

# Homegrown Terrorism: How I've Lived Through This Before

By [Guido Mina di Sospiro](#) on May 3, 2013

*Terrorism spreads quickly, and is viciously efficient: it takes very little to do a lot of harm. The knowledge of how it developed recently elsewhere, and how it was eventually defeated, can only be of help.*



It's orientation day for foreign students at the University of Southern California, late August 1980. I am assigned a room in a dorm to share with a fellow international student, a Palestinian 300-pounder whose father is "not as powerful as President Carter, but almost." The first night in the dorm he keeps me up playing "beautiful Arabic tunes" on a recorder because "I like Italians, they're very nice people; we train them in our camps, you know, the Red Brigades, and others."

## **Back to the present.**

The Boston Marathon bombings and the events following them have made the prospect of homegrown terrorism become a reality. Although the 21st century has begun with multiple acts of terrorism on an unprecedented scale, it has been perceived all along as a threat that comes from the outside. The Boston events, unfortunately, may herald a new phase. In their wake I was surprised, and at times astonished, by what I read in the media, both on- and off-line. It was the overwhelming naïveté therein that took me aback—above all the (Karma-based?) idea that the war on terror launched as a response to 9/11 has caused this.

Before coming to this country as a young man to attend USC, I lived through what came to be known as the "Years of Lead" in Milan, Italy, throughout the 1970s—more than a decade of tremendous turmoil and social upheaval in which terrorism was the daily bread for all Italians, and particularly for those who lived in big cities. I propose to explain what life was like during that time, so that fellow Americans may be on guard and do their utmost to learn from history and make sure that such a scenario does not repeat itself on US soil. The historical reconstruction will be sketchy, for two reasons: I don't set out to write the detailed history of that turbulent period, nor has a consensus been reached yet as to why it happened and who was supposed to benefit from such carnage.

It all began at the end of 1969: a bomb exploded inside the headquarters of a bank in the center of Milan, killing 17 people and wounding 88. It has never been determined who

did it; perhaps anarchists. It has since been discovered that the mentioned Red Brigades themselves (a Marxist-Leninist paramilitary organization that distinguished itself with 14,000 acts of violence within a decade) opened an investigation on such a bombing whose conclusion was declassified recently: they too believed it to be attributable to anarchists. The fact is that Italy, then with the largest Communist party in the western world, was just the perfect place for what became known as the “strategy of tension.” It was in the interest of the Soviet Bloc that the establishment would gradually collapse and Italy be absorbed within the Iron Curtain countries, which began at Italy’s eastern border with what was then Yugoslavia; and it was in the interest of NATO and all stay-behind anti-communist networks as well as the CIA to showcase the brutality and ruthlessness of largely ultra-left terrorism so that the world would know better than to embrace communism. To this incendiary cocktail were added three Italian secret services, at times with conflicting agendas, the Masonic Lodge P2 (a veritable shadow government), the Mafia, the Vatican, even, which cumulatively made for a highly volatile scenario in which things could quickly go from bad to worse—and they did.

But we had no such understanding back then. Events unraveled chaotically. Initially the communist party was in denial: the Red Brigades were a neo-fascist invention. Then it began to refer to the *brigatisti* as “comrades who make mistakes.” Finally, in 1979, it broke away from the Soviet Union, which had been sponsoring ultra-left terrorism all along by delegating affairs to the Czechoslovak StB (a secret police force). Soviet and Czechoslovakia arms and explosives were supplied via the Middle East along smuggling routes of heroin traffickers. Training camps were the responsibility of the PLO—the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Other bombings were, in fact, carried out by ultra-right groups. Regardless of who was behind them, people kept dying in the streets without knowing why. How did somebody become a terrorist back then?

As it has transpired, many of them were students, either out of high school or college, who became radicalized. Taking part in demonstrations alongside factory workers and in clashes with the police, no matter how violent, was no longer enough for them. Suddenly what would dawn on some of such activists was the simplest of physical laws, which for them would be a heady realization:

It is a lot easier to break (something/anything) than it is to make (something/anything).

“I,” realizes the euphoric would-be terrorist, “I who am nothing have, in fact, a say. There’s a lot that I can *undo*.”

And this is the first message for Americans who are not used to homegrown terrorism: all it takes is two ruthless morons to kill, maim and wound a lot of people and bring a major city to its knees. Yes, hecatombs such as 9/11 take a lot more planning and kill a lot more people, but the “strategy of tension” thrives on a gradual increment of attacks throughout the territory. Suddenly people decide not to go to marathons, parades, arenas, movie theaters, crowded places any longer. If they can, they start even avoiding the subway,

going to mass, rush hour, etc. But the point is, terrorism is all about sabotage and attacks where one least expects them. During the years of lead, bombs went off in banks, public squares, buildings of various types, trains, railway stations—just about everywhere.

Eventually the average citizen, rather than becoming a recluse, makes peace with the idea that they may leave their house in the morning never to return to it.

So how does a disgruntled hothead become radicalized? He, and sometimes she, finds a place in which his same anti-establishment feelings are shared, and echoed. But such a place has a distinction: it doesn't just voice antisocial grumblings—it actively encourages one to take action. Suddenly the hothead has guidance, and a plan. Such guidance may and may not provide also practical help, such as explosives, weapons, hideaways, cash, and so on. Regardless, the seed is sown. And all sorts of atrocities are waiting to be committed, and organizations with colorful names such as *Proletari Armati per il Comunismo* (Armed Proletarians for Communism) are eager to welcome the recruit among their ranks.

The Red Brigades, Prima Linea (Front Line) and other terrorist organizations had a ritual initiation for their recruits: to go out and kill a policeman at random to prove that they were worthy of entering the organization. In my high school the windows in the principal's office were riddled with bullet holes. When asked why he would not have the glasses replaced, he'd reply: "I don't want to invite in more bullets."

In addition to bombings, there were more select acts. *Gambizzare* (to "leg" someone) became an established practice: to shoot someone in the legs—a journalist, a judge, a university professor, a politician—to persuade them to desist from voicing their opinions. Other prominent figures were less lucky—they'd just be shot and killed. Kidnappings abounded, too. Two good friends of mine had their uncles kidnapped. The standard procedure by the authorities was to freeze the family's assets so that they couldn't pay the ransom, and hence give in to the terrorists' demands. Which resulted in the family's obtaining money in secret from loan sharks. After paying the ransom, the uncle of one of my friends came home alive; the uncle of my other friend was found in a ditch, putrefying. The most infamous kidnapping is that of Aldo Moro, a former prime minister and the architect behind the "historical compromise" between Christian Democrats and Communists, which would have extended the government's parliamentary majority. After 55 days of captivity, when it became clear that the government would not release the political prisoners the Red Brigades wanted in exchange for the politician, they shot him dead and dumped him in the trunk of a car.

Of course such a climate of near lawlessness boosted common criminality, too—burglaries of all types, muggings, heists, and kidnappings not carried out by terrorists.

The average day of a high school student back then was as follows. You'd go to school not knowing what to expect. There often were picket lines at the entrance organized by leftist and ultra-leftist activists as an act of solidarity with just about every factory worker in the country. The students who dared cross such lines did it at their own peril. In fact,

nobody did. Or, on the way to school, or back from it, you would chance on a demonstration. These were oceanic gatherings of vociferous people that brought civil unrest smack in the center of town, and a lot of bellicose types along with it. The police would be waiting for them, and clashes would ensue unfailingly. Cobblestones were thrown and Molotov cocktails too, steel shots were propelled by slings, till a kid two years older than I was provided photographers with what has become an icon: his face covered by a mask, he levels a Beretta Cal 22 handgun that he holds with both outstretched arms, and shoots straight at the police.

That happened in 1977, a seminal year for the escalation of violence. Indeed the spontaneous political Movement of 1977 was founded then. Institutional theft was a novelty implemented by the movement: the reappropriation of goods and places was claimed as a right. Vacant or abandoned buildings would be occupied; goods were expropriated for the sake of the proletarian struggle; one-sided reduction or cancellation of bills became the norm (from public transportation to cinema and restaurants).

An acquaintance of mine, who has since passed away, told me some years ago that when he was a student at the University in Bologna (the oldest university in the world) once he went with some friends to the restaurant Diana, an institution in that city. They had a sumptuous meal, and at the end they got up saying that they were enacting a proletarian cancellation of the bill, i.e., they'd just had the proverbial free lunch. The manager didn't say a word. Why? Ordinary people suffered all sorts of abuses in silence because they feared what would happen to them or their businesses should they dare to react.

The police and carabinieri were overwhelmed and stupefied alike, and there was no way that they could address every violation. And—wouldn't you know it?—they didn't like young people one bit. I, and millions of other kids my age, experienced what may well amount to profiling on a daily basis: any young man with long hair was, in their eyes, a terrorist. Practically every day the police would stop me and my mane of wavy hair (sometimes at gunpoint), ask for my ID, and then make me wait for about half an hour. They'd radio in my data to headquarters, and see whether or not I was on some black list. In the meantime, they'd mock me, hoping in some reaction from me. Anything I'd say other than "Yes, Sir" or "No, Sir" would prompt them to arrest me and whisk me to the nearest police station for *accertamenti*, further investigations. I always managed to keep calm, but some friends and acquaintances of mine were not as collected and experienced their share of police brutality although they had done nothing at all.

You may wonder why I didn't simply cut my hair short. In that case, ultra-left hotheads might have mistaken me for a neo-fascist (it had happened to other kids) and they would have shown less "civility" than the police. The option was between being harassed by the police and ending up with a crushed skull. It was paradoxically safer to look like a left-leaning activist.

The police and carabinieri as a category were a funky lot. Most of them came from the rural and impoverished south, where their choice had been between enlisting and starving. They were undergoing acute culture shock while at the same time they were

already shell-shocked. Skinny, frightened, dazed and only a few years older than we were, they hated us because, unlike them, we were getting an education (well, on and off), and because we weren't peasants and spoke Italian without their heavy accent. They perceived us as privileged beings from another planet, which only fomented class conflict (a foreign concept in the US) and (the more familiar concept of) racism. And there was something else—the sneaking suspicion they must have felt that they were on the wrong side of the barricade: they too were proletarians, but they were being shot at, and for a pittance.

In the end, I got tired of the daily grind: respecting picket lines, dodging violent demonstrations, resentful policemen, sundry bullies, rabid terrorists and erratic bullets and/or explosions—and I often got alarmingly close to them. So I began to leave in the morning and, instead of going to school, I'd go to the garage and sleep in the family car. Once I overslept and got back home late only to find that the police had been summoned, fearing that I had been kidnapped, or killed.

What I want to stress is that it took a relatively small number of ruthless extremists to wreak havoc and spread terror nationwide. In my high school of 1,600 students, no more than 50 were activists, and among those only a handful, as it transpired, were terrorists. Yet a small minority paralyzed the entire school, much as a few thousand terrorists paralyzed a country of 55 million.

Italy had done nothing to deserve this: it hadn't invaded and/or bombed any country. Yet, for a number of reasons whose complexity is beyond the scope of this piece, it became the playground of homegrown terrorism supported by foreign entities.

After years of bloodshed and escalating violence, sanity was reestablished. Authorities had been uncharacteristically swift in setting up a special police force (*Nucleo Speciale Antiterrorismo*) whose objective was exclusively to counter terrorism. Also, a special law was passed that granted reductions of sentences to imprisoned terrorists who would disassociate themselves and collaborate with justice. Moreover, the special counter-terrorist force began to collaborate effectively with secret services, both national and international, Interpol and the regular police and carabinieri.

Save for a few relapses, the threat is now over, only to be replaced by a new threat. After 9/11, Europe has lived through 11-M (the Madrid bombings), 7/7 (the London bombings), the Toulouse and Montauban shootings, in France. In Italy, there have been two attempts, which are the premise for THE FORBIDDEN BOOK, the novel I have co-written with Joscelyn Godwin: two plots to blow up the Basilica of San Petronio, in Bologna, one of the largest churches in Christendom.

A fresco inside the Basilica by Giovanni da Modena is inspired by a scene from Dante's *Inferno* in which the Prophet Mohammed displays his own entrails. On two distinct occasions Islamist groups directly linked to Al-Qaeda threatened to blow up the church. In 2002, a plot was discovered, orchestrated by a key figure known as "Amsa the Libyan," who was arrested in Britain for possessing false papers, and suspected of having

passed orders from Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan and Iran to terrorist cells in Europe. Four more suspects were arrested by the Italian police. In 2006, six terrorists were arrested, three of whom were later deported from Italy, two detained and one placed under observation, while a seventh man was still sought.

The lessons to be evinced are that terrorism does not necessarily happen in retaliation for a country's belligerent actions; that to disrupt and to destroy is immensely easy; and that things deteriorate quickly, as it takes a few thousand determined extremists to do serious damage to a whole country, or indeed to paralyze it. If such homegrown extremists are sponsored from abroad, their task is made even easier.

What if, at the same time in which the tragic events were unraveling in Boston, other terrorists had carried out attacks in multiple major cities in the country? The possibility of locking them all down cannot be realistically contemplated. Once, perhaps, but not if the same were to happen time and again. So the realistic approach is to redouble all efforts to thwart attacks *before* they happen, and to intensify the collaboration with the secret services and special counter-terrorist units of all allied countries.

In his essay *Political Terrorism: An Historical Case Study of the Italian Red Brigades* Victor Sundquist writes: "As the world's governments become increasingly engulfed in economic and political strife, international leaders should step back and understand what historical realities enabled political extremism to surface in particular regions of the world."