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ABSTRACT

This article examines Israel's clandestine campaign in Italy, where a Rome-based sabotage unit conducted a coordinated programme of maritime and industrial disruption. Drawing on newly declassified records, the study reveals how these operations, spanning ports, airfields, and diplomatic circles, became integral to the state's military strategy. It argues that Italy, which functioned as a Mediterranean hinge, acted as active enabler whose strategic ambiguity facilitated operational innovation. These experiences contributed to the codification of Israeli covert practice and naval doctrine within a postwar landscape defined by limited war and diplomatic constraint.

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Introduction

On 14 May 1948, as the British Mandate in Palestine expired, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel. The declaration followed the United Nations General Assembly's Partition Plan of 29 November 1947, which proposed dividing Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. While the Jewish leadership accepted the plan, the Arab League and Palestinian Arab representatives rejected it, and violence in Mandatory Palestine rapidly escalated into civil war. As a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report observed, Arab forces were preparing to resist the establishment of a Jewish state and were already training troops in Palestine and neighbouring countries.¹

The conflict expanded the day after independence, when Egypt, Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, supported by Saudi Arabia and contingents of Arab volunteers, launched a coordinated military invasion. Yet the struggle extended beyond the battlefield.² A parallel campaign unfolded in the shadows, aimed at disrupting Arab arms procurement before weapons could reach the front lines. In the months surrounding independence, Jewish operatives undertook a sustained effort to obstruct Arab arms acquisitions. Acting on Ben-Gurion's directive to secure weapons for Israel while denying them to Arab forces, Shaul Avigur, head of *Mossad le-Aliyah Bet* and *Rekhes*, established a sabotage unit in Rome that quickly became an operational hub of Israeli covert activity in Italy and across Europe.³

At this stage, Jewish security structures remained fluid rather than fully institutionalized. While *Mossad le-Aliyah Bet* was primarily responsible for the clandestine movement of Jewish refugees to Palestine, *Rekhes* functioned as the Haganah's dedicated arms procurement organization. By integrating the infrastructure of the former with the logistical networks of the latter, the Rome sabotage unit emerged

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as a hybrid entity that facilitated a strategic pivot from procurement to disruption.⁴ Recent historiography has highlighted this fluid institutional landscape. Ronen Bergman and Ami Pedahzur have emphasized that early Israeli intelligence emerged less from centralized planning than from institutional overlap and operational competition. The Rome sabotage unit exemplifies this process: its effectiveness derived not from bureaucratic consolidation but from adaptive coordination within a transitional wartime framework.⁵

In 1948, Italy stood at the centre of the emerging Cold War order, becoming a focal point of Western intervention aimed at securing the Mediterranean for the Atlantic alliance.⁶ Rather than a peripheral theatre, Italy functioned as a strategic bridge between Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Geographically situated between the parties involved, Rome faced a complex balancing act: consolidating its nascent alignment with the United States while navigating longstanding political and economic ties with the Arab world. This position transformed Italy into a visible geopolitical frontline while simultaneously hosting a more discreet, transnational covert struggle linked to the Arab – Israeli war.⁷

The April 1948 elections reinforced this centrality, representing a proxy contest between Western democracy and Eastern totalitarianism. As Mario Del Pero has shown, the campaign turned Italy into a ‘crucial testing ground’ for the coordination of political, economic, and psychological warfare. Rosario Forlenza has further characterized postwar Italy as a ‘laboratory of democratic stabilization’, a setting in which new forms of political management and strategic experimentation were developed to secure the country’s Western alignment.⁸

This geopolitical centrality also shaped the operational environment in which the conflict surrounding the creation of Israel unfolded. New research on Jewish arms acquisition underscores Italy’s material importance during the early stages of the 1948 war. Before major shipments arrived from other sources, Italian ports, transport corridors, and commercial intermediaries played a critical role in sustaining Israeli supply.⁹ Contemporary intelligence assessments recognized this reality. Already in early June 1948, CIA Director Roscoe Hillenkoetter observed that a ‘European headquarters operated under cover in Rome’, through which arms shipments bound for Palestine moved with the knowledge – and possibly the tacit cooperation – of Italian officials, while routes and destinations were deliberately obscured. This environment not only facilitated procurement but also created structural conditions for offensive covert operations.¹⁰

This article moves beyond procurement logistics to examine how Israeli operatives exploited Italy’s political ambiguity and physical infrastructure to conduct a sustained campaign of sabotage and interception. The conflict that unfolded on Italian soil constituted what may be termed a secret front: an operational layer of warfare in which the secrecy did not concern Italy’s well-documented geopolitical importance, but the covert methods through which state actors sought to shape the Mediterranean balance of power. Drawing on Roy Godson’s definition of covert action as state-sponsored influence conducted under conditions of concealment, the campaign directed from Rome appears not as a series of improvised attacks but as an integrated instrument of national strategy, designed to shape the regional balance of power without provoking open escalation.¹¹

Although the diplomatic and military dimensions of the First Arab – Israeli War have been extensively examined,¹² the covert contest in Italy remains understudied.¹³ Within this setting, Israeli operatives leveraged Italian infrastructure to conduct a campaign that

required transnational coordination and adaptive improvisation. These operations did not merely supplement the conventional war effort; they amplified its strategic effects by shifting the focus from simple procurement to active disruption.¹⁴ By situating sabotage within its logistical and diplomatic contexts, this study provides the first integrated account of how Italian strategic ambiguity and Israeli covert innovation intersected in 1948. Drawing on newly declassified CIA records, Italian diplomatic correspondence, Israeli state papers, American foreign policy documents, and cross-referenced memoirs,¹⁵ this article reconstructs the architecture of this hidden campaign. Where retrospective testimony diverges from the archival record, the latter is privileged to mitigate memoirist biases and ensure a more systematic reconstruction of the operational chronology.

This study traces the evolution of Israeli clandestine activity in Italy through four case studies that show how these operations expanded and adapted over time. It begins with the April 1948 sinking of the *Lino* in Bari, an improvised success that prompted the creation of a sabotage unit in Rome. It then examines the summer of 1948 hijacking of the *Argiro*, which redirected salvaged weapons to the Jerusalem front, and the industrial sabotage targeting Egyptian air capabilities at Venegono. The discussion concludes with the early 1949 Varazze affair, an operational failure that exposed structural vulnerabilities within the clandestine network while revealing the dynamics of Italian collusive secrecy and strategic ambiguity. Taken together, these episodes illustrate the evolution of Israeli clandestine practice in Italy, from improvised wartime disruption to increasingly coordinated and strategically integrated covert action conducted under conditions of political tolerance and diplomatic constraint.

Maritime sabotage: the sinking of the Lino

Amid the intensifying arms race following the United Nations Partition Plan, Syria sought to acquire substantial quantities of modern weapons from both Western and Eastern European sources. While British authorities rejected Syrian requests for rifles and ammunition, fearing the weapons might be used against British forces still in Palestine, Czechoslovakia proved more accommodating.¹⁶ On 22 December 1947 the Haganah's purchasing agent in Prague, Ehud Avriel, warned Tel Aviv that Arab representatives were negotiating major contracts.¹⁷ Soon afterward, Prague approved the delivery of 8000 rifles, 200 machine guns, and six million rounds of ammunition destined for Syria. Although delivery was initially delayed by payment difficulties, further complicated by British efforts to block the financial transfer, export clearance was granted by late February 1948. The consignment was routed via the Danube to the Yugoslavian port of Rijeka before continuing to Beirut.¹⁸

The shipment quickly attracted the attention of Jewish intelligence. On 26 March 1948, Shayke Dan, a senior figure in *Mossad le-Aliyah Bet* operations in Eastern Europe, reported that a vessel in Rijeka was preparing to sail with arms matching the Czech – Syrian agreement. For the Yishuv, the cargo threatened to alter the emerging military balance, making its diversion a pressing operational concern.¹⁹ To this end, Dan approached Yugoslav officials with a proposal to take control of the falsely declared shipment and redirect it to the Haganah. Although they refused, fearing repercussions, they nevertheless provided intelligence on the vessel's departure and crew. The ship was identified as the *Lino*, a 450-ton Italian freighter.²⁰

With diplomatic avenues exhausted, Avigur ordered that the vessel must not reach Beirut. Senior Haganah representatives convened in Rome under the coordination of Ada Sereni, a leading *Mossad le-Aliyah Bet* coordinator.²¹ Two options were considered: aerial strike or maritime interception. The absence of standardized operational doctrine necessitated reliance on improvised methodologies, with success depending equally on technical ingenuity and high-level political manoeuvring. The aerial proposal involved manually deploying explosives from a modified transport aircraft at low-altitude, a technically delicate plan with uncertain chances of success. By contrast, the maritime option tasked a small sabotage team with disabling the freighter at sea. Both approaches require precise intelligence and flawless timing.²²

Preparations intensified as reconnaissance flights were launched from an airstrip near Rome,²³ while sabotage specialist Yossale Dror prepared improvised explosive devices.²⁴ At the same time, Sereni pursued a parallel political strategy. Exploiting the vessel's Italian registry, she warned a senior Ministry of the Navy official that the cargo of thousands of rifles might not be destined for Palestine but could instead be intended for use within Italy itself. In the charged political atmosphere preceding Italy's April 1948 elections, the allegation prompted immediate action: Adriatic ports were instructed to intercept the *Lino* should it enter Italian waters.²⁵

An engine failure soon forced the vessel to dock at Molfetta, where Italian authorities arrested the crew and towed the ship to Bari.²⁶ For the Haganah, the unexpected detention created both opportunity and risk, as public exposure could compromise broader clandestine networks operating in Italy. Nevertheless, Avigur ordered sabotage to proceed. Sereni meanwhile delayed the vessel further by invoking maritime regulations, thereby buying crucial time for operational preparation.²⁷

An initial attempt on the night of 8–9 April was aborted when the vessel was illuminated and guarded by the British destroyer *HMS Whitesand Bay*.²⁸ The following morning, Sereni confronted Italian naval officials, protesting the presence of a British warship in an Italian port. Italian authorities proved receptive. Reflecting a broader assertion of sovereignty following the 1947 Peace Treaty, Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Emilio Maugeri issued confidential instructions limiting foreign interference in matters deemed internal Italian jurisdiction.²⁹ The British destroyer withdrew offshore, though it remained nearby, a reminder that diplomatic sensitivities persisted.³⁰

That night, as British surveillance subsided, Dror and his team approached the vessel, attached explosive charges, and withdrew undetected. The *Lino* sank without casualties and without attribution.³¹ Contemporary observers offered conflicting explanations regarding the cargo's intended destination. Italian press reports suggested the arms might have been intended for Italian communists rather than for Arab forces, deflecting suspicion away from Zionist involvement. Even British Admiralty Intelligence briefly questioned whether the shipment was destined for either Arabs or Jews. Such uncertainty reinforced the concealment and preserved the ambiguity on which its success depended.³²

The operation exemplified what Rory Cormac terms the logic of 'disrupt and deny': degrading an adversary's capabilities while preserving plausible deniability and avoiding diplomatic escalation.³³ Strategically, the sinking of the *Lino* demonstrated how limited resources, local networks, and deniable maritime sabotage could produce disproportionate effects, disrupting adversary supply while avoiding interstate escalation.³⁴

Building the Rome sabotage unit: organization and early operations

In the aftermath of the *Lino* operation, Avigur moved to institutionalize these methods. Recognising the need not only to monitor but also to disrupt further Arab arms shipments, he ordered the creation of a dedicated sabotage unit and entrusted command to Amnon Yona.³⁵

Yona enlisted Dror to co-lead the initiative, and together they drafted an operational plan that quickly won Avigur's approval. On 13 May 1948, the Unit for the Sabotage of Enemy Supply in Europe was formally established. Its headquarters were set up in Rome, on Via Principe Amedeo near Termini Station, which soon became the central hub for intelligence, logistics, and coordination across Italy and continental Europe. Recruitment began immediately, drawing on Jewish operatives and instructors already active on the continent. The team included Gideon Rosen, Bentz Stoffler, Gideon Weisser, alongside a skilled driver and a trusted secretary. A secret *Mossad le-Aliyah Bet* base between Gaeta and Formia was placed at the unit's disposal. There, in relative seclusion, the first cadre of Israeli naval commandos trained in underwater sabotage, preparing to disable Arab arms shipments throughout the Mediterranean.³⁶

Drawing on techniques developed by the Italian Navy *Gamma* assault-diver unit, Dror led the inaugural course together with Rosen. Launched in June 1948, the programme covered diving techniques, long-distance swimming, and underwater demolition. Training was reinforced by the involvement of Italian naval veterans recruited through unofficial channels by Commander Agostino Calosi, head of the Italian naval intelligence. Unable to provide formal military assistance under the terms of the Peace Treaty, Italian authorities facilitated the participation of former *Decima Flottiglia MAS* specialists whose wartime experience in underwater sabotage and irregular maritime warfare directly informed Israeli operational practices. Specialized equipment was procured from Italian firms such as Pirelli and Salvas, including rebreathing apparatus equipped with advanced oxygen-filtration systems that allowed divers to remain submerged for extended periods without producing bubbles. Together, technical instruction, veteran expertise, and access to Italian matériel accelerated the transformation of an improvised sabotage formation into a functioning naval commando capability, although additional operational experience remained necessary.³⁷

Later that summer, two seasoned Palmach divers, Yehuda Venezia and David Frummer, were transferred to Italy, bringing critical operational experience. Frummer assumed responsibility for the technical dimension of sabotage, designing and adapting specialized equipment, while Venezia helped assemble and organize the team before being dispatched to establish new operational bases in Belgium and the Netherlands. They brought from Israel a supply of sabotage matériel, concealed in a woodland near the village of Nemi, about 30 kilometres from Rome. In a villa already used for *Mossad le-Aliyah Bet* operations, a small workshop was established, where one of the team's first tasks was to prepare underwater mines. Simultaneously, reconnaissance missions were launched in Italian ports, and operational bases were established across coastal hubs where Arab arms were expected.³⁸

Meanwhile, Arab weapons procurement efforts, particularly those of Egypt, were intensifying across Italy.³⁹ At the centre of these activities stood Egi-Italia, a firm headed by Italian – Egyptian businessman, Abdal Latif Abu Rigalia and backed by Colonel Omar

Seif Al Din. Its agents brokered deals for small arms, ammunition, artillery, torpedo boats, naval equipment, tanks, and, above all, fighter aircraft.⁴⁰

British officials, aware of Egi – Italia's role, identified three principal sources of supply: British and American equipment from military dumps, nominally destined for scrap but resold abroad at profit; surplus Italian arms released by the Ministry of Defence to revive domestic production and reopen export channels; and newly manufactured matériel.⁴¹ Invoking both United Nations ceasefire recommendations imposing an arms embargo and the provisions of the Peace Treaty limiting Italian armament production, the British acted decisively. On 12 June, the Foreign Office froze a £2 million payment from the Egyptian Ministry of Defence to its Legation in Rome, funds intended for aircraft equipment brokered through Egi – Italia. Even these measures, however, proved insufficient. Egypt circumvented British controls by arranging payment through cotton shipments, a mechanism accepted by the Italian government.⁴²

As Egypt's procurement activity expanded, the Israeli sabotage unit moved to act, yet its initial operations proved unsuccessful. On 16 August 1948, two reconditioned aircraft (a Savoia-Marchetti SM-95 and a FIAT G-212) being prepared for delivery to the Egyptian Air Force were scheduled for inspection at Venice's San Nicolò al Lido airport by Prince Naif Suleiman, a cousin of King Farouk.⁴³ During a routine inspection, a technician discovered five explosive devices concealed near the wings and fuel tanks. The operation had been executed with precision, but the detonators failed to ignite, apparently due to obsolete triggering mechanisms.⁴⁴ Journalist Eric Salerno, drawing on interviews with key protagonists, later offered an alternative explanation: Frummer, who was colour-blind, may have installed 24-hour fuses instead of short-delay timers.⁴⁵

The next operation fared no better. Egypt arranged to purchase five Douglas DC-3s from a Florentine company. Yona's team prepared the explosives and positioned saboteurs, only to discover that the aircraft still bore Italian markings. An attack under such conditions risked diplomatic repercussions. Avigur called off the mission, and the planes departed the following day untouched.⁴⁶

A third plan targeted the *Rosalyn*, a ship loading arms for Egypt in the port of Genoa. Here again the operation collapsed when Rosen was badly injured after a device detonated prematurely during preparation, bringing the mission to an abrupt end.⁴⁷

Strategic diversion: the hijacking of the *Argiro*

Following the sinking of the *Lino*, the Syrian recovery effort began. Major Fuad Mardam oversaw a salvage operation that successfully retrieved the weapons within 15 days for a refurbishment at a nearby military base. Tracked by Sereni's intelligence network in Bari, Mardam's subsequent search for a Beirut-bound transport vessel created a renewed operational priority for the Israeli unit, shifting the mission from sabotage toward the capture and diversion of the cargo.⁴⁸

Initial planning considered providing Mardam, via a shipping intermediary, a *Mossad le-Aliyah Bet* vessel to carry and secretly divert the cargo to Israel. The option was discarded due to the high risk of exposure, and the unit decided to infiltrate the vessel Mardam intended to charter. The refined plan required two recruited crew members to disable the engines 15 miles south of the port, simulating a mechanical failure. At the designated point, a boarding party – disguised in Allied military uniforms – would

intercept the ship and convince the captain they were a security escort dispatched by Mardam. To facilitate the takeover, Sereni and Yona bribed Mardam's shipping agent, an individual with a history of double-dealing, with IT£20,000 and an additional IT£15,000 contingent on the successful diversion. With the agent's cooperation, the team acquired a fishing vessel and the theatrical insignia necessary to execute the deception.⁴⁹

The *Argiro* departed Bari on 20 August. By 01.45 the following day, the unit received confirmation that the takeover had succeeded without incident. A coded message reported that the crew had been neutralized and the vessel's wireless equipment secured, marking the first successful capture of an arms ship en route to Israel.⁵⁰

On 26 August, the vessel was intercepted at sea by Israeli naval forces, which transferred the matériel before sinking the ship. The cargo reached Haifa by 30 August and was immediately dispatched to the *Etzioni Brigade* fighting on the Jerusalem front, a direct conversion of adversarial resources into a vital logistical asset. To mitigate diplomatic friction with Rome, the Italian crew was temporarily detained. The captain's subsequent death from tuberculosis in a Haifa hospital underscored the complex humanitarian and legal entanglements inherent in such deniable maritime operations.⁵¹

If the *Lino* represented disruption, the *Argiro* illustrated strategic appropriation. The seizure of enemy-bound matériel and its immediate incorporation into Israeli arsenals reflected a widening operational scope in which intelligence, deception, and procurement functioned as mutually reinforcing instruments. Rather than merely preventing delivery, the operation transformed adversarial resources into a direct logistical asset, demonstrating the flexibility with which clandestine networks exploited opportunity within the fluid conditions of the 1948 war.

Yet this tactical success also highlighted a deepening strategic dilemma. As Arab procurement networks in Italy continued to expand, the Israeli unit was compelled toward progressively riskier measures, pushing operations beyond maritime interception toward direct intervention within Italy's industrial infrastructure. In this sense, the *Argiro* episode marked the transition from opportunistic disruption to sustained, system-level interference.

Industrial sabotage: targeting Egyptian aircraft at Venegono

By the summer of 1948, Egyptian procurement efforts, particularly within Italy's aviation sector, were accelerating at an alarming pace. Cairo was prepared to mortgage future cotton harvests, and King Farouk even considered pledging a Swiss bank account to secure contracts. Such acquisitions threatened to alter the regional balance of air power, prompting continued vigilance from the sabotage unit. At the end of July, a confidential source reported that Egypt had signed a contract for 20 Macchi C-205 fighter aircraft, with an option for up to 48, a prospective influx of modern combat aircraft demanding immediate countermeasures.⁵²

In early September, Yona learned that the first five C-205s were nearing completion at the Venegono airfield near Varese. The site, leased to Macchi for test flights, was only lightly protected, guarded by two-night watchmen. Frummer volunteered to lead the sabotage, and Yona assembled a small team. Pinhas Sapir, Avigur's successor, granted approval on a critical condition: the aircraft had to bear Egyptian markings before any actions was undertaken, ensuring that political attribution would be unmistakable.⁵³

On the night of 17 September, the team infiltrated the airfield, dismantled a glass panel of the hangar, and planted five explosive charges inside the cockpits. Each device contained approximately one kilogram of TNT packed in waxed-canvas and fitted with a timed detonator. The mechanism employed a corrosive liquid designed to release a spring-loaded striker, allowing near-simultaneous explosions while minimizing operator exposure.⁵⁴

Inside the compact hangar were also three MB-308 touring planes. At 04:45 on 18 September, a powerful explosion ignited the structure. Fuel barrels containing gasoline and acetone intensified the resulting fire, destroying one C-205 and all three MB-308s, while the remaining aircraft sustained severe damage.⁵⁵

Although local emergency response limited the physical destruction, the subsequent inquiry, initially focused on guard negligence, was soon overtaken by a journalistic and official suspicion of deliberate sabotage. Attention intensified when several unexploded devices were discovered, prompting Italian newspapers to speculate about possible Israeli involvement, though investigators produced no definitive proof.⁵⁶

Despite the partial failure of several charges, the attack delayed Egypt's acquisition programme and demonstrated the growing reach of Israel's clandestine network, capable of striking Italian industrial infrastructure while avoiding casualties or major diplomatic repercussions.⁵⁷ The Venegono operation marked an escalation from maritime interdiction to industrial targeting, extending sabotage from supply routes to the production infrastructure underpinning Egyptian air capabilities. By striking aircraft before they could enter operational service, the attack demonstrated how covert action could influence the balance of air power without direct battlefield confrontation.

The same could not be said of the subsequent mission in Varazze, where operational missteps and internal rivalries culminated in arrests, exposure, and diplomatic strain. If Venegono demonstrated the expanding reach of Israeli sabotage, Varazze revealed the structural vulnerabilities of decentralized warfare under conditions of partial state tolerance.

Operational failure and strategic ambiguity: the Varazze affair

At the end of 1948, the unit learned of a major Egyptian procurement effort: three motor torpedo boats (MTBs) commissioned from the Baglietto Shipyard in Varazze, with delivery scheduled for early February 1949. As in previous missions, sabotage was to be conducted discreetly, minimizing collateral damage and avoiding diplomatic repercussions. Operational planning therefore emphasized concealment and strict deniability vis-à-vis Italian authorities.⁵⁸

The original directive was explicit: action could proceed only after Egyptian payment had been confirmed, both to prevent economic losses for the shipyard and to reduce the likelihood of Italian intervention.⁵⁹ The plan appeared straightforward. The civilian shipyard was lightly guarded, and an Italian insider facilitated access. Surveillance was conducted from a nearby cemetery, which provided an unobtrusive observation point overlooking the yard.⁶⁰

The operation's trajectory changed, however, when it attracted the attention of *Shayetet 13*, the newly formed Israeli naval commando unit, itself partly shaped by training programmes and operational techniques developed through earlier Italian cooperation.⁶¹ Dror, previously

dismissed from the Rome sabotage unit, had since assumed command of the formation. Buoyed by *Shayetet 13's* success in sinking the Egyptian flagship *Emir Farouk* on 22 October 1948, he viewed the Varazze mission as an opportunity to consolidate the unit's operational prestige and successfully requested authorization to assume command.⁶² The episode reflected a broader pattern in early Israeli intelligence: emerging units operated through improvisation and personal initiative, while overlapping authorities and institutional rivalries shaped both operational opportunities and constraints. Competition between the Rome sabotage unit and the newly created naval commando organization illustrates how early clandestine practice evolved less through centralized planning than through negotiation, experimentation, and the assertion of agency within a fluid intelligence environment.⁶³

Upon arriving in Italy on 22 January 1949, Dror met Venezia, who had initially been tasked with leading the mission, to revise the plan. Concluding that the original proposal diverged from his operational vision, he replaced it with a more complex structure. The team would divide into two groups: Dror would travel in the first, accompanied by a female operative and three explosive charges, while a second group, departing an hour later, would include Venezia and three additional operatives drawn from both *Shayetet 13* and the sabotage unit.⁶⁴

This restructuring introduced overlapping chains of authority, generating friction that strained coordination and morale. These tensions proved operationally fatal on 5 February 1949, when fragmented oversight and the absence of basic security protocols prompted an Italian police patrol to investigate a suspicious vehicle parked along the Via Aurelia. In a six-page report dated 23 February, the Genoa Superintendent (*Questore*) detailed the subsequent inquiry conducted jointly by the Milan and Rome police. Around 02.00, Lieutenant Salvatore Criscione, commander of the Savona Traffic Police, identified the vehicle registered to Valerio Ascarelli (Ada Sereni's brother) but driven by Francesco Zaroni, who claimed it had been stolen, apparently attempting to deflect suspicion. A search uncovered a woman's handbag and, in the trunk, three high-explosive charges equipped with timing mechanisms and liquid detonators stored in a thermos flask.⁶⁵

Following Zaroni's arrest, officers expanded their search of the area, soon discovering Dror and the female operative from the first group hiding nearby along the Via Aurelia. Roadblocks were established throughout Varazze and neighbouring towns, though no additional suspects were apprehended. The detainees were interrogated locally before transfer to the Savona Police Headquarters. Initial suspicions centred on a possible plot against the *Star of Egypt*, a steamship carrying significant war matériel docked in Savona. As investigations progressed, authorities determined that the intended target was the Baglietto Shipyard itself, where the Egyptian MTBs were under construction. The inquiry reconstructed the network involved, leading to the subsequent detention of Venezia.⁶⁶ In contrast, Dror offered an alternative account: he claimed that, acting out of patriotic duty, he had hidden sabotage matériel near Varazze for later transport to Israel, denying knowledge of the Egyptian-bound vessels or any intention to conduct operations on Italian soil.⁶⁷ On 3 June 1949, the investigating judge dismissed charges against the remaining suspects but committed Dror to trial, which opened on 22 June. He received a sentence of three years and four months' imprisonment. Israeli officials responded with a sustained diplomatic intervention, ultimately producing a political resolution. Dror was granted a presidential pardon under a decree originally intended for electoral offences, despite his conviction for illegal possession of explosives, underscoring the exceptional political sensitivity of the case. He was freed on 2 September 1949.⁶⁸

Dror's release was less a matter of judicial oversight than a calculated act of executive leniency, in which Italian authorities leveraged a legal technicality to turn an operational embarrassment into a practical expression of a broader strategic posture defined by selective enforcement. This pardon signalled that such flexibility was a functional component of Italy's Mediterranean policy, a mechanism of delicate balance that allowed clandestine operations to continue, provided they remained beneath the threshold of public escalation. It was not an isolated judicial anomaly, but the practical application of informal permissiveness sanctioned at the highest level of the state. In June 1948, Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi granted Ada Sereni what she later described as informal authorization for Zionist activities in Italy, effectively agreeing that authorities would 'close one eye – and preferably two' to operations conducted on Italian soil.⁶⁹ This executive sanction underscored how strategic necessity could override legal protocol within the secret front's operational architecture.

However, this posture came at a cost. By attempting to maintain amicable relations with both Arab states and Zionist emissaries, Italy introduced 'an element of contradiction into its Mediterranean policy', a tension that would persist as a defining feature of its foreign policy for decades. Through selective enforcement, political pardons, and managed visibility, Italy functioned simultaneously as a transit corridor, logistical base, and diplomatic buffer.⁷⁰ As Foreign Minister Count Carlo Sforza observed in correspondence with Defence Minister Randolfo Pacciardi, Rome sought a managed equilibrium that avoided undermining Zionist aims while preventing the alienation of Arab partners.⁷¹

This strategy was rooted in the anxieties of the post-electoral landscape: following the April 1948 victory, Rome aimed to demonstrate reliability within the emerging Atlantic order while avoiding overt entanglement in the Arab – Israeli conflict. Italy's position as a Mediterranean hinge, defined by a dual obligation to Atlantic security and regional Arab proximity, produced a pattern of controlled enforcement in which ambiguity became a stabilizing mechanism.⁷² By utilizing what Austin Carson describes as collusive secrecy, Italian officials sustained plausible deniability while preventing the Arab – Israeli conflict from jeopardizing Rome's domestic political equilibrium, creating political space in which Israeli clandestine networks could consolidate and expand their activities.⁷³

Within this environment, Israeli covert action evolved through iterative adaptation rather than formal doctrine. Operations privileged deception, improvisation, and operational daring, embedding practices that would later shape Israel's approach to deniable intelligence activity. As scholarship on covert conflict suggests, such campaigns often unfold within a grey zone where visibility and acknowledgment remain negotiable rather than binary.⁷⁴

The Varazze affair ultimately exposed the limits of this decentralized model. Success depended not only on daring but on coordination, discipline, and political management. Rather than discrediting covert action, the episode underscored the mounting need to move beyond ad hoc practice toward more regulated, centrally coordinated structures.

Conclusions

Israeli clandestine operations in Italy between 1948 and 1949 illuminate the mechanics of the secret front: an operational layer of conflict where the secrecy lay not in Italy's geopolitical status, but in the clandestine methods utilized to shape the regional balance. Far from being a peripheral theatre, 1948 Italy occupied the centre of the emerging Cold War order, serving as a frontline for Western strategic consolidation. Within this Mediterranean operational arena,

a state fighting for survival projected effective covert power before formal intelligence institutions fully developed, demonstrating how clandestine capability arose from operational necessity rather than centralized bureaucratic design.

The operational trajectory, from maritime disruption and strategic seizure to industrial targeting, reveals an expanding horizon of Israeli clandestine activity. These experiences ultimately contributed to the consolidation of a more structured operational methodology within the emerging Israeli security establishment.⁷⁵

The continuity of these operations depended on a delicate political balance within the Italian state, most clearly evidenced by the political resolution of the Varazze affair. What proved historically consequential was the structural space created for covert practice within an environment of managed stabilization and strategic experimentation.⁷⁶ This setting provided a unique arena where the imperatives of the Atlantic order were reconciled with a pragmatic Mediterranean policy, enabling the Italian state to accommodate Israeli networks via a coordinated ambiguity and discretionary tolerance.

Ultimately, the significance of the Italian secret front lay in its cumulative effects on the trajectory of Israeli statecraft. It enabled the refinement of compartmentalized networks and transnational coordination, practices that were subsequently codified within the doctrinal framework of Aman and Mossad. These operations were not isolated episodes of reactive innovation but part of a wider transformation in which deniable action became a foundational instrument of modern statecraft, contributing directly to the long-term integration of Israeli covert capabilities within a postwar landscape.

Notes

1. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1948, Vol. V, Part 2, 666.
2. Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race*; Frank, Klima, Goldstein, "The First Israeli Weapons Procurement," 125–52; Calhoun, "Arming David," 22–32; and Režek, "Yugoslavia's Policy Towards the Middle East," 293–315.
3. Quoted in Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 126.
4. Raviv and Melman, *Every Spy*, 16–40; Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, 71–6; and Bar-Joseph, "State-Intelligence Relations in Israel," 136–8. For a definitive account of the transition from pre-state paramilitary intelligence to formal state structures during the 1948 conflict, see also the seminal work by Gelber, *Budding a Fleur-de-Lis*.
5. Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services*, 14–21; and Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, 26–31. On this see also Rosset and Sahi, *Mossad: From Bureau to Agency*, a major study based on newly declassified sources on the Mossad's early development.
6. *FRUS*, 1947, Vol. III, 908–13; 1948, Vol. III, 765–9, 775–9, and 845. See also, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani (DDI)*, 1947, Vol. VI, 214–20 and 456–8.
7. Martini, *Nome in codice Ulisse*, 111; Quartararo, *Italia e Stati Uniti*, 162–71 and 218–34; and Mammarella and Cacace, *La politica estera dell'Italia*, 131–83.
8. Del Pero, "The United States and Psychological Warfare," 1304–34; and Forlenza, *On the Edge of Democracy*, 68–138.
9. Fiore, "Arming a Nation," 1–21.
10. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "Clandestine Air Transport Operations by US Citizens," June 1, 1948.
11. Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards*, xxxi–xxxvi.
12. Lorch, *The Edge of the Sword*; Bregman, *Israel's Wars*; Rogan and Shlaim, *The War for Palestine*; Gelber, *Palestine 1948*; Morris, *1948*; Tal, *War in Palestine, 1948*; Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*; and Karsh, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*.

13. Mardor, *Strictly Illegal*; Slater, *The Pledge*; Sereni, *I clandestini*; Deacon, *The Israeli Secret Service*; Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*; Thomas, *Gideon's Spies*; Sacharov, *Out of the Limelight*; Salerno, *Mossad Base Italia*; and Martino, *Azione di guerra*.
14. As Michael Herman observes, operational experience in intelligence organizations often precedes formal doctrinal codification. Herman, *Intelligence Power*, 16–9.
15. Ben-Gurion, *Israel: Years of Challenge*; Mardor, *Haganah*; Sereni, *I clandestini*; Buttazzoni, *Solo per la bandiera*; and Yona, *Missions with No Traces*.
16. The National Archives (TNA), FO 371/68798 E528/243/89, War Office to Commander-in-Chief Middle East Land Forces, November 24, 1947; Minute by Beith, January 14, 1948; Foreign Office to Damascus, February 26, 1948.
17. *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, Political and Diplomatic Document (PDD)*, 92.
18. TNA, DEFE 7/180 J1404/46/16, Minute by Wheeler, March 15, 1948; Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race*, 159 and 178–9.
19. Sereni, *I clandestini*, 308–9; and Režek, “Yugoslavia’s Policy Towards the Middle East,” 295–300.
20. Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 99–100.
21. Sereni had already played a central role in organizing clandestine immigration and refugee transports to Palestine. As the conflict intensified, she redirected her efforts towards arms procurement and the disruption of Arab arms transfers.
22. Mardor, *Strictly Illegal*, 200–2; Sereni, *I clandestini*, 309–10; and Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 99–103.
23. TNA, FO 371/68637, Prague Chancery to Eastern Department, “Czech Volunteer Pilot’s Report on Recruiting,” 12 August 1948; Cohen, *Israel’s Best Defence*, 23–5; Sacharov, *Out of the Limelight*, 157–61; Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 100–1; Cull and Nomis, *The Desert Hawks*, 26–7; and Salerno, *Mossad Base Italia*, 137–8.
24. Yossale Dror was a veteran of the Palmach and Palyam, trained in naval operations and clandestine missions. His extensive experience in maritime sabotage and commando operations made him a key operative in assembling and deploying explosive devices. See, https://www.palyam.org/English/IS/Dror_Yosef_Yossale.pdf.
25. Sereni, *I clandestini*, 313.
26. TNA, ADM 223/227, “Monthly Intelligence Report: April 1948,” 51–2; and *Corriere della Sera*, April 4, 1948.
27. Mardor, *Strictly Illegal*, 203–5; Sereni, *I clandestini*, 315–20; and Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 108–11.
28. TNA, ADM 223/227, “Monthly Intelligence Report: April 1948,” 51–2.
29. Toscano, *La porta di Sion*, 243–4.
30. Sereni, *I clandestini*, 321–2.
31. Mardor, *Strictly Illegal*, 209–10; and Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 117–9.
32. TNA, ADM 223/227, “Monthly Intelligence Report: April 1948,” 52; and *Corriere della Sera*, April 13, 1948.
33. Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*, 1–15.
34. Raviv and Melman, *Every Spy*, 16–40; Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, 71–6; Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny*, 1–15; and Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, 26–31.
35. Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 126–7.
36. Black and Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars*, 72–3; Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 126–9; and https://www.palyam.org/English/IS/Weisser_Gideon.pdf.
37. Fiore, “The Wingate of the Israeli Navy,” 624–6.
38. Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 132–8; Salerno, *Mossad Base Italia*, 84–7; and Fiore, “Arming a Nation,” 15.
39. *FRUS*, 1948, Vol. V, Part 2, 1244 and 1279.
40. CIA, “Arms Negotiations Between Italy and Egypt,” May 10, 1949; Mardor, *Strictly Illegal*, 142–3; and Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race*, 64 and 191–2.
41. TNA, FO 371/73559 J4650/11917/16, Ministry of Defence to Foreign Office, May 30, 1949; Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race*, 64 and 191–2.

42. CIA, "Arms Negotiations between Italy and Egypt," 10 May 1949, and "Arms Shipments to Albania," July 11, 1950; TNA, FO 371/73559 J4650/11917/16, Ministry of Defence to Foreign Office, 30 May 1949; Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race*, 196.
43. *Corriere della Sera*, 16 August 1948.
44. Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 189–95.
45. Salerno, *Mossad Base Italia*, 87–8.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. Sereni, *I clandestini*, 323; Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 147.
49. Sereni, *I clandestini*, 324–5; and Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 149–54.
50. Quoted in Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 158.
51. Mardor, *Strictly Illegal*, 210–1; and Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 169–70.
52. TNA, FO 371/69188 J6191/16/16, War Office to Foreign Office, "Information Available about Egyptian Purchase of Military Equipment from Italy," 10 September 1948; FO 371/73559 J4650/11917/16, Ministry of Defence to Foreign Office, 30 May 1949; Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race*, 196; Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 205.
53. Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 205–8.
54. *Ibid.*, 210–1.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Corriere della Sera*, September 19, 1948.
57. Fifteen Macchi C-205s were eventually delivered to Egypt before the end of the 1948 war, briefly engaging the Israeli Air Force. Notably, on 7 January 1949, one C-205 reportedly shot down an Israeli P-51 Mustang.
58. TNA, FO 371/73559 J4650/11917/16, Ministry of Defence to Foreign Office, 30 May 1949; CIA, "Egyptian Military Purchases in Italy," 9 March 1949; Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race*, 196; and Salerno, *Mossad Base Italia*, 93–4.
59. Quoted in Salerno, *Mossad Base Italia*, 93–4.
60. CIA, "Israel MTM and SMA Programme," February 9, 1949; and Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 227.
61. Capriotti, *Diario di un fascista*, 17–29; and Fiore, "The Wingate of the Israeli Navy," 623–6.
62. Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 228–9.
63. See note 34 above.
64. Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 229–31.
65. Martino, *Azione di guerra*, 9–10 and 68–76.
66. Archivio di Stato di Savona (AS-SV), Fondo Questura, C3, b. 157, "Procedimento a carico dell'organizzazione terroristica ebraica: Zanoni Francesco, Basevi Giuliana, Dror Joseph," 10 and 23 February 1949; Martino, *Azione di guerra*, 9–10.
67. AS-SV, Fondo Questura, C3, b. 157, "Procedimento a carico dell'organizzazione terroristica ebraica: Zanoni Francesco, Basevi Giuliana, Dror Joseph," 4 March 1949; and Martino, *Azione di guerra*, 89–92.
68. AS-SV, Fondo Tribunale Penale di Savona, 182/1949, b. 79, "Procedimento contro Dror Joseph, Basevi Giuliana, Zanoni Francesco e altri," 17 and 21 March 1949; Yona, *Missions with No Traces*, 245–7; Salerno, *Mossad Base Italia*, 93–4; and Martino, *Azione di guerra*, 94–9.
69. Sereni, *I clandestini*, 327–8.
70. Enardu, "L'immigrazione illegale ebraica," 166; Tremolada, *All'ombra degli arabi*, 21; and Pizzigallo, *La diplomazia italiana*, 34–5.
71. Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE), Affari Politici 1946–1950, b. 156, f. 5, 19 May 1948.
72. Martini, *Codice Ulisse*, 111.
73. Carson, *Secret Wars*, 26–74.
74. Cormac and Aldrich, "Grey Is the New Black," 477–94.
75. Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services*, 14–21; and Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, 26–31.
76. See note 8 above.

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