swimming pool and not

put to work; Daniele Ventura was deluded “when we found out that we were useless” (Interviews Steindler; Finzi Norsi; Gross; Toaff Della Pergola; Calò; Ergas; Di Gioacchino; Ventura). Even Piero Steindler, one of the medical students, “came back with wonderful memories, but also a little bit frustrated”. As he recalled: “I had left to do things seriously and then I realized that I was one among many that they did not know what to do with.” He continued:

I had left with the idea that I could have died, and it was something that I had accepted. Then all went well. I came back as if I had been on a tour. We even visited a battlefield. Two or three days after the war (interview Steindler).

For him “moving to Israel had never been an option”, while the opposite was true of Marina Finzi Norsi who did not see any other option: despite the good social life that she was leading in Milan, “at some point I no longer saw the reason to remain attached to this [Jewish] tradition in a superficial way,” Ultimately, she left the University of Milan in her fifth year and graduated at the Hadassah medical school in Jerusalem (interviews Steindler; Finzi Norsi).

Young Italian Jews were not alone. When the Six Day War started, a whole generation of young Jews literally from all over the world chose to be *there* regardless of the inevitable risks they would run. And although this essay has not kept into consideration the voices of those of the same age group who remained at home, the numbers of those who mobilized and left within a few days are quite remarkable. Listed by country of provenance as of 5 July 1967 (one month after the beginning of the war) the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs counted 1295 volunteers from England, followed by South Africa (861), France (607), USA (301), and so on, for a total of 5043 individuals (“The Volunteer”) from five continents and more than twenty countries. Most of the Italian volunteers had touched this international dimension already on the planes (or ships) that took them to Israel, and certainly lived it through in loco, in the *kibbutzim* where they worked, in the fields, in the kitchens, in the laundry, and so on. Miriam Toaff remembered American, French, and South African volunteers; Roberto Osimo met Helen Leigh, a volunteer from England who later became his wife. The international dimension of this experience was also intergenerational: Piero Steindler worked under the “supervision of an old Polish director, Prof. Kaufmann, whose aides were a Scottish or an

Irish physician”); Marina Finzi Norsi started her practice with a Czechoslovakian surgeon, a genius of surgery, people of great valor” (interviews Steindler; Finzi Norsi; Toaff Della Pergola; Osimo; Leigh Osimo).

*d) 1968–1969.* Those who left as volunteers in 1967 came back as transformed individuals, regardless of whether they had spent their days in Israel working in orchards or travelling the country. For most, it was an eye-opening experience in various respects; most striking had been the encounter with peers of the same age group from all over the world. In a different sense, striking had also been the realization that there existed a discrepancy between a diasporic narrative built on foundational myths and a sense of nostalgia, and the reality of the hard politics on the ground, especially in reference to the new dramatic situation of Palestinians, that they had witnessed first-hand, for example, in tours of East and Old Jerusalem and of other occupied areas (interviews Di Gioacchino; Steindler).

When they returned to Italy, the university students among them found themselves involved in the students protests that were spreading across the country, in the debates, assemblies, and occupations that opened up a new season of collective action. In that context, the experience in the *kibbutz* could also be seen in continuity with other experiences of collectivism: Marina Ergas had come to Florence to work as a volunteer in 1966 when the Arno river had flooded, with other members of the Jewish community, among them the well-known sociologist Renato Mannheimer, and with hundreds of other volunteers from all over Italy and the world (Interview Ergas). However, in the politicized climate of 1968, their experience was not well received.

As we saw above, since 1965, GUPS had begun to be active in Italy and, in the following few years, various chapters of this student association spread in universities across the country. Their version of events was gradually adopted and incorporated in the political battles of the time, accompanied by a highly pitched political rhetoric. In this context, those Jews who shared the ideals that were at the foundations of the revolution of 1968 presented their collectivist experience in the *kibbutz* as a validation of their political identification; however, they were refused on grounds of their ethnic belonging. Those who were finishing their studies and had already made up their minds that they would settle in Israel were not

particularly touched by such a rebuttal. Miriam Toaff Della Pergola was one of them:

When after 1967 the left shifted its support away from Israel, I was actually finishing my exams at university and was already heading out, towards Israel. Being a volunteer at kibbutz Sde Eliahu during the war certainly carried its weight in my decision to leave Italy in 1970. (interview Toaff Della Pergola)

Others used their collectivist experience to obtain some credibility in student assemblies and public debates where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was one among other themes; this was the case of Daniele Ventura, who intervened in a student assembly at the University of Florence:

At the centre of Santa Apollonia there had been a demonstration organized by Arab students. (...) I went with my cousin Franco Ventura and some Israeli students. At some point, something was said that deeply offended the Israeli students who left the room. It was my turn to speak and I felt very uncomfortable; still, I took the floor after a young South American student that spoke extensively about colonialism and imperialism. I denounced his speech as anti-Semitic, because he had essentialized Jews, presenting these practices as values of the whole Jewish people. (Interview Ventura)

For those who shared deeply the values of social justice and progress and the ideals that the youth was trying to (re)claim in 1968, the awakening to the complexity of ethnic belonging and political belief was even harder. The words of Marina Ergas are exemplary in this respect:

I tried to participate to 1968, working in the neighborhood. One felt involved in the age of collective mobilization: in the morning I used go at the gates of [the factories] of Breda and Pirelli and in the evenings I worked with the families of migrants from Sicily. And the experience of the kibbutz was seen in different ways. Workers had no idea what a kibbutz was so, having been there gave me a status in certain places and it did not in others. (...) After the war, when I presented myself again in one of the left wing groups of which I was part, they took away my right to speak, because I had been to Israel and I was trying to balance the [political] positions that were expressed in those debates. And this really disturbed me and made me decide to come back here [to Israel] because there [in Italy] I would not have functioned with this conflict. (Interview Ergas)

## CONCLUSIONS

When the conflict in the Middle East peaked, both Jews and Arabs in Italy (Moslems and Christians, mainly Palestinians and of other nationalities) felt increasingly isolated from a political and existential point of view. This in turn fostered their sense of attachment to their respective communities, and their adherence to more exclusive versions of their own histories and narratives. In this respect, when considering how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict spilled over to Europe and how it helped shape Diasporic identities, we can observe its effects on three areas: self-perception, perceived identity, and social affiliation. To paraphrase Amartya Sen, the twin illusions of destiny and of uniqueness—that are so important in shaping exclusive identities—came to the fore at times of crisis, strengthening the predominance of the religious-national-ethnic component over others (professional, gender, political affiliation, etc.) in the definition of Self and of Other (Sen 2006), with long-term political and cultural consequences.

Italian Jewry had been altogether a latecomer to Zionism and, after the Second World War, it gradually rejoined the cultural and political trends that had been developing in the meantime in the rest of the Jewish world. Between 1945 and the early 1950s, a previous generation of Italian Jews had asked questions about their own identity and place in society; many of them had volunteered during the War of 1948, often in a military capacity. Arrigo Levi, the journalist of RAI 1 mentioned above was one of them, and so was Prof. Luciano Segre, whom I quoted in opening (Simoni 2010, 2018). Those born after 1945 asked similar questions and participated to some of the dynamics of the Six Day War as (civilian) volunteers.

There were differences between these two generations. Those born after 1945 were confronted with challenges that were less existential and more political: they had not been directly expelled from schools or universities, they did not have to run for their lives, nor did they have to hide for fear of being betrayed; their families sheltered them as they were growing up, unlike those of the previous generation (Simoni 2018); still, they felt cornered, this time both from the right and from the left, in a society that often misunderstood their complex identity and that misrepresented and condemned the sentimental and nostalgic attachment towards the State of Israel that many of them had developed in their teens. When the Six Day War started in June 1967, these young Jews, and especially those who identified with the left felt betrayed, indeed because left-wing parties, press, and civil society shifted their support for Palestinians in the name of

the same values of anti-Fascism and Resistance that Jews had embraced for their own survival twenty-five years before. This became particularly obvious when the conflict in the Middle East peaked, or when it spilled over in Europe through violence and terrorism. During and after the 1960s, this young Diaspora responded to these challenges by strengthening its relationship with the State of Israel, whether through nostalgia, professional relations, by settling in the new Homeland, or by adopting a more fluid model of coming and going that Italy's geographical proximity to the State of Israel allowed.

During the same decade the Palestinian young Diaspora too started to organize themselves and respond to the loss of that very same Homeland, and to react to the historical narrative that the victor in this conflict had established and that Jews in the Diaspora had often also adopted without too much critical questioning. This could not happen, for obvious political reasons, by going to historic Palestine, but it occurred by bringing Palestine to the diasporic countries where Palestinians were now studying, living, building their careers and families, and working. The establishment, network, work, and activities of GUPS in Italy (and in many other countries in Europe and elsewhere) was an important step in this direction. When this narrative was adopted by the local (and later national) parties, and incorporated into domestic political dynamics, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict took a life of its own away from the Middle East.

In the 1960s, Italian society and politics did not prove up to the task of acknowledging the complexity of these political and historical narratives, and their juxtaposition, nor did they express any interest or ability to defuse their destructive potential. On the contrary, the press and institutional and grassroots politics fueled this conflict, often recurring to stereotypes that either drew from an Orientalist imaginary or that were remnants of the so-called anti-Jewish Archive (Levis Sullam 2008). Whatever the case, the spillover of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Europe started then a new course of its own that continued to reverberate for decades to come.

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- Interview of Laura Castellini with Dahmash Wasim. 2013. Rome, July 13.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Di Gioacchino Umberto. 2009. Florence, July 14.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Dr. Finzi Norsi Marina. 2009. Beer Sheva, July 26.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Ergas Marina. 2009. Jerusalem, August 3.
- Interview of Laura Castellini with Gerber Hani. 2013. Milan, October 18.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Gross Lio Beniamino. 2009. Triest, September 24.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Leigh Osimo Helen. 2009. Haifa, July 28.
- Interview of Laura Castellini with Nabulsi Amin. 2013. Padua, September 13.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Osimo Roberto. 2009. Haifa, July 28.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Pacifici Millul Lia. 2009. Haifa, July 27.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Prof. Steindler Piero. 2009. Padua, September 1.
- Interview of Laura Castellini with Qaryouti Samir. 2013. email, September 30.
- Interview of Laura Castellini with Saleh Bassam. 2013. Rome, July 15.
- Interview of Laura Castellini with Salman Yusef. 2013. Rome, July 12.
- Interview of Laura Castellini with Suleiman Omar. 2013. Naples, November 11.
- Interview of Laura Castellini with Tamimi Khader. 2013. Milan, October 17.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Toaff Della Pergola Miriam. 2009. Jerusalem, July 27.
- Interview of Marcella Simoni with Ventura Daniele. 2009. Ra'anana, July 22.