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## 2 The Italian Red Brigades (1969–1984): Political Revolution and Threats to the State

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### INTRODUCTION

On 19 April 1974, Mario Sossi, an Italian district attorney known for his aggressive investigations of extremist groups in Italy, was kidnapped near his home in Genoa. Police later learned that Sossi's kidnappers belonged to the leftist militant group *Brigate Rosse* (BR), or Red Brigades. This was the same group that Sossi had once investigated in the late 1960s. Leaflets placed in a telephone booth informed police that Sossi's kidnappers were holding him in a "people's jail," until he could later be subjected to a trial conducted by a "revolutionary tribunal."<sup>1</sup>

As the "trial" proceeded, the BR released eight communiqués and two pictures of the "defendant." In exchange for Sossi's freedom, the BR demanded the release of eight convicted members of the October XXII Circle, a fellow leftist militant group. An Italian court agreed to the demands, although the ultimate release of the prisoners was blocked by Genoa's attorney general. Nevertheless, the BR released Sossi "in the apparent belief that the State's authority had been sufficiently undermined."<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the kidnapping of Mario Sossi is considered a major turning point in the evolution of BR ideology and tactics. The decision to kidnap Sossi was "the first concrete demonstration that the terrorist campaign of the BR was intended to strike beyond mere political adversaries or the capitalist system."<sup>3</sup> It was, instead, a direct challenge to the Italian state. The attack, moreover, would be a preview of the BR tactics and operations to come.

Today, discussions of terrorism in Italy evoke images of violent Islamist or *jibadi* networks operating out of major Italian cities and beyond. Recent intelligence reports and scholarly analyses support this view.<sup>4</sup> However, it could easily be argued that the fiercest

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and most savage terrorism experience in Italy occurred within the period from 1969 to 1984, when the Red Brigades were most active.

During this period, the Red Brigades, described by one scholar as “by far Europe’s principal armed communist organization,”<sup>5</sup> spread a wide swath of human carnage and physical destruction. In fact, more than “twelve hundred people died or suffered grievous injury from this violence.”<sup>6</sup> Key targets of Red Brigades terrorism included policemen, lawyers, judges, university professors, union leaders, industrialists, and an array of bystanders.<sup>7</sup> This may explain a 1984 national poll that listed terrorism as the top “historical development of the last fifty years to which future historians of Italy would devote the most attention.”<sup>8</sup> No other issue—including the history of fascism, Italy’s liberation in World War II, Italy’s transformation into a modern industrial state, among others—came close to matching the significance of terrorism in the poll.<sup>9</sup>

### **ORIGINS OF THE RED BRIGADES (BR)**

The origins of the Red Brigades can be traced back to the late 1960s at the University of Trento in northern Italy. The BR originally started as a small group of radical and communist students and workers who were commanded by a former student radical leader named Renato Curcio.<sup>10</sup> Curcio’s spouse, Margherita “Mara” Cagol, also played a significant role in the BR’s early history.<sup>11</sup> Although both Curcio and Cagol came from Catholic families and were married in a church, they found the prospect of living mundane lives (they had been trained in hotel management and bookkeeping) to be unappealing. Their “free floating idealism” drew them to the University of Trento, where they studied sociology and subsequently became enmeshed in the student movement.<sup>12</sup>

At the time, the University of Trento, located in a tranquil and socially conservative province in northern Italy, was a new university that specialized exclusively in social sciences. Trento was comparable to University of California–Berkeley in the United States or the Free University of Berlin in West Germany in that it was a hotbed for student activism, radicalism, and innovation.<sup>13</sup> With its flexible admissions policy, Trento attracted “socially concerned students” from throughout Italy.<sup>14</sup> The environment at Trento suited Curcio and Cagol; eventually, they would establish the “historical nucleus” of the BR.<sup>15</sup>

In 1969, Curcio and Cagol left the university and moved to Milan. They met another communist youth from the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna named Alberto Franceschini. The three of them founded the Metropolitan Political Collective, an organization that was intended “to coordinate and to radicalize the anticapitalist discontent of the students and workers.”<sup>16</sup> When it became clear that the Italian Communist Party was unwilling to engage in revolution or work for the goals of the extreme Left, the Red Brigades emerged to play this role.<sup>17</sup>

Up until the late 1980s, the BR followed an ideology and doctrine that advocated “armed violence against the capitalist state.”<sup>18</sup> A strong anticapitalist streak dominated the thinking of Curcio and his followers: “They saw multinational corporate capitalism as a monster preparing to devour the world.”<sup>19</sup> Ideologically, the Red Brigades considered themselves to be true Marxists. They sought to create a true socialist state in Italy along the lines of Lenin’s socialism from 1917 to 1924 and of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution.<sup>20</sup>

The Red Brigades were also influenced by the ideas and writings of Lin Biao, Che Guevara, Carlos Marighella, and Abraham Guillen. Marighella was the author of the *Mini-manual of Urban Guerrilla Warfare*, which described in detail how to conduct an urban campaign, which was the key strategy of the Red Brigades.<sup>21</sup> However, Marighella saw urban guerrilla warfare as an adjunct to the larger rural struggle, a point that the BR—which did not focus on rural areas—either missed or ignored.<sup>22</sup>

From a historical perspective, the Red Brigades emerged out of the milieu of the 1968 student protest movement and growing international antiwar sentiment generated by American involvement in the Vietnam War. Indeed, the year 1968 was particularly problematic for the U.S. Vietnam campaign because of the Tet Offensive, launched by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars.<sup>23</sup> This offensive and the American response resulted in dramatic violence that was televised internationally. The attack “created stunning [television] images: American planes strafing villages, dropping napalm canisters that burst into rolling fireballs.”<sup>24</sup> In addition to the Vietnam War experience, the year 1968 could also be characterized simply as a time of liberation, counterculture, and protest. Young people on both sides of the Atlantic were eager to challenge “the Establishment.”<sup>25</sup>

However, the Red Brigades did not see themselves as merely a protest movement. As die-hard Marxists, they viewed their movement as the product of inevitable historical trends and forces, which brought about social and political changes that were natural, evolutionary, inevitable, and irreversible.<sup>26</sup> The BR believed it would eventually prevail against the Italian state. Its self-confidence was based on the belief that it was “correctly aligned with political, economic and social forces” that were—it believed—becoming dominant.

In the Italian context, the Red Brigades felt betrayed by the fact that the Italian Communist Party had turned on the “movement” and had reached a “historic compromise” with the Christian Democrats in an effort to share government power.<sup>27</sup> One of the key objectives of the Red Brigades was to disrupt cooperation between the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats, led by former prime minister Aldo Moro. The Red Brigades apparently targeted Aldo Moro—a former prime minister who would eventually be kidnapped and murdered in 1978—because he was considered “the architect of the arrangement between the parties, which according to the Red Brigades made him ‘one of the persons who bears the greatest responsibility for the 30 years of dirty Christian Democratic rule.’”<sup>28</sup>

## **STRUCTURE, SUPPORT, AND TACTICS**

The Red Brigades were organized vertically among at least six columns, which were in turn divided into brigades and then cells. Columns were located in Milan, Genoa, Turin, Rome, Naples, and the Veneto Region. The column concept was inherited from the structure of the Italian partisans who operated during World War II.<sup>29</sup> Certain columns, depending on their locations, had specific roles or tasks. The columns in the northern part of the country, for example, were active in areas of large concentrations of factory workers. The Rome column’s strategic goal—not surprisingly—was to attack Italy’s political leaders, and particularly those affiliated with the Christian Democratic Party.<sup>30</sup>

Areas that were not covered by columns would be managed by the regional revolutionary committees, which were seeds of future columns. Core members of the Red Brigades, estimated at 400 to 500 hard-core full-time members, received a salary of roughly 250,000 lire (\$400 a month).<sup>31</sup> A second tier of members lived “above ground” and appeared to live a “seemingly normal existence as respected members of Italian society.”<sup>32</sup>

At the apex of the Red Brigades’ organizational structure was the Strategic Directorate (SD), which was responsible for forming the political-organizational program. The SD was considered the BR’s “brain center” where “all members would merge and consolidate their experiences and knowledge.”<sup>33</sup> The SD also solicited and gathered recommendations from all BR members. In addition, the SD published “resolutions,” which were strategic texts that guided the organization.<sup>34</sup>

The Red Brigades recruited unemployed workers, students, and others who exhibited enthusiasm for revolutionary change. However, before entry into the organization, potential recruits would be tested to determine whether or not they could renounce a normal life, their family and friends, and sentimental liaisons.<sup>35</sup> Most important, the key criterion for membership was powerful idealism (not simply ideological conviction). The successful recruit would also need to be imbued with “an implacable desire to fight injustice to create a new society.”<sup>36</sup>

Fund-raising for the Red Brigades was often accomplished from the proceeds of kidnappings or bank robberies. Ironically, the BR’s reputation for violence sometimes helped to facilitate nonviolent bank robberies. In one case in 1978, a BR operative appeared at a bank in Genoa and, after identifying himself as a BR member, requested 80 million lire. The deputy manager stated that such a sum could not be paid without the manager’s permission. When the manager appeared, the BR operative repeated the demand and made it clear that the Red Brigades organization knew everything about the manager’s family. The bank subsequently paid the amount requested.<sup>37</sup>

Another important consideration related to support of the BR organization was the degree to which the organization was linked with—or received support from—other militant organizations located outside of Italy. The BR promoted the notion of a Third International, but it “never came to much.”<sup>38</sup> Despite occasional contacts with fellow European “red” groups, the BR considered Italy to be the central focus of its revolutionary struggle. The organization that the BR had the most sympathy with was arguably the German Red Army Faction (RAF). As one former BR member stated, “we had a lot of respect for our RAF comrades. Personally, I thought it was very courageous of them to struggle on such difficult terrain as Germany.”<sup>39</sup>

However, in some instances, police in countries outside Italy would capture BR members who were hiding in suspected terrorist hideouts. In April 1980, for instance, a massive French operation in Paris and Toulon led to the arrest of 22 suspected terrorists, including five Italians, one of which was Franco Pinna, who was considered a key figure in the Aldo Moro kidnapping and murder in 1978.<sup>40</sup> In addition, a BR operative, Antonio Savasta, admitted that the organization had contact with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), particularly after the murder of Aldo Moro, and that these meetings took place in France.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the PLO reportedly shipped a load of small arms to the Red Brigades in 1978.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, a U.S. intelligence report stated that links between

the Red Brigades and other terrorist organizations seem to have been “of only modest importance.”<sup>43</sup>

The tactical history of the Red Brigades can be divided up into four key periods. The first phase lasted from 1969 to 1972 and was centered primarily in Milan. In this phase, the BR primarily engaged in propaganda activities and attacks on private companies (primarily firebombings). The second phase, which ended in mid-1974, saw the BR expand to the industrial triangle of Milan, Turin, and Genoa. This period saw the BR turn to kidnapping activities, in which it learned how to “exploit the attendant media coverage.”<sup>44</sup> The third phase—roughly 1974 to 1976—witnessed the ascent of the BR’s second generation and a larger campaign to target the Italian state directly. The fourth phase (from 1977 to 1978) has been described as the BR’s strategy of liquidation. “From 1977 on, terrorist attacks were carried out almost daily, usually in the form of ‘campaigns’ devoted to specific themes.”<sup>45</sup>

### **THE STRATEGY OF LIQUIDATION AND THE MURDER OF ALDO MORO**

The year 1978 seems to have been a particularly vigorous and violent year for Red Brigades ambush operations. Bankers and industrialists were common targets for BR attacks. In one typical attack, two youths on a motorcycle shot and wounded Giorgio Borhetti, a 53-year-old bank executive, only three blocks from the Vatican.<sup>46</sup> Following the attacks, anonymous callers who claimed to be BR members took credit for the attack. In April 1978, a Red Brigades ambush team shot and wounded Felice Schiavetti, president of the Genoa Industrialists Association, as he left home to head for his office.<sup>47</sup> Within 30 minutes of the ambush, a man called a Genoa newspaper and said, “This is the Red Brigades. An armed group has shot Felice Schiavetti, servant of the state.”<sup>48</sup>

In May 1978, a particularly gruesome month, Red Brigades gunmen fired dozens of bullets into the legs of two industrialists in almost simultaneous attacks in separate cities. In Milan, Umberto degli Innocenti of Sit-Siemens Telecommunications was attacked as he left his office.<sup>49</sup> Just moments later, Alfredo Lamberto of the Italsider metal plant in Genoa had his leg shattered by a Red Brigades gunman.<sup>50</sup> Approximately six days later in Milan, Marzio Astarita, who had just been named director of Chemical Bank’s Milan operations, was departing his home for work.<sup>51</sup> As his wife waved goodbye to him from their balcony, a sedan pulled up alongside him with a masked man and woman who fired a gun at his left leg, wounding Astarita severely (although he later recovered).<sup>52</sup>

The year 1978 was also the year in which the BR accomplished its most ambitious operation to date with the abduction of former prime minister Aldo Moro.<sup>53</sup> The planning for the Moro kidnapping had been meticulous. On the day before the operation, the BR eliminated a vendor who normally sold flowers near the former prime minister’s house so that he could not be a possible witness. On the day of the operation, approximately 12 BR operatives—11 men and one woman—conducted the kidnapping while wearing the uniform of Alitalia, the state airline.<sup>54</sup> As the 12 approached Moro and his party of bodyguards, they opened fire with automatic weapons, immediately killing four of Moro’s bodyguards; the fifth died later in a hospital.<sup>55</sup>

The kidnapping shocked the Italian public and even elicited a personal plea from Pope Paul VI, who wrote (in a public statement): “Men of the Red Brigades, leave me . . .

the hope that in your souls there still is dwelling a victorious sentiment of humanity.”<sup>56</sup> For its part, the Italian government launched a massive manhunt involving over 50,000 police and army troops. Feeling the intense pressure of government surveillance, Italian mobsters joined in on the search for Moro’s abductors. Although crime bosses claimed they were motivated by patriotism, it was also obvious that they “were sick of watching their ‘businesses’ founder in the massive dragnet thrown over Italy.”<sup>57</sup> Italian mobsters also threatened, via a communiqué, to have their “colleagues in prison . . . physically suppress all Red Brigades members within their jurisdictions.”<sup>58</sup>

However, this combination of pleas and threats could not save Aldo Moro from his ultimate fate after a 55-day hostage standoff. On 9 May 1978, Italian police found the bullet-ridden body of former prime minister Aldo Moro, which was abandoned in the backseat of a burgundy red Renault R-4.<sup>59</sup> The discovery of the body capped a nearly two-month long, emotionally wrenching hostage crisis.

The kidnapping and the tense period afterward not only traumatized the Italian public but also catapulted the Red Brigades to world fame.<sup>60</sup> Only 11 days after the discovery of Moro’s body, the BR issued a communiqué describing the kidnap-murder as an “act of legitimate revolutionary justice.”<sup>61</sup> In addition, the BR eliminated all ambiguity about its true motives with regard to the Italian state. The murder of Aldo Moro, according to the BR, was “nothing other than the first act of a precise objective to destabilize, disarticulate and destroy the state.”<sup>62</sup>

## **PUBLIC REVULSION AND THE STEADY DECLINE OF THE RED BRIGADES**

Although the Red Brigades may have viewed the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro as a victory, many analysts and observers believe the incident actually signaled the steady decline of the BR in Italy. As indicated earlier, the incident shocked and galvanized the Italian public. But it also dramatically shifted public opinion strongly against the Red Brigades and their fellow leftists.<sup>63</sup> In addition, the Italian police launched major sweeps against BR members, which led to the arrest of Nadia Mantovani, the 28-year-old girlfriend of Renato Curcio, who had gone into hiding after violating parole. Also arrested were Lauro Azzolini, identified as one of the BR’s original members (and who had been tied to the murders of several Italian officials), and Antonio Savino, who was arrested after firing a weapon at police.<sup>64</sup>

Although the Red Brigades, in the post–Aldo Moro era, were in steady decline, this fact did not temper the organization’s violent tendencies. In addition to kidnapping and murdering Christian Democratic leader Aldo Moro, the Red Brigades continued their campaign against Christian Democratic leaders, including Fausto Cuocolo, a professor at the University of Genoa, who was shot by two young men who walked into his classroom and shut the door. Their first two shots missed, but as they moved closer to Mr. Cuocolo, they were able to pump at least two rounds into his body.<sup>65</sup> Fortunately, as news reports indicated, the bullets “had all lodged in flesh, damaging no bones or vital organs.”<sup>66</sup> Within an hour of the attack, a call was made to the local newspaper and a person claiming to be part of the Red Brigades Genovese Column stated that “we lamed Fausto Cuocolo, one of the major representatives of the Genovese Christian Democratic Party.”<sup>67</sup> Similar attacks against Christian Democrats during the period include the shooting of

Enrico Ghio, a candidate for the European Parliament, who was shot four times in the legs. In another case, a Christian Democratic city councilwoman was “tied up and had glue dumped all over her hair.”<sup>68</sup>

In one brazen attack, Red Brigades guerrillas bombed a police barracks, “wounding 18 officers engaged in counterterrorist work.”<sup>69</sup> After the attack, and according to usual custom, a Red Brigades spokesman telephoned several newspapers to announce that their “war against the state” was continuing.<sup>70</sup> Italian leaders initiated a new vigilance against the terrorist threat. “We are at war,” Italian president Alessandro Pertini reportedly declared in 1980.<sup>71</sup>

## THE GENERAL DOZIER DEBACLE

In 1981, the Red Brigades accomplished another prominent terrorist feat by kidnapping American General James Lee Dozier, who at the time was deputy chief of staff for logistics and administration at NATO’s headquarters in southern Europe and also the highest-ranking American serving with that command. A graduate of West Point and recipient of the Silver Star from his duty in Vietnam, General Dozier was described by friends and colleagues as a “soldier’s soldier” who was “low key and efficient.”<sup>72</sup>

Dozier’s kidnappers entered his home in Verona, Italy, dressed as plumbers. They hit Dozier on his head with a pistol butt and then tied his wife up and then sealed her eyes and mouth with adhesive tape.<sup>73</sup> After the kidnappers searched Dozier’s apartment, they put Dozier into the trunk of a car.<sup>74</sup> Later they transported him to an apartment in the ground unit of a “drab modern building on the outskirts of Padua.”<sup>75</sup> For more than a month, Dozier’s right wrist and left ankle were chained to a steel cot, which was placed under a small tent. He was also forced to live under the “never-extinguished glare of an electric bulb.”<sup>76</sup> Dozier’s captors also required him to wear earphones and listen to loud music.<sup>77</sup>

During Dozier’s captivity, the Red Brigades issued various communiqués to the government and the public generally, describing their demands or complaints. They issued the first communiqué only days after the kidnapping; it was striking for its lack of any ransom demand. Instead it dwelled on international matters of interest to the Red Brigades, including a tribute to the German Red Army Faction.<sup>78</sup> Subsequent communiqués also failed to mention ransom demands and even lacked any particular reference to Dozier.<sup>79</sup>

The fifth communiqué, retrieved from a trash can in downtown Rome, contained a number of anti-NATO and anti-American statements but did not make any specific demands for Dozier’s release.<sup>80</sup> One of the consequences of the Dozier kidnapping was increased concern within the U.S. government that the kidnapping signaled that the Brigades had “decided to suspend operations against domestic Italian targets and move against U.S. and NATO targets.”<sup>81</sup>

Shortly after the fifth communiqué was issued, however, the Italian government got its big break. A captured BR operative informed police of Dozier’s location, and subsequently, the Italian authorities were able to mount a successful rescue of the NATO general. Dozier, who had been held for 42 days, would later report that as police stormed the apartment in which he was being held, a Red Brigades operative was “leveling a gun at his

head.”<sup>82</sup> After this rescue, the Red Brigades experienced further defections of its members, many of whom in turn acted as informants for the government.<sup>83</sup>

The rescue of General Dozier boosted the popularity and reputation of Prime Minister Giovanni Spadolini, who “had little sympathy for the [politically active, leftist] students and even less for the terrorists.”<sup>84</sup> More important, it derailed what was later discovered to be a grand plot—of which the Dozier kidnapping was the initial stage—that featured a series of bold attacks across Italy, including the kidnapping of the managing director of Fiat and the “staging of commando-style raids to free jailed terrorists from prison.”<sup>85</sup>

In the three months following the rescue of General Dozier, the Italian government launched a massive crackdown against the Red Brigades. More than 200 terrorists were arrested between December 1981 and March 1982.<sup>86</sup> Italian authorities also imposed harsh measures against Red Brigades members already in prison, such as revoking telephone privileges and disallowing receipt of outside packages.<sup>87</sup>

Among the by-products of the rescue of General Dozier was the capture of Antonio Savasta, described as one of the Red Brigades’ “greatest betrayers.”<sup>88</sup> Savasta quickly changed sides and offered up to police more than 100 names of fellow Red Brigades members (including locations of their hideouts).<sup>89</sup> The Savasta capture, combined with the various Italian enforcement measures against the Red Brigades, marked a period of steady subsequent decline for the organization. Although the group continued to conduct violent operations well into the 1980s, the number of attacks dropped off considerably.<sup>90</sup>

## LESSONS FOR TODAY

On the surface, it would seem obvious that the Red Brigades, rooted in Marxist, anticapitalist ideology, should be regarded as being very different and distinct from Al Qaeda and its alignment movements, which are largely rooted in militant religious ideologies that feature or glorify, among other things, suicide bombings. Nevertheless, there are a number of interesting common features that apply to both movements.

First, and perhaps most significant, both movements reflect—and are reactions to—profound and disruptive changes and transformations that have occurred in the larger international system. The Red Brigades, as noted earlier in the chapter, reflected (and were arguably products of) the 1968 student protest movement as well as growing hostility toward U.S. military action in Vietnam, in addition to the overall tensions that emanated from the cold war. They also were part of a wave of “red” terrorist movements—such as the German Red Army Faction, the French *Action Directe*, American Weather Underground, and the Japanese Red Army—which saw themselves as “vanguards for the Third World Masses.”<sup>91</sup>

Al Qaeda and aligned movements are similarly reflective of their international environment. The year 1979 was significant because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which generated the international mujahideen movement. The narrative resulting from the Soviet Union’s withdrawal from Afghanistan—that a small group of determined mujahideen fighters could defeat a superpower—greatly emboldened the movement that would beget Al Qaeda. In addition, Al Qaeda is arguably a product of profound social,



economic, and political forces of globalization that are manifest throughout the world. Audrey Kurth Cronin argues that the wave of international terrorism represented by Al Qaeda and similar groups is not only a reaction to globalization but is also facilitated by it.<sup>92</sup>

Second, both the Red Brigades and Al Qaeda exhibited or have exhibited a remarkable resilience and ability to survive in the face of massive military and political responses by states. In both cases, the resilience and viability of the organizations were or are sustained by “soft support” from their respective constituencies. Italian authorities, for example, were amazed at the BR’s remarkable ability to sustain itself despite intense government enforcement measures. In the case of the Red Brigades, soft support was rooted in the fact that many people were sympathetic to the basic arguments of the Red Brigades, although they did not necessarily agree with their terrorist tactics. BR sympathizers were critical to the long-term success of the movement; they provided aid and shelter to BR operatives, which was particularly important when the latter were being actively pursued by police.<sup>93</sup> “The amazing destructiveness and staying power of the Red Brigades depended ultimately on their success in gaining the support of astonishingly large numbers of people who believed in revolution as something sacred.”<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, Al Qaeda—and its aligned movements—has survived despite having borne the brunt of a “war on terrorism” implemented by the world’s only superpower with global military reach. Soft support in the case of Al Qaeda largely has derived from the fact that many Muslims, while not directly supporting terrorism, nevertheless have been sympathetic to the larger “metanarrative” around which Al Qaeda has constructed its ideology. Central to this narrative is the notion that Muslims around the world are under assault and are mistreated by the dominant and powerful actors within the international system, a system that is ultimately led by the United States.

Anti-American sentiment has also helped fuel the narratives of both organizations. The Red Brigades benefited from—and promoted—a narrative that Italy’s workers were being abused by corporate interests or were victims of an economic system dominated by the United States. In the case of Al Qaeda, anti-American sentiment has played a much more central role in the organization. After all, Osama bin Laden and his allies essentially declared war on the United States when, on 23 February 1998, they proclaimed the formation of the World Islamic Front, which declared a jihad against Jews and crusaders.<sup>95</sup> In addition, Al Qaeda thrives on the “political oxygen” generated by extremely unpopular U.S. policies in the Middle East.<sup>96</sup>

Buttressing this grievance narrative is the reality of poverty and despair in many of the constituent communities. At the leadership levels, the poverty link to terrorism is tenuous at best. Leaders within the Red Brigades or Al Qaeda have been, for the most part, relatively well educated and, presumably, economically prosperous (or at least they had access to the means to achieve prosperity). However, at the lower “worker” levels of the two organizations, poverty arguably has played a more significant role in fueling despair and thus facilitating recruitment.

In the case of Al Qaeda, it has been observed that although “bin Laden and many of his lieutenants and agents have not been victims of poverty or deprivation, tens of millions of people in the region have been.”<sup>97</sup> Moreover, diaspora Muslims residing in Western Europe face much higher unemployment rates—typically double those of the native

population—which provides a convenient pool of potential terrorist recruits.<sup>98</sup> In the case of the BR, many analysts speculated that the BR (and similar groups) and its ideology flourished within a breeding ground (in Italy during the 1970s) of 1.2 million unemployed young people between 18 and 29 years old.<sup>99</sup> Thus, poverty and unemployment may have played a role in fostering an enabling environment for both organizations.

A third important parallel between the two organizations is the fact that each sincerely has believed in its movement and perceived that historical circumstances had or are aligned in such a way that its vision could be fulfilled. In the case of Al Qaeda, many Al Qaeda members and their supporters “see their actions as pursuing a noble cause.”<sup>100</sup> They see their efforts as a way to bring about a revolution followed by a new and religious-oriented international order. The BR similarly viewed its role as an actor in a larger struggle to bring about revolution in Italy. The Red Brigades sincerely believed that by creating an atmosphere of collapse and total anxiety, they would ultimately pave the way to total revolution.<sup>101</sup>

A fourth important parallel between the two organizations is the fact that both movements were constrained—although not completely disrupted—by aggressive state responses. In the case of the Red Brigades, the Italian government launched major counterterrorism operations periodically, but most significantly following the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro. Another major sweep was launched following the kidnapping and release of American General James Dozier in the early 1980s. In addition, the Italian authorities created a *pentiti* system that promised reduced punishment for those who helped the government in its investigation.

The *pentiti* system proved invaluable for turning key operatives—eager to save their own skins by betraying comrades—who gave authorities the critical information they needed to make arrests. “The special provisions governing the State’s treatment of *pentiti* ultimately proved to be decisive in the defeat of the Red Brigades.”<sup>102</sup> The confessions that came out of this system led to the discovery of hideouts and arms deposits and, ultimately, the neutralization (either by arrest or by death) of dozens of terrorists.<sup>103</sup> In one case, a confession obtained from a 27-year-old BR member led to the arrests of 45 additional individuals and to “new charges against already jailed suspects.”<sup>104</sup>

In the case of Al Qaeda and aligned movements, the turning of lower-level operatives against the Al Qaeda organization has been critical to the unraveling of terrorist networks around the world. The arrests of leaders such as Riduan Isamuddin (a.k.a. Hambali), who was believed to be Al Qaeda’s senior representative in Southeast Asia, have provided substantial intelligence about terrorist methodologies and future plans.<sup>105</sup> In addition, international cooperation in the realms of intelligence, law enforcement, and military deployments has severely confined Al Qaeda’s functional space, evidenced by the lack of any major attack in the United States since September 11, 2001. Moreover, aggressive U.S. actions—including aggressive interrogation methods and rendition practices—illustrate the tension between the desire for effective security and the imperative to preserve those liberal and humanitarian-oriented values for which the United States has traditionally been highly regarded.

## CONCLUSION

The Red Brigades were arguably one of the most serious threats to the Italian state in its recent history. The BR not only terrorized the Italian public but essentially struck at the heart of the Italian state. In this way, the Red Brigades defied the notion that terrorism, while dramatic and shocking, tends to have little political impact beyond its immediate consequences. As Walter Laqueur has stated, “[Terrorism] has been a tragedy for the victims, but seen in historical perspective it seldom has been more than a nuisance.”<sup>106</sup> The Red Brigades’ campaign against the Italian state for more than 15 years suggests the existence of a threat that rises above the level of mere “nuisance.”

As noted above, perhaps the most fascinating feature of the BR’s existence was its ability to sustain itself for more than 15 years despite intense law enforcement and intelligence activity directed against it. This can be attributed to the significant “soft support” that the organization enjoyed within the Italian public. This fact can also provide a lesson for the United States and allied states seeking to combat Al Qaeda and aligned movements. The BR was able to sustain itself via a narrative of injustice, inequality, and the need for revolution, just as Al Qaeda thrives on a narrative that it serves the needs of downtrodden Muslims who have been betrayed and abused by an international system that is dominated by the United States. Effectively countering the militant jihadi threat will require, among other measures, a sincere effort on the part of the United States to reduce the political oxygen that sustains contemporary terrorism.

## NOTES

1. Vittorfranco S. Pisano, “The Red Brigades: A Challenge to Italian Democracy,” in *Contemporary Terrorism*, ed. William Gutteridge (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1986), 177.
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