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Next: Spielberg's Biggest Gamble

By [DAVID M. HALBFINGER](#)

LOS ANGELES, June 30 – On Wednesday, [Steven Spielberg's](#) apocalyptic thriller "[War of the Worlds](#)" invaded movie theaters worldwide. But the director had already moved on. That night in Malta, Mr. Spielberg quietly began filming the most politically charged project he has yet attempted: the tale of a secret Mossad hit squad ordered to assassinate Palestinian terrorists after the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich.

Mr. Spielberg has taken risks before: he said he feared being seen as trivializing the Holocaust when he directed "[Schindler's List](#)" in 1993, at a time when he was best known for blockbuster fantasies like "E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial" and "[Raiders of the Lost Ark](#)." And with "[Saving Private Ryan](#)," he gambled successfully on audiences' tolerance for prolonged and bloody combat scenes.

But with the as-yet-untitled Munich film, already scheduled for Oscar-season release by Universal Pictures on Dec. 23, Mr. Spielberg is tackling material delicate enough that he and his advisers are concerned about adverse effects on matters as weighty as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process if his project is mishandled – or misconstrued in the public mind.

Indeed, the movie's terrain is so packed with potential land mines that, associates say, Mr. Spielberg has sought counsel from advisers ranging from his own rabbi to the former American diplomat Dennis Ross, who in turn has alerted Israeli government officials to the film's thrust. Mr. Spielberg has also shown the script to Mr. Ross's old boss, former President Bill Clinton. Mr. Clinton's aides said Mr. Spielberg reached out to him first more than a year ago and again as recently as Tuesday. Mr. Spielberg is also being advised by Mike McCurry, Mr. Clinton's White House spokesman, and Allan Mayer, a Hollywood spokesman who specializes in crisis communications.

The film, which is being written by the playwright Tony Kushner – it is his first feature screenplay – begins with the killing of 11 Israeli athletes in Munich. But it focuses on the Israeli retaliation: the assassinations, ordered by Prime Minister Golda Meir, of Palestinians identified by Israeli intelligence as terrorists, including some who were not directly implicated in the Olympic massacre. By highlighting such a morally vexing and endlessly debated chapter in Israeli history – one that introduced the still-controversial Israeli tactic now known as targeted killings – Mr. Spielberg could jeopardize his tremendous stature among Jews both in the United States and in Israel.

He earned that prestige largely for his treatment of the Holocaust in "Schindler's List" and for his philanthropic efforts, through the Shoah Foundation, to preserve testimonies of survivors of the concentration camps. Until now, though, he has been relatively quiet on Middle East politics compared with more vocal American supporters of Israel.

Making matters more complicated, an important source for Mr. Spielberg's narrative is a 1984 book by George Jonas, "[Vengeance](#)," based largely on the account of a purported member of the Mossad's assassination team, whose veracity was later widely called into question.

Friends of Mr. Spielberg said he was keenly aware that admirers of his Holocaust work could misunderstand his new film and regard it as hurtful to Israel. And they noted that he had never before courted controversy so openly. "A lot of people around him never thought he'd make the movie," said one associate, who asked not to be identified, in keeping with Mr. Spielberg's preference for secrecy.

Typically, Mr. Spielberg keeps a tight lid on information about coming projects, and he has been especially careful to do so this time. He has revealed that the film will star [Eric Bana](#) as the lead Israeli assassin, along with Daniel Craig, [Geoffrey Rush](#), [Mathieu Kassovitz](#), Hanns Zischler and [Ciaran Hinds](#). The director released a short statement simultaneously this week to The New York Times, the Israeli newspaper Ma'ariv and the Arab television network Al Arabiya, but he turned down requests for an interview and declined through a spokesman to answer written questions.

In the statement, Mr. Spielberg called the Munich attack – which was carried out by Black September, an arm of the P.L.O.'s Fatah organization – and the Israeli response "a defining moment in the modern history of the Middle East."

Mr. Spielberg's interest in the question of a civilized nation's proper response to terrorism deepened, aides said, after the 9/11 attacks, as Americans were grappling for the first time with similar issues – for instance, in each new lethal strike on a suspected terrorist leader by a C.I.A. Predator drone aircraft. In Mr. Kushner's script, people who have read it say, the Israeli assassins find themselves struggling to understand how their targets were chosen, whether they belonged on the hit list and, eventually, what, if anything, their killing would accomplish.

"What comes through here is the human dimension," said Mr. Ross, formerly the Middle East envoy for Mr. Clinton, who has advised the filmmakers on the screenplay and helped Mr. Spielberg reach out to officials in the region. "You're contending with an enormously difficult set of challenges when you have to respond to a horrific act of terror. Not to respond sends a signal that actions are rewarded and the perpetrators can get away with it. But you have to take into account that your response may not achieve what you wish to achieve, and that it may have consequences for people in the mission."

Mr. Spielberg's statement indicated that, despite the implications for other conflicts, his movie – to be shot in Malta, Budapest and New York – was aimed squarely at the Israeli–Palestinian divide.

"Viewing Israel's response to Munich through the eyes of the men who were sent to avenge that tragedy adds a human dimension to a horrific episode that we usually think about only in political or military terms," he said. "By experiencing how the implacable resolve of these men to succeed in their mission slowly gave way to troubling doubts about what they were doing, I think we can learn something important about the tragic standoff we find ourselves in today."

That Mr. Spielberg has a daunting task ahead – and the degree to which his film will be scrutinized, interpreted and debated – can be seen in the way a few prominent Israelis responded to the mere mention of doubts on the part of the assassins.

"I don't know how many of them actually had 'troubling doubts' about what they were doing," said Michael B. Oren, the historian and author of "Six Days of War." "It's become a stereotype, the guilt-ridden Mossad hit man. You never see guilt-ridden hit men in any other ethnicity. Somehow it's only the Jews. I don't see Dirty Harry feeling guilt-ridden. It's the flip side of the rationally motivated Palestinian terrorist: you can't have a Jew going to exact vengeance and not feel guilt-ridden about it, and you can't have a Palestinian who's operating out of pure evil – it's got to be the result of some trauma."

And Efraim Halevy, a veteran Mossad agent who headed the organization, Israel's intelligence agency, from 1998 to 2002, warned against reading too much into the misgivings of Israel's hit men.

"I know some of the people who were involved," he said. "Maybe people have doubts. If they have doubts, I think it's to their credit. It's not an easy thing to do. But it doesn't mean it's wrong. I'd be very happy to see the doubts on the other side, the fierce debates going on about whether they should or should not do it."

Yet Mr. Spielberg's advisers say he is studiously avoiding the most glaring potential trap: drawing a moral equivalency between the Palestinian attack and the Israeli retaliation.

While people who have read various versions of the script praised Mr. Kushner, the author of "[Angels in America](#)" and "Homebody/Kabul," for humanizing the film's hunted Palestinians and giving a fuller sense of their motivation, they said the terrorists would hold little claim to the audience's sympathies. One scene added by Mr. Kushner, who was commissioned last year to rework an earlier draft by the writer Eric Roth, places an Israeli assassin, posing as a terrorist sympathizer, at a safe house where he listens as Palestinians give voice to their anger but also to their hatred of Jews, two people connected with the film said.

Moreover, Mr. Spielberg is making sure to provide enough historical context to explain what impelled Israel to make killers of its sons, as Golda Meir was said to have lamented at the time. "It's easy to look back at historic events with the benefit of hindsight," he said in his statement. "What's not so easy is to try to see things as they must have looked to people at the time."

Mr. Spielberg's movie will not be the first dramatic telling of this story. In 1986, HBO adapted Mr. Jonas's book as a television movie, "[Sword of Gideon](#)," starring Steven Bauer as the lead assassin, "Avner," along with [Rod Steiger](#) and [Colleen Dewhurst](#). Mr. Spielberg became interested more recently, after learning that [Barry Mendel](#), the producer of "[The Sixth Sense](#)" and several [Wes Anderson](#) films, including last year's "Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou," had acquired the feature rights to the book for Universal several years ago.

Anticipating questions about the authenticity of the book's source, Mr. Spielberg has sought to distance the movie from "Vengeance," insisting in his statement that the film is based on multiple sources, "including the recollections of some who participated in the events themselves." But one of them, people involved in the film confirmed, is Juval Aviv, a New York–based security consultant identified years ago as Mr. Jonas's Avner character, whose claims to a career in the Mossad have been disputed by experts on Israeli intelligence. Mr. Aviv did not respond to phone and e-mail messages.

Mr. Spielberg originally announced that he would begin production last summer of the script by Mr. Roth, the writer of "[Forrest Gump](#)" and "[The Insider](#)," but hired Mr. Kushner to humanize what he felt was too procedural a thriller in Mr. Roth's telling, people familiar with both scripts said.

In Mr. Roth's script, for instance, the Munich killings dominated the first 15 minutes of the movie. Mr. Spielberg, the readers said, was still weighing how to depict the massacre without minimizing its power, but also without overpowering the audience.