U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN THE AMIA BOMBING INVESTIGATION: KEEPING IRAN “IN THE DOCK”

by

MIKE LASUSA

Dr. Philip Brenner, Advisor

A substantial research paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in International Affairs: United States Foreign Policy and National Security

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Washington, D.C.

APRIL 2016
**Introduction**

On the morning of July 18, 1994, a bomb exploded in Buenos Aires, destroying the headquarters of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Association, better known by its Spanish acronym, AMIA. The blast killed 85 people and injured more than 200 others in an incident that would become known as the deadliest anti-Semitic terrorist attack in Latin American history.¹

Over the past two decades, a labyrinthine body of evidence has accumulated about the AMIA bombing. Yet, despite the emergence of several plausible theories of culpability, no one has ever conclusively proven the identity, much less the guilt, of any of the perpetrators.

Nevertheless, from the day of the attack day until the present, various elements of the United States government have advanced the idea -- now widely accepted in foreign policy circles -- that high-level Iranian officials orchestrated the attack through their contacts with the Lebanon-based militant group Hezbollah. In fact, as of this writing, a timeline on the website of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center definitively attributes responsibility for the AMIA bombing to Hezbollah.²

At the same time, some experts and observers over the years have questioned the “Iran Theory.” For example, in 2014, the Argentine judge handling the AMIA case, Rodolfo Canicoba Corral, said the Iran Theory is “still a hypothesis.”³ Both Iran and Hezbollah have repeatedly denied that they had any role in the bombing. And the American ambassador in Argentina at the

---

time of the attack, James Cheek, has stated that “there was never any real evidence” supporting assertions of Iranian involvement.4

This begs the question: why did so many U.S. foreign policy decision-makers accept and promote a theory implicating Iran in the AMIA attack despite the weakness of the evidence and plausible alternative explanations? And what effects did this have on official investigations of the incident?

This essay will argue that U.S. antagonism toward Iran played a major role in the propagation of the Iran Theory. Linking top Iranian government officials to the AMIA attack served to reinforce a broader U.S. government portrayal of Iran as a hostile nation capable of using terrorism against Western countries in pursuit of its political goals. The U.S. government relied heavily on the perpetuation of this narrative in attempts to achieve its major foreign policy objectives with regard to Iran; namely, constraining the country’s geopolitical influence and denying its attempts to attain nuclear enrichment capabilities.

Additionally, many decision-makers involved in various aspects of the AMIA case adhered to the widespread -- and perhaps well-deserved -- perception that the Argentine justice system was so dysfunctional as to be incapable of identifying and prosecuting the perpetrators of the bombing.5 This made it relatively easy for U.S. officials to discount lines of investigation pursued by their Argentine counterparts that did not implicate Iran. Moreover, a majority of Argentines themselves also believed their government could not properly handle the case, which

5 For example, Claudio Grossman, a professor at American University’s Washington College of Law who served the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) as an observer of the AMIA case from 2001 to 2005, recently told a reporter, “Every aspect of the [AMIA] case was a disaster, beginning with the initial investigation…Argentina is a modern country, but there is no trust in the legal system, no faith that the system can solve problems.” Dexter Filkins, “Death of a Prosecutor,” The New Yorker, July 20, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/20/death-of-a-prosecutor.
put pressure on Argentine officials to follow the lead of foreign investigators. Combined with U.S. predisposition toward the Iran Theory, this dynamic helped shift the focus of the investigation away from determining who carried out the plot and toward establishing that it had been ordered by the Iranian government.

This essay does not seek to definitively disprove the Iran Theory. Rather, it aims to explore some of the major shortcomings in the evidence cited by its proponents in order to consider whether U.S. antagonism toward Iran and distrust of Argentina’s investigative abilities contributed to the persistence of this line of investigation. It will also briefly outline an alternative theory of culpability (the so-called “Syria Connection”) and compare the U.S. treatment of that hypothesis to its treatment of the Iran Theory.

During the research for this essay, the author did not find any academic literature on how geopolitical concerns may have affected the course of the AMIA inquiry. Nor did the author encounter scholarship regarding the possible effects of geopolitical concerns on other investigations of suspected incidents of international terrorism in which the United States became involved. Therefore, this essay is intended to serve as a starting point for other scholars who become interested in these little-studied aspects of foreign relations.

**Methodology**

The evidence and conclusions presented here derive from an extensive examination of many hundreds of pages of primary source documents related to the investigation of the AMIA attack and the circumstances surrounding it, including diplomatic cables, judicial filings, intelligence reports and internal government correspondence. Some of these documents entered the public domain in response to Freedom of Information Act requests performed by this author.
and other researchers, as well as through authorized and unauthorized releases made public by
various individuals and organizations. Some of these documents have not yet been made
available to the public, because researchers at the National Security Archive are still cataloging
them, but these researchers generously shared documents with the author. This essay also relies
on works by journalists and scholars who have done prior research on the AMIA bombing and
related topics. Interviews with several sources knowledgeable about the issues discussed below
provided useful background information. However, this essay would have been strengthened by
on the record conversations with officials involved in the AMIA investigation, which for various
reasons proved difficult to obtain.

Setting the Stage for the Iran Theory: The 1992 Israeli Embassy Bombing

Roughly two years before the AMIA attack, a similar bombing had struck Buenos Aires.
On March 17, 1992, an explosion destroyed the building housing Israel’s embassy in Argentina,
killing 29 people and wounding more than 250 others.6 Several competing claims of
responsibility surfaced shortly thereafter. A Buenos Aires radio station reported a phone call the
day of the bombing from a group called “For a Free Palestine” asserting that organization’s
authorship of the attack.7 The Argentine embassy in Lebanon reported that a local Lebanese
newspaper had published a communiqué from a suspected Hezbollah front group called “Islamic
Jihad” claiming responsibility for the bombing.8 An Argentine television station reported

6 Israeli Security Agency (Shabak), “Terrorist Attack against the Embassy of Israel in Buenos Aires, Argentina
(1992),” Israeli Security Agency (Shabak), 2013,
7 Terence Todman, “92BUENOSAIRES2692 – Update on Israeli Embassy Bombing,” March 18, 1992,
8 Ibid.; Alberto Nisman and Marcelo Martinez Burgos, “Report; Request for Arrests” (Argentine Attorney General’s
receiving a message warning, “Today it was an embassy, tomorrow it will be a ministry. Beware of Argentina’s Nazis.”

At the time of these claims, no hard evidence pointing to a credible suspect had emerged, a fact that was publicly acknowledged by senior U.S. and Israeli officials even as they made general references to alleged Iranian and Syrian support for international terrorism. During the daily press briefing at the U.S. State Department the day after the attack, spokesperson Margaret Tutwiler said the United States was “investigating” Islamic Jihad’s claim of responsibility, but had “no information to confirm this reported claim.” Syrian President Hafez Assad publicly denied any connection to the bombing, and Iran denied involvement in private diplomatic messages.

Still, most public discussion in the days and weeks after the bombing focused on the possibility of Iranian or Syrian involvement in the attack. And behind closed doors, much more focus was placed on Iran. Argentine President Carlos Menem had asked for assistance investigating the embassy attack from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Israeli intelligence service known as Mossad. According to Israeli author Ronen Bergman, “Israeli intelligence had no doubt the operation was revenge” for the assassination of Abbas Musawi, Hezbollah’s secretary general, by Mossad agents on February 16, 1992. Bergman writes that Mossad “worked closely with the CIA’s Counter Terrorist Center (CTC),” which produced a

---

9 Todman, “92BUENOSAIRES2692 – Update on Israeli Embassy Bombing.”
report that “presented the bombing as the model of an Iranian-led operation, with Iran working through [Hezbollah] to avoid direct evidence of its involvement.”\footnote{Ibid.} The proof, a Mossad source told Bergman, was “not a smoking gun, but a blazing cannon.”\footnote{Ibid, pg. 171.}

The “blazing cannon” appears to have been a telephone conversation between two senior Hezbollah operatives, recorded by the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA), in which the men were heard “rejoicing over ‘our project in Argentina’ and mocking the Shin Bet, which is responsible for protecting Israeli legations abroad, for not preventing it,” Bergman writes.\footnote{Ibid.} The Argentine intelligence service, known as SIDE, also concluded that Iran was involved, in large part due to an intercepted argument between an Iranian diplomat and his wife, the latter of whom threatened “she would tell everything she knew about his part in ‘what happened to the offices of the Zionists.’”

Whatever the actual merits of the evidence implicating Iran and Hezbollah in the embassy bombing, the allegation of Iranian involvement clearly served a political purpose for the Israeli government, arguably the United States’ closest international ally.\footnote{John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,” \textit{Middle East Policy} 13, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 29–87, doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2006.00260.x.} As American author Gareth Porter points out, “invoking an extraordinary new threat from Iran had an immediate domestic political objective” from the point of view of Yitzhak Rabin, who became prime minister of Israel in the summer of 1992, namely “deflecting Israeli animosity away from the Palestinians and providing political cover for Rabin’s moves for peace with the Palestine Liberation Organization,” which was “the central thrust of Rabin’s national security policy.” Additionally, Porter writes, “Rabin’s new political line on Iran also served two strategic objectives in relation to U.S. policy: to induce the United States to use its power to eliminate the
Iranian nuclear program through force or the threat of force and to enhance the value of Israel as a strategic ally of the United States in the region.”

On the U.S. side, the allegations of Iranian participation in the embassy attack also served political interests, albeit of a different kind. “In the context of its adjustment to the end of the Cold War and the threat from the Soviet Union,” Porter writes, “the CIA had a very large institutional interest at stake in treating Iran as a new, high-priority threat.” Porter argues that by emphasizing the threat posed by Iran, particularly its supposed attempts to acquire nuclear weapons and allegations of its support for international terrorism, the CIA “was trying to position itself to convince Congress that new threats required shifting vastly increased commitments of intelligence collection and analytical assets to other targets that had replaced the Soviet threat.”

For a number of reasons, Argentine authorities were also inclined to blame Iran and Hezbollah for the bombing. A Mossad agent who spoke with Bergman said American and Israeli investigators deduced early on “that the attack had seriously embarrassed the local authorities, who were in a hurry to wrap it all up quickly and quietly.” On top of this, President Menem had made what the historian David M.K. Sheinin called a “shocking about face…to discard decades of Peronist anti-American rhetoric and to align his nation’s economic, financial, and strategic policies with the United States.” Given the Menem administration’s desire to resolve the issue of culpability for the bombing as quickly as possible while also remaining on friendly terms with...

---

20 Ibid, pg. 94.
21 Ibid.
22 Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*, pg. 171.
the United States, it is rather unsurprising that the Argentine government adopted the shared U.S.-Israeli assumption of Iranian responsibility.

Obviously, the existence of these political incentives does not necessarily negate the possibility that the conclusions reached by the CIA, Mossad and SIDE were accurate. However, it does raise the question of whether these incentives, combined with the sharing of information among these investigating agencies, might have contributed to confirmation bias on the part of officials in all three countries. A full exploration of that question as it relates to the 1992 embassy bombing lies outside the scope of this essay, but it is worth keeping this backdrop in mind when discussing the similar events that began to unfold two years later.

The AMIA Bombing and the Early Development of the Iran Theory

The 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires never became a major political issue in the United States. The 1994 AMIA attack, on the other hand, generated much more interest. And U.S. efforts to tie the latter bombing to Iran and Hezbollah were more immediate, more public and more sustained.

After the 1992 embassy bombing, top U.S. national security officials declined to publicly link Iran to the attack in any definitive way. But, as Porter wrote in a 2008 article, on the day of the AMIA attack, “before anything could have been known about who was responsible, Secretary of State Warren Christopher blamed ‘those who want to stop the peace process in the Middle East’ -- an obvious reference to Iran.” In that article, Porter reported that “William Brencick, then chief of the political section at the US Embassy in Buenos Aires and the primary Embassy contact for the investigation, recalled…that a ‘wall of assumptions’ guided the US approach to the case. The primary assumptions, Brencick said, were that the explosion was a

24 Porter, Manufactured Crisis, pp. 90-91.
suicide bombing and that use of a suicide bomb was prima facie evidence of involvement by Hezbollah -- and therefore Iran."\textsuperscript{25}

The assumption of Iranian and Hezbollah involvement likely seemed reasonable at that time, given the conclusions of the Israeli, American and Argentine intelligence services regarding the 1992 embassy bombing. This assumption was also bolstered by threats made by Hezbollah to carry out attacks in response to the May 1994 abduction by Israeli security forces of a Lebanese militia leader named Mustafa Dirani, whom Israeli military intelligence personnel reportedly tortured in order to obtain information that facilitated airstrikes on a Hezbollah training camp in Lebanon’s Bekka Valley a month before the AMIA attack.\textsuperscript{26} Although Hezbollah immediately denied “any connection” to the bombing, the group had previously cited both Dirani’s kidnapping and the strike against the training camp as potential motives for retaliation against Israeli interests.\textsuperscript{27}

Other circumstances immediately surrounding the AMIA bombing contributed to the sense that the attack constituted the culmination of an Iranian plot involving Hezbollah. On July 19, 1994, the day after the AMIA attack, Alas Chiricanas Flight 901 exploded en route from Colón, Panama to Panama City, killing all 21 people on board, including 12 Panamanian Jews. Shortly thereafter, a group calling itself “Ansar Allah” (“Followers of God”) claimed responsibility. Investigators quickly fingered an Arab suspect, suggesting anti-Semitic and/or anti-Israel motives, but as of this writing the case remains unsolved.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} Porter, “Bush’s Iran/Argentina Terror Frame-Up.”
Similarly, exactly one week later, on July 26, 1994, the Israeli embassy in London was hit by a car bomb, injuring 20. Thirteen hours after that, another car bomb exploded outside Balfour House, then the headquarters of several London-based Jewish and Israeli organizations. Two Palestinian men were later convicted in British court of “conspiring to cause explosions,” supposedly as a strike against Israel in retaliation for its policies toward Palestine, though many observers questioned the strength of the evidence that led to those convictions.²⁹

Furthermore, the United States had experienced its own traumatic car bombing just over a year before the AMIA attack, when an explosion killed six people and injured more than a thousand others at the World Trade Center in New York City. As the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) later put it, “It was Friday, February 26, 1993, and Middle Eastern terrorism had arrived on American soil -- with a bang.”³⁰ At least one newspaper headline named Americans’ “illusion of invincibility” with regard to terrorism as one of the casualties of the attack -- a feeling that was no doubt reinforced by the series of events in the summer of 1994.³¹ The accused mastermind of the World Trade Center attack, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, later stated that the goal of the bombing was to assassinate a “Zionist official.”³² Early suspicions fell upon Iran and Hezbollah, though no solid evidence linked either to the plot.³³

At a congressional hearing on August 1, 1994, California congressman Tom Lantos, chairman of the foreign affairs committee in the House of Representatives, cited all of these

above-mentioned attacks as evidence that “we are facing a new and violent upsurge in a much broader, more insidious and dangerous war against civilized societies, against democracy and pluralism, against the West.” Lantos then read from a *New York Times* article reporting that the Iranian government had been cracking down on that country’s Christian minority. After he finished reading the excerpt, Lantos declared, “It would be naive indeed not to make a connection of all these events.”

“Clearly the kind of people who bombed Pan Am 103, who bombed the World Trade Center, and who carried out the series of bombings of the last few weeks are capable of seeking and using nuclear weapons, as well as weapons of a chemical and biological nature,” Lantos continued. “These latest bombings have the clear imprint of Iran and its ally, Hizballah, the radical Muslim organization in Lebanon…It is essential that we give the greatest attention to this issue so that Tehran, the leaders of Hizballah in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, and the leaders of other rogue regimes which sponsor or shelter terrorism will know that the West is prepared to defend itself against terrorism, no less than it was ready and prepared to defend itself against the Soviet Union.”

An article from the *New York Times* news service, which appeared two days before the hearing, read, “American and Israeli diplomats and intelligence officials strongly suggested…Iran and Hezbollah…were responsible for recent terrorist bombings of Jewish targets in Buenos Aires and London.” The article quoted Secretary of State Christopher saying, “The killers involved in those terrible incidents must not -- we will not -- let them...

---


35 According to an off-the-record discussion this author had with a former high-ranking American diplomat, U.S. authorities strongly suspected Iran was behind the 1988 bombing of the Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland in the immediate aftermath of the attack. However, it was later determined that the Libyan government was a much more likely culprit; See also: Patrick Radden Keefe, “The Avenger: Solving the Mystery of the Lockerbie Bombing,” *The New Yorker*, September 27, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/29/the-avenger.

36 *International Terrorism: Buenos Aires, Panama and London*. 
succeed...Groups like Hezbollah that wreak havoc and bloodshed must be defeated. And Hezbollah’s patron, Iran, must be contained.”^{37}

Taken together, these statements provide compelling evidence for the central thesis of this essay. Just days after these bombings occurred, virtually nothing could be known for certain about the actual perpetrators or their motives. Yet top U.S. officials appear to have already decided to blame Iran and Hezbollah, not based on convincing evidence, but rather because, in Lantos’ words, “the kind of people...who carried out the series of bombings of the last few weeks are capable of seeking and using nuclear weapons,” and, in Christopher’s words, because “Groups like Hezbollah that wreak havoc and bloodshed must be defeated. And Hezbollah’s patron, Iran, must be contained.”

The same dynamic was simultaneously playing out away from public view. A memo from the CIA’s counterterrorism center classified as “secret” and dated July 18, 1994 -- the day of the AMIA attack -- asserts that the bombing was “probably staged by Hezbollah.” The agency supported this conclusion with the somewhat circular argument that Hezbollah had “facilitated the destruction of Israel’s Embassy in Buenos Aires in March 1992,” and that the group had made recent threats against Israeli interests in the wake of Dirani’s kidnapping and the attack on the training camp in Lebanon.^{38}

Another “secret” CIA memo dated July 21, 1994 states that “circumstantial evidence of [Hezbollah’s] culpability for the bombing...is surfacing, despite public denials by the group.” The author of the document speculates that Hezbollah’s denials “appear to be politically

---


^{38} DCI Counterterrorist Center, “Counterterrorist Center Commentary: Hizballah Attacks Israel in Buenos Aires?” (Central Intelligence Agency, July 18, 1994); This document is not yet available to the public.
motivated attempts to distance [its] political organization...from its terrorist elements." Yet another “secret” CIA memo dated July 27 -- the day of the second bombing in London -- warned that the series of seemingly-connected attacks “may be part of a coordinated terrorist campaign” by Hezbollah, backed by Iran.  

A State Department cable also marked “secret” and also dated July 27 repeated the CIA’s conclusions in a missive to all the major U.S. diplomatic posts in South America’s Southern Cone sub-region. “With the airplane bombing in Panama and the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in London, there is increasing speculation that the AMIA bombing is part of a wave of Iranian-inspired terrorism targeted at the Mideast peace process,” it read. That same day, at a briefing in Florida organized by the State Department, U.S. officials spent two hours informing Argentine Interior Minister Carlos Ruckauf about U.S. intelligence related to “the AMIA bombing, the 1992 Israeli embassy bombing, [Hezbollah] activities in Latin America, [and Hezbollah’s] ties to Iran.” Although the U.S. officials mentioned that there was “no definitive evidence linking [Hezbollah] to the recent terrorist bombings,” the briefing was nevertheless intended to “prove helpful to [Ruckauf] as he oversees the investigation of the AMIA bombing.”

It is important to reiterate that all of these statements were made within days of the bombing, before any credible forensic evidence had accumulated implicating Iran or Hezbollah in the attacks. This documentary record suggests that U.S. officials were heavily predisposed

---

39 DCI Counterterrorist Center, “Counterterrorist Center Commentary: Update on the Buenos Aires Bombing” (Central Intelligence Agency, July 21, 1994); This document is not yet available to the public.
40 DCI Counterterrorist Center, “Counterterrorist Center Commentary: Possible Hizballah Bombing Campaign” (Central Intelligence Agency, July 27, 1994); This document is not yet available to the public.
41 Multiple authors, “94STATE200603 - Official-Informal” (U.S. Department of State, July 21, 1994); This document is not yet available to the public.
42 Strobe Talbott, “94STATE203682 - Terrorism Briefing for Argentine Interior Minister” (U.S. Department of State, July 29, 1994); Strobe Talbott, “94STATE203689 - Terrorism Briefing for Argentine Interior Minister” (U.S. Department of State, July 29, 1994).
43 Talbott, “94STATE203689 - Terrorism Briefing for Argentine Interior Minister.”
toward blaming Iran and Hezbollah for the AMIA bombing due to pre-existing hostility toward Iran. And while the assumption of Iranian and Hezbollah involvement may appear understandable given the contemporary context, some in the U.S. government were clearly aware of some major flaws in the Iran Theory quite early on.

For example, Ronald Godard, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. embassy in Argentina at the time of the AMIA bombing, sent a cable the day after the incident that pointed out a “fundamental difference” between the 1992 Israeli embassy attack and the more recent bombing. “Whereas the embassy bombing was seen as an attack on a foreign entity, some of whose victims happened to be Argentine, AMIA and DAIA,” the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations, which was housed in the same building as AMIA, “are seen clearly as Argentine organizations,” Godard wrote. “All of the victims of the AMIA attack appear to have been Argentines, regardless of their religion. Some are not Jews. Moreover, the historic origins of AMIA and DAIA in Argentina long predate the creation of Israel.”45 (Years later, Godard would state that the “whole Iran thing seemed kind of flimsy.”)46

Nevertheless, another cable sent on August 29, 1994 makes clear that the United States planned to continue to promote the Iran Theory despite weeks of investigation that had turned up no substantial evidence of that country’s involvement in the AMIA attack. The document, titled “The Iran Connection: Iran Stays in the Dock for the AMIA Bombing,” was somewhat ironically written by James Cheek, the same man who would later declare that “there was never any real evidence” backing the Iran Theory. It reads, in part:

46 Porter, “Bush’s Iran/Argentina Terror Frame-Up.”
The battle for public opinion has been, at its heart, an effort to demonstrate that Iran deserves condemnation for its state-supported terrorism even without hard, physical evidence of its involvement in this specific attack. Effective public counterpunching has offset Iranian protestations of innocence, weak evidence in the AMIA case, and accusations about plots against Iran by U.S. and Israeli intelligence services. Iran has thus been prevented from adopting an appearance of aggrieved innocence even in the absence of direct links between [Iranian government] officials and the terrorist attack…Despite the relatively weak Argentine case against Iran in the AMIA attack and vociferous Iranian denials, a steady campaign to keep Iranian complicity in global terrorism in the public eye has kept the Iranians in the dock where they belong. While they may escape conviction in the AMIA bombing on a technicality, there will remain strong public belief in Iran’s complicity in the barbarous attacks here and elsewhere.47

A few days after Cheek sent this cable, then-U.S. Ambassador at Large for Counterterrorism Philip Wilcox traveled to Argentina, where he voiced similar sentiments both publicly and privately. In public remarks in Buenos Aires, Wilcox said, “We do indeed see a bond among the attacks in Buenos Aires in Panama and in London. We believe there is a growing body of evidence that these criminal acts were carried out by [Hezbollah] terrorists. The [Hezbollah] have organized themselves around the world and these three crimes bear the marks of the [Hezbollah]. With respect to Iran, Iran has been responsible for supporting and sponsoring

many terrorist acts around the world." According to another cable from Cheek, Wilcox told Argentine Vice Foreign Minister Fernando Petrella “that he was in Argentina to reinforce [U.S. government] interest in close cooperation in the hemisphere on combating terrorism…Wilcox said the best approach toward Iran is a policy of isolation and pressure and urged the [Argentine government] to adopt a similar stance.”

It is, of course, possible -- and even likely -- that Wilcox genuinely believed what he told Petrella about Iran. But at the same time, his statements plainly reflected U.S. foreign policy interests. At that time, U.S. policy toward Iran consisted of “dual containment,” described by its architect, national security adviser Martin Indyk, as a strategy that would allow the United States to “counter both the Iraqi and Iranian regimes,” eliminating the “need to depend on one to counter the other.” With respect to Iran, this included “energetically” persuading U.S. partners not to cooperate with Iran on military matters, nor to maintain “normal commercial relations” with the Middle Eastern nation. Argentina had built extensive ties with Iran in the nuclear technology realm stretching back to the 1970s, but this relationship abruptly ended following U.S. pressure in the early 1990s. Encouraging further distancing of Argentina from Iran would help accomplish the second major goal of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran; containing its geopolitical influence. The AMIA attack provided a perfect opportunity to further that end.

However, as noted earlier in this essay, keeping Iran “in the dock” for that country’s alleged sponsorship of international terrorist attacks did not serve as the sole motivation for U.S.

---

51 Ibid.
52 Sheinin, Argentina and the United States, pp. 198-199.
promotion of the Iran Theory. State Department correspondence in the weeks and months after the AMIA attack makes it clear that both everyday Argentine citizens, as well as many U.S. officials, did not feel confident that Argentine institutions were capable of solving the case. This contributed to the sense that the Iran Theory was the only plausible line of investigation, since it was the one favored by U.S. and Israeli intelligence and law enforcement agencies. A cable authored by Cheek on the occasion of the three-month anniversary of the AMIA attack underscores this notion:

Argentines have reverted to their customary pessimism about their justice system and have virtually written off its ability to resolve the AMIA case… Juan Jose Galeano, the federal investigating judge responsible for the case…has held firmly to his original hypothesis that Iranian diplomats helped Hezbollah orchestrate the attack, and he has left the impression that other possible leads are being ignored…While we have privately underlined our belief in the good faith of Galeano and the Argentine government as a whole, there are many outside the country who share the public’s skepticism here either from -- apparently unfounded -- suspicions of some alleged neo-Nazi connection to the attacks or the lingering bad reputation of Argentina’s security forces…Galeano and the police have handled this investigation better than their colleagues dealt with the bombing of Israel’s Buenos Aires embassy in March 1992, but there is a wide margin for improvement. The failures are at root institutional. The resources at Galeano’s disposal are poor. His investigation is understaffed, underfunded and
undertrained. He cannot rely on the consistent cooperation of the Argentine federal police or the State Intelligence Secretariat.\textsuperscript{53}

This lack of faith in the capacity of Argentine institutions to handle the case contributed to the belief that the attack could only be solved with extensive help from the United States. In an earlier cable, Cheek had spelled out in greater detail the systemic problems facing Argentina’s law enforcement and judicial institutions. Noting that the Argentine government was “internally at odds over what measures it should take in response to the probable Iranian complicity in the bombings,” Cheek recommended that the United States “identify areas where the [U.S. government] could provide further assistance, especially in the AMIA case, and express willingness to respond favorably to [Argentine government] requests for help.”\textsuperscript{54} Given the apparent U.S. predisposition toward the Iran Theory, any help the United States provided was sure to prioritize that line of investigation.

\textit{The Iran Theory Takes Root}

No new evidence implicating Iran or Hezbollah in the AMIA bombing emerged over the year following the attack, and Americans’ attention began to shift from international to domestic terrorism following the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City. (Interestingly, most mainstream U.S. media coverage immediately after the attack incorrectly implied that Middle Eastern terrorists were behind the Oklahoma City bombing when


\textsuperscript{54} James Cheek, “94BUENOSAIRES5821 - Scenester for Counter-Terrorism Team Visit to Buenos Aires, September 5-6” (U.S. Department of State, September 1, 1994), https://foia.state.gov/searchapp/DOCUMENTS/Waterfall/190107.pdf.
it was in fact an American right-wing extremist. Nevertheless, in a September 28, 1995 congressional hearing on terrorism in Latin America, U.S. counterterrorism ambassador Wilcox reiterated his previous claims that Hezbollah was behind both the 1992 and 1994 attacks in Buenos Aires.

The hearing ignited some controversy in Argentina, especially due to the allegations leveled by Argentine Jewish community leader Ruben Beraja that his government was dragging its feet on investigating Iran’s potential connection to the attack for fear of inciting further terrorism. The international pressure prompted the Argentine government to make several arrests in connection with the AMIA case, but as Cheek put it in a later cable, these led “almost nowhere.” Subsequently, the judge in charge of the AMIA investigation, Juan José Galeano, began looking more deeply into the possible involvement of current and former members of the Argentine security forces, going so far as to indict several Buenos Aires provincial police officers in July 1996 as “necessary participants” in the attack. By that time, however, yet another major terrorist event had captured U.S. attention.

On June 25, 1996, terrorists killed 19 members of the U.S. military and injured hundreds of other people when they exploded a bomb outside a U.S. Air Force housing complex known as Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. As in the case of the AMIA bombing, U.S. officials publicly and privately linked Iran to the attack.\(^62\) Notably, however, an investigation carried out by Gareth Porter in 2009 found that the FBI inquiry “ignored compelling evidence that Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda -- not Iran-supported Saudi Hezbollah -- planned and executed the bombing,” and that the investigation was “precooked to arrive at the outcome that had been politically determined by the White House.”\(^63\) The Saudi government has accused a Hezbollah suspect as the ringleader of the Khobar Towers bombing, and a U.S. court found Iran responsible for the attack due to the Iranian government’s support for Hezbollah.\(^64\) However, Iran has consistently denied involvement in the Khobar Towers attack, whereas bin Laden claimed his organization actually carried out the operation.\(^65\)

At the time of the Khobar Towers bombing, Argentina remained a key U.S. partner on counterterrorism issues. According an annual report on terrorism sent by Ambassador Cheek to State Department headquarters in November 1996, Argentina had become “one of the biggest recipients of [U.S. government] training in anti-terrorism techniques.”\(^66\) Certain members of the U.S. congress also remained interested in the AMIA case,\(^67\) including the developments

\(^62\) David Pearce, “97ABUDHABI3777 - Thoughts on Iran - the Lion and the Cage” (U.S. Department of State, May 21, 1997), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/97ABUDHABI3777_a.html.


\(^65\) Ibid.; Porter, “Who Bombed Khobar Towers?”


Regarding the potential participation of members of the Buenos Aires police. Additionally, the Argentine government was under increasing pressure, in particular from the country’s Jewish community, to show progress in the case. As ever, the United States was eager to supply information that furthered the Iran Theory. When Argentine authorities requested that the United States provide them with unclassified information on Islamic Jihad for use in their investigation in October 1997, the new U.S. ambassador in Argentina, Manuel Rocha, asked “Washington agencies” to “respond to this request in a timely fashion,” and “provide us with as much unclassified information as possible along the lines requested” by the Argentine government.

In addition to continuing U.S. antagonism toward Iran, this willingness to assist Argentina in pursuing the Iran theory likely stemmed from the generally warm U.S.-Argentine relationship as well as the fear that Argentina could not handle the AMIA investigation on its own. Despite the slow progress of the AMIA inquiry, Argentina’s ties with the United States during this time were as close as they had ever been. President Bill Clinton visited Argentina in October 1997 and in January 1998, he declared the country a “major non-NATO ally.”

Counterterrorism was a key pillar of this tight relationship, as evidenced by the fact that a delegation of U.S. congressional representatives traveled to Argentina in April 1998 “to discuss primarily counterterrorism issues,” according to Rocha.

---

Another top concern for the U.S. government was Argentina’s membership in the Mercosur trading bloc, which opposed the Clinton administration’s efforts to create a “Free Trade Area of the Americas.” Some analysts believed that the United States was offering “gifts” (such as major non-NATO ally status) to Mercosur countries in order to induce them to support the U.S. “free trade” agenda. It is possible that U.S. offers of further cooperation on the AMIA investigation were among these “gifts.”

At the same time as the visit of the congressional delegation to Argentina in April 1998, an FBI team was in Argentina working on the AMIA bombing case. Then-director of the FBI Louis Freeh even made a public visit to Buenos Aires the following month, where he gave what Rocha called “a major speech” on international terrorism. Days after Freeh’s visit, the Argentine government appeared to make a major advancement in the AMIA case. On May 16, 1998, the New York Times reported that Argentina had “arrested eight Iranian residents and ordered the expulsion of seven of Iran’s eight embassy employees.” Citing a press conference given by Argentine foreign minister Guido Di Tella, the newspaper wrote that “Argentina is close to breaking relations with Iran, acknowledging that American and Israeli intelligence officials have been correct for years in asserting that Teheran played a direct role in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy here and the 1994 bombing” of the AMIA building.

---

79 Ibid.
This apparent breakthrough resulted from the testimony of a former Iranian intelligence operative named Abdolghassem Mesbahi. According to Ronen Bergman, Mesbahi was recruited by German intelligence as a double agent in the late 1980s, and “came in from the cold” in 1993 to provide evidence in trials of alleged Iranian operatives accused of engaging in assassinations of dissidents in Europe.\textsuperscript{80} Several press reports in May 1998 indicated that Judge Galeano had traveled to Germany to interview Mesbahi shortly before the announcement of the arrests and the diplomatic expulsions.\textsuperscript{81} Mesbahi reportedly told Galeano that the AMIA bombing had been organized by a longtime leader in the Argentine Muslim community, Mohsen Rabbani, who was serving as a cultural attaché in the Iranian embassy at the time of the attack.\textsuperscript{82} Mesbahi also claimed that the Iranian government had ordered the attack as retaliation for Argentina cutting off nuclear cooperation with Iran under pressure from the United States.\textsuperscript{83}

But, in the words of an FBI agent who attended the 1998 trip to Argentina, Mesbahi was “full of shit.”\textsuperscript{84} For one, it is not clear how Mesbahi would have known much, if anything, about the supposed Iranian AMIA plot, given that he had “come in from the cold” before the attack was carried out. Secondly, Mesbahi’s explanation of motive ran counter to previous assessments that the bombing had been a response to the kidnapping of Dirani and the destruction of a Hezbollah training camp. Further undermining Mesbahi’s credibility, his understanding of the situation regarding Argentine-Iranian nuclear cooperation was not even complete. As Gareth

\textsuperscript{80} Bergman, \textit{The Secret War with Iran}, pp. 133-148.
\textsuperscript{83} Rotella, “Argentine Probe Frays Iran Ties.”
Porter has pointed out, Argentine and Iranian officials continued negotiations on canceled nuclear agreements up to and even after the AMIA attack.\(^\text{85}\)

Galeano had previously accused a number of Iranian diplomatic officials in Argentina of involvement in the bombing based on the testimony of a different Iranian defector. In August 1994, the judge had issued arrest warrants for several Iranian embassy officials after interviewing an ex-Iranian government employee named Monoucher Moatamer, who also implicated Mohsen Rabbani in the attack.\(^\text{86}\) At the time, Cheek wrote in a cable that Moatamer’s “knowledge and reliability regarding the events in [the AMIA] case are questionable,”\(^\text{87}\) and he later stated that the U.S. embassy “finally decided that [Moatamer] wasn’t credible.”\(^\text{88}\) Galeano’s 1994 accusations also came under criticism from “Jewish organizations in Argentina and Iranian and Western diplomats, who characterized the report as ‘flimsy and lacking substance,’” according to the *New York Times*.\(^\text{89}\)

Following the “breakthrough” brought about by Mesbahi’s testimony, Argentine investigators continued to pursue evidence to back up the Iran Theory. In November 1998, a Brazilian citizen named Wilson dos Santos was detained in São Paulo.\(^\text{90}\) Dos Santos had reportedly warned Argentine and Israeli diplomats in Milan about the plan to bomb the AMIA building just over a week before the attack took place, claiming that his girlfriend, an Iranian


citizen named Nasrin Mokhtari, told him about the plot.\textsuperscript{91} But Dos Santos later recanted this testimony and said he had invented the story.\textsuperscript{92} When Mokhtari was arrested and questioned by Argentine authorities in December 1998, she denied any involvement in the bombing.\textsuperscript{93} Somewhat unsurprisingly, Mokhtari was acquitted in February 1999 for lack of evidence linking her to the AMIA attack. Yet Galeano issued an accompanying report that nevertheless strongly implied that Iran and Hezbollah bore responsibility for the bombing.\textsuperscript{94} Despite this flurry of activity, on the occasion of Mokhtari’s release Ambassador Rocha assessed that the “AMIA and Israeli embassy bombing investigations appear to be headed toward closure, with little chance of identifying the responsible parties.”\textsuperscript{95} In a partially redacted section of the same cable, Rocha wrote that some close to the case “are resigned to never being able to find the people responsible for these bombings.”\textsuperscript{96}

Nevertheless, the Argentine government was under pressure to show progress in the investigation, seeing as 1999 was not only a general election year in Argentina, but also the year that would mark the fifth anniversary of the AMIA attack. Shortly before the five-year anniversary, Galeano moved to bring to trial several Argentineans suspected of involvement in the bombing.\textsuperscript{97} In September, just over a month before the elections, the Argentine Supreme Court issued an arrest warrant for Imad Mugniyah, a Hezbollah leader who had been linked to

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
virtually every major attack attributed to the group since the 1980s. According to a report in the leading Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, officials from the U.S. State Department had provided Argentina with a report on Mugniyah shortly before the arrest order was issued.\(^98\) Oddly, however, the warrant for Mugniyah did not mention the Iranian government, and linked him only with the 1992 embassy bombing rather than the 1994 AMIA attack. In another strange twist, the day after the announcement of the issuance of the arrest order for Mugniyah, various Argentine news outlets received and reported on a notice -- later determined to be fake -- purporting to have originated with the Argentine Supreme Court, which stated that the embassy bombing case had been “resolved and clarified.”\(^99\) The timing of these events strongly suggests their impetus was political, rather than evidence-based.

While U.S. officials like Rocha privately admitted that there was little hope of ever finding, much less successfully prosecuting, the actual perpetrators of the 1992 and 1994 bombings, they took a much different tack when speaking publicly. In December 1999, Rocha cabled Washington with suggested language for a speech to be given by the acting Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Peter Romero. Rather than calling attention to the weakness of the evidence in both cases, Rocha suggested Romero mention the recent legal decisions implicating Hezbollah and Mugniyah in the 1992 embassy bombing, and he recommended that Romero characterize the state of the AMIA inquiry in generous terms. “While the investigations into both bombings began slowly, they have now reached the point where certain facts are known,” reads the suggested language.\(^100\)

---


“Certain facts” were indeed known about the AMIA bombing, but the essential theory of Iranian and Hezbollah responsibility for the attack still rested on extremely shaky ground. Aside from a contested claim of responsibility by a suspected Hezbollah front group, the testimony of two Iranian defectors determined not to be credible and circumstantial evidence related to the timing of other terrorist acts alleged sponsored by Iran, few of the known facts lent much credence to the Iran Theory. By this time, however, another possible theory of culpability was garnering increased attention in Argentina. The media dubbed it the *pista siria*, or the “Syria Connection.”

*The Syria Connection: An Alternative to the Iran Theory?*

In February 2000, just two months after Carlos Menem stepped down as president of Argentina, Argentine authorities detained Alberto Jacinto Kanoore Edul, a businessman of Syrian heritage residing in Argentina. Telephone intercepts reportedly showed that, days before the bombing that destroyed the AMIA building, Edul had contacted Carlos Alberto Telleldin, an Argentine of Lebanese descent who owned the “chop shop” that allegedly supplied the vehicle used in the attack. Suspicion fell on Edul because he was close with then-president Menem, whose family hailed from the same region of Syria as Edul’s, and because Edul had ties to Mohsen Rabbani (the cultural attaché in the Iranian embassy who allegedly helped orchestrate the attack), as well as to the notorious Syrian arms trafficker Monzer al-Kassar, who was also linked to Menem.103

---

Like the Iran Theory, much of the evidence for the Syria Connection is speculative and circumstantial. However, the contrast between the U.S. treatment of this theory of culpability and its treatment of the Iran Theory illustrates how political factors unrelated to the strength of the evidence may have influenced U.S. cooperation in the AMIA investigation. Essentially, proponents of the Syria Connection argue that elements of the Syrian government ordered the AMIA attack as retaliation for Menem’s failure to follow through on supposed promises to cooperate with Syria on ballistic missile and nuclear reactor technologies in exchange for contributions to his presidential campaign. In 1988, as a presidential candidate, Menem reportedly traveled to Syria and met with Syrian officials to make that deal. After his election, however, Menem came under heavy pressure from the United States to cancel nuclear cooperation with Syria and to shut down entirely a missile development program known as Condor II. After years of internal wrangling within the Argentine government, the Condor program finally ended in late 1993. This, advocates of the Syria Connection contend, provided the impetus for the AMIA attack several months later.

It should be noted that the Syria Connection and the Iran Theory are not mutually exclusive. Hezbollah received support not only from Iran but also from Syria, both of which appeared to have motive to sponsor an attack against Argentina. However, the Syria Connection shares some of the same logical problems as the Iran Theory.

---

108 Urien Berri, “Irán, Siria Y La AMIA.”
For one, both hypotheses rest largely on the testimony of Iranian defectors of questionable credibility. Shortly following Edul’s arrest in February 2000, evidence for Syria Connection was provided by a supposed defector who claimed to be a former high-ranking Iranian intelligence officer named Ahmad Behbahani. In an interview with 60 Minutes, the man purporting to be Behbahani claimed to have documents proving that Iranian officials planned the AMIA attack, and that Syrian agents in Argentina carried it out.\textsuperscript{109} However, shortly after that interview, the Washington Post revealed that the CIA and FBI had determined the man to be an imposter. Quoting an unnamed U.S. intelligence official, the newspaper reported that the man “lacks basic knowledge of Iran’s intelligence apparatus” and “has been lying about lots of stuff.”\textsuperscript{110}

Also, like the Iran Theory, the Syria Connection relies heavily on weak circumstantial evidence regarding the supposed motive for the AMIA attack. For example, it is not clear why the mere cancelation of nuclear or military technology cooperation would provide sufficient motivation for a government to take such a risky and extreme action as sponsoring a major terrorist attack against Argentina, especially since neither Iran nor Syria were affected in any extraordinary way by those decisions. In fact, as in the Iranian case, negotiations about the canceled Argentine nuclear technology agreements with Syria continued even after the attack.\textsuperscript{111} Moreover, Syria had other means by which it could obtain the desired technology, as the country


had been pursuing extensive nuclear and military cooperation with China for at least three years prior to the AMIA bombing.\textsuperscript{112}

Aside from the weakness of the evidence, there are several political reasons why U.S. officials were disinclined to push for an investigation of the Syria Connection. For one, despite significant domestic opposition, Carlos Menem had aligned Argentina’s foreign policy with that of the United States to such a degree that in November 1993 the \textit{New York Times} described the country as the United States’ “closest ally in South America.”\textsuperscript{113} The United States had little interest in supporting an investigation with the potential to mar the reputation of such a friendly government. Additionally, the U.S. government under President Clinton expended significant energy on supporting peace negotiations between Syria and Israel.\textsuperscript{114} Around the time of the AMIA attack, the talks had stalled, but Israel and the United States were attempting to draw Syria back to the table.\textsuperscript{115} It therefore made little sense to encourage investigations that would implicate Syria in the AMIA bombing, since this could complicate efforts to rekindle the peace talks.

Indeed, when U.S. counterterrorism ambassador Philip Wilcox traveled to Argentina in September of 1994, he commented to Argentine Vice Minister of Foreign Relations Fernando Petrella that the Syrian government had not sponsored acts of international terrorism since the 1980s, and according to Ambassador Cheek’s account, Wilcox “made reference” to the U.S.

interest in the Syrian-Israeli peace talks to Petrella.\textsuperscript{116} A State Department cable from 2007, authored by then-U.S. ambassador in Argentina Anthony Wayne, demonstrates how little attention the United States paid to the Syria Connection in the intervening years. In response to a statement concerning possible Syrian involvement in the AMIA attack from a relative of one of the victims, an FBI representative “discounted a possible Syrian connection to the AMIA bombing, noting that Hezbollah agents who carried out the attack, are financed by Iran, not Syria. The Ambassador acknowledged that individual Syrians may have facilitated the operations, but that it was less likely that Syria or the Syrian-Argentine community was involved in the attack.”\textsuperscript{117}

To be clear, this author does not argue that the Syria Connection merits more or less acceptance than the Iran Theory. The evidence for both is similarly unconvincing. However, the seemingly out-of-hand dismissal of the Syria Connection by U.S. authorities further suggests that geopolitical considerations influenced which investigative avenues the United States was willing to support when it came to the AMIA case.

\textit{The Iran Theory After September 11}

In January 2001, George W. Bush took office as president of the United States at a time of worsening political and economic turmoil in Argentina.\textsuperscript{118} Nevertheless, relations between the two governments remained generally strong, especially with regard to counterterrorism cooperation.\textsuperscript{119} In fact, the day before the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the

\textsuperscript{116} Cheek, “94BUENOSAIRES6058 – Interagency Counter-Terrorist Team Consultations in Buenos Aires – Foreign Minister.”


\textsuperscript{118} Sheinin, \textit{Argentina and the United States}, pp. 209-218.

leading Argentine newspaper La Nación published a report of an interview in which FBI officials named counterterrorism as the agency’s top priority in Argentina.  

Less than a month after the shocking events of September 11, the U.S. House of Representatives held a hearing on the Western Hemisphere’s response to the attacks. In prepared remarks, U.S. counterterrorism ambassador Francis X. Taylor stated that the 1992 and 1994 bombings in Argentina “were characterized by the same faceless cowardice that we saw on September 11,” pointing to Hezbollah as “the prime suspect” in the Argentine attacks. Days after the hearing, the Argentine press reported that authorities were looking into possible links between the AMIA attack and the Al Qaeda organization accused of carrying out the September 11 plot. It is unclear whether this line of investigation was pursued at the urging of U.S. officials, some of whom reportedly believed that Iran provided “vital” support to Al Qaeda. But in any case, nothing ever came of those inquiries.

A more significant development came several weeks later, however, when the Argentine press reported that judge Galeano was preparing to issue arrest warrants for Mohsen Rabbani and two other Iranian officials in connection with the AMIA case. In the months that followed, Galeano struggled to shore up his allegations, as he faced accusations that he had mishandled

---


123 Bergman, The Secret War with Iran, pg. 231.


evidence and helped to facilitate a $400,000 bribe to the “chop shop” owner Telleldin, a key witness in the case. In July of 2002, the *New York Times* reported on a copy of a deposition of Mesbahi that was provided to the newspaper by unnamed “Argentine officials” who were “frustrated that the case remains unsolved.” The *Times* wrote that the document “supports long-held suspicions of Iranian involvement” in the AMIA bombing, adding that Mesbahi had accused former president Menem of accepting a $10 million bribe from the Iranian government in exchange for covering up the involvement of Iranian officials.126 (This bribe was supposedly deposited in a Swiss bank account, but Swiss authorities were not able to uncover any evidence supporting that claim.)127

In late October 2002, Galeano approached the U.S. embassy in Argentina to seek the assistance of the U.S. government in moving forward with his allegations against the Iranian officials. U.S. ambassador James Walsh wrote in a cable a few weeks later that Galeano had “requested close collaboration between the judge and [U.S.] officials knowledgeable about the 1994 case in order to ensure that the resolution and arrest warrants presented are as strong as possible.” Walsh “endorsed a positive and quick response,” recommending that the U.S. government “cooperate further with Judge Galeano along the lines of what the [U.S. government] has now done on two separate occasions in recent years.”128

By this time, U.S. policy with regard to Iran had shifted from the Clinton-era strategy of “dual containment” to a more aggressive posture. In his first state of the union address, President Bush had accused Iran of pursuing “weapons of mass destruction” and “export[ing] terror,” and

---

he claimed the country belonged to an “axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”129 High-level civilian and military officials in the Bush administration had even begun to advocate for facilitating a “regime change” in Iran.130 Allegations of Iranian government involvement in the AMIA attack, however weakly supported, served to provide a justification for this belligerent stance.

Roughly three months after Galeano’s request for assistance from the U.S. embassy, Argentine journalist Raúl Kollman reported on the contents of a report on the AMIA attack that had recently been prepared for Galeano and Argentine President Eduardo Duhalde by the Argentine intelligence service, SIDE, with help from the CIA and Mossad.131 Unsurprisingly, its basic conclusion, according to Kollman, was that Iranian government officials had ordered the attack, which had been carried out by members of Hezbollah cells that had infiltrated Argentina. The report apparently did not mention the group of local policemen then on trial for their alleged involvement in obtaining the vehicle used in the attack, nor did it mention the possibility that extremist right-wing elements of the Argentine security forces had provided the explosives used in the bombing.132

Less than a month after the publication of Kollman’s article, José Barbaccia and Alberto Nisman, the prosecutors working the AMIA case, requested arrest warrants for nearly two-dozen international suspects based on the report compiled by SIDE, the CIA and Mossad.133 Shortly

---

130 Porter, Manufactured Crisis, pp. 135-137.
after this request, Galeano approved arrest warrants for the former cultural attaché Mohsen Rabbani, former Iranian security and intelligence minister Ali Fallahijan, and Iranian foreign ministry officials Barat Ali Balesh Abadi and Ali Akbar Parvaresh.\textsuperscript{134} The day after this decision, U.S. ambassador Walsh appeared to celebrate the developments. In a classified cable, Walsh wrote that “Iranian officials have long been suspected of masterminding the attack on the AMIA community center and the 1992 bombing of the embassy of Israel in Buenos Aires. However, until these latest development, there had been little public evidence of progress in the investigation.”\textsuperscript{135}

Predictably, these events elicited a sharp rebuke from the Iranian government, which threatened to reduce trade and even break diplomatic ties with Argentina, despite Argentine assurances that the judicial actions were not politically motivated.\textsuperscript{136} Nevertheless, Galeano pushed ahead. In early April 2003, the judge assented to the request for arrest warrants for Iranian suspects Hamil Nagashan and Halil Pashi as well as brothers Vahid, Hahssan and Nasser Alahban, all of whom, according to the SIDE report, had been involved in trafficking explosives from Colombia to Venezuela and Brazil and finally into Argentina to be used in the AMIA attack.\textsuperscript{137}

In August 2003, Galeano issued several more arrest warrants for Iranian suspects in the AMIA bombing, including Iranian foreign ministry officials Hossein Ali Tabrizi and Mahmoud

\textsuperscript{135}James Walsh, “03BUENOSAIRES775 – Progress in AMIA Investigation Developments Lead to Stiff Iranian Protest” (U.S. Department of State, March 6, 2003), https://foia.state.gov/searchapp/DOCUMENTS/Waterfall/190775.pdf.
Monzavizadeh; Masoud Amiri, an attaché at the Iranian embassy in Brazil from 1993 to 1997; Seyed Yousef Arabi, who allegedly served as Iran’s top spy in Chile during the early 1990s; Ahmad Alamolhoda, the director of cultural affairs at the Iranian foreign ministry in June 1994; an Iranian diplomat named Saied Baghban; and Ahmad Reza Asghari, a secretary at the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires at the time of the AMIA attack. The most controversial warrant, however, was for Hadi Soleimanpour, who was serving as Iran’s ambassador to Argentina at the time of the AMIA bombing. On August 21, 2003, Soleimanpour was arrested by police in Great Britain, where he was working as a research assistant at the University of Durham.

Soleimanpour’s detention provoked an outcry from the Iranian government, which backed Soleimanpour’s claims that he had nothing to do with the bombing. Soleimanpour was later released, and Galeano’s request for his extradition was denied after a British court found there was insufficient evidence to link him to the AMIA attack.

After the episode with Soleimanpour, the Argentine government appeared to change course with regard to its pursuit of international suspects. This change of course perhaps reflected a realization that the case for the Iran Theory was significantly weaker than it previously seemed, though it is equally plausible that the Argentine government did not want to disrupt a robust trade relationship with Iran. In November 2003 -- the day after Great Britain declined the request to extradite Soleimanpour -- Argentine foreign minister Rafael Bielsa

---


141 According to Argentine foreign relations scholar Juan Gabriel Tokatlian, the more than $400 million worth of products Argentina exported to Iran in 2001 represented 2% of Argentina’s global trade. In 2003, possibly as a result of diplomatic frictions caused by the AMIA case, the value of Argentine exports to Iran fell dramatically to $47 million; See: Tokatlian, “Kirchner, Irán Y La AMIA,” La Nación, December 3, 2006, http://www.lanacion.com.ar/864107-kirchner-iran-y-la-amia.
announced that he would travel to Iran to discuss the AMIA case with officials there, and he
 denied that Argentina blamed Iran for the attack.\textsuperscript{142} (Curiously, around this time, the
 international law enforcement organization INTERPOL issued “wanted” advisories known as
 “red notices” for 12 Iranian suspects in the AMIA bombing at Argentina’s request.\textsuperscript{143}) A month
 later, Galeano was removed from the AMIA case for allegedly facilitating the $400,000 bribe to
 Telleldin, the “chop shop” owner.\textsuperscript{144} Galeano was replaced by Rodolfo Canicoba Corral.\textsuperscript{145}

In May 2004, Argentine President Nestor Kirchner visited Washington, D.C., and in a
speech before an audience of 1,600 representatives of Jewish organizations from 45 countries
around the world, he vowed to find the “truth” about the AMIA bombing.\textsuperscript{146} But as the \textit{New York
Times} wrote later that month, the investigation of the Iran Theory appeared to have fizzled out
and the “trial of those charged with providing the car used in the bombing [was] in danger of
collapsing.”\textsuperscript{147} Yet still, on occasion of the tenth anniversary of the AMIA attack that July,
despite all the indications that the AMIA case would remain unsolved, the U.S. House of
Representatives passed a resolution that urged Argentine authorities to continue their
investigations and “stresse[d] the need for international pressure on Iran and Syria to extradite

\textsuperscript{142} La Nación, “El Canciller Bielsa Dijo Que Viajará a Irán,” \textit{La Nación}, November 13, 2003,
bielsa-dijo-que-no-culpa-a-iran-por-el-ataque-a-la-amia.
\textsuperscript{143} INTERPOL, “Argentinean Red Notices for Iranian Officials Cancelled,” \textit{INTERPOL}, September 27, 2005,
\textsuperscript{144} La Nación, “Apartaron a Galeano de La Causa AMIA,” \textit{La Nación}, December 4, 2003,
\textsuperscript{145} La Nación, “El Sucesor Simpatiza Con El PJ,” \textit{La Nación}, December 4, 2003,
\textsuperscript{146} La Nación, “Kirchner Comienza Hoy Su Tercer Viaje a Los Estados Unidos,” \textit{La Nación}, May 3, 2004,
for trial individuals and government officials accused of planning or perpetrating the AMIA attack.”  

Hopes for a resolution to the AMIA case took another blow in September 2004, when a panel of judges acquitted Telleldin and the local police officers accused of providing the car used in the attack.  U.S. ambassador to Argentina Lino Gutierrez wrote in a cable that the “decision insures that the AMIA saga becomes even more twisted and difficult -- if not impossible -- to resolve.” In a separate cable a few weeks after the decision, Gutierrez assessed that the Kirchner administration would use the discrediting of the Galeano-led investigation as a way to score political points against the Menem government. However, Gutierrez wrote, “What will be more important for [Kirchner’s] administration in the long run is how the government now facilitates and promotes the efforts to identify and prosecute the still-at-large authors and agents of the terrorist attack,” presumably referring to the Iranian and Hezbollah suspects. The ambassador pointed out that victims’ family members and Jewish groups were likely to keep pressure on Kirchner to pursue the Iran and Hezbollah angles, but he also noted that “the investigation was based mostly on circumstantial evidence that required further extensive corroboration.” In conclusion, Gutierrez wrote, “We believe it is very unlikely that, 10 years later, whatever leads remain will yield useful evidence.”

The acknowledgement that the evidence in the AMIA case was largely circumstantial and unlikely to be bolstered by future investigations did not prevent the U.S. government from

---

continuing to support the Iran Theory. In January 2004, the Iranian government had petitioned INTERPOL to rescind the “red notices” issued against Iranian officials in November 2003, basing their request on the apparent mishandling of the investigation by Galeano.\textsuperscript{152} In October 2004, after the ignominious end of the AMIA trial in Argentina, INTERPOL’s Executive Committee voted unanimously to suspend the notices.\textsuperscript{153} Then, in February 2005, Argentine Interior Minister Aníbal Fernández approached the U.S. embassy seeking assistance in getting the “red notices” reinstated. In a March 1, 2005 cable, Ambassador Gutierrez called the notices “substantively and symbolically important,” and “strongly recommend[ed] that [the State] Department coordinate with the [U.S. National Central Bureau of INTERPOL] to engage the Interpol Secretary General’s office at the earliest opportunity to express the [U.S. government’s] strong support for Argentina’s request that the Red Notices be reinstated.”\textsuperscript{154}

The INTERPOL general assembly upheld the decision to cancel the “red notices” in September 2005.\textsuperscript{155} But this seems to have only redoubled the commitment to keeping Iran “in the dock” among proponents of the Iran Theory within the U.S. government. In January 2006, a delegation of staffers from the international affairs committee of the U.S. House of Representatives visited Argentina to express support for the Argentines’ continued focus on the Iran Theory. According to Ambassador Gutierrez’s summary, the staffers “emphasized the importance of close coordination between the Special Investigative Unit” handling the AMIA probe and the U.S. government, which would “allow for timely diplomatic intervention to counter a certain Iranian campaign against reinstatement of the notices.” Gutierrez also opined

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{152}INTERPOL, “Argentinean Red Notices for Iranian Officials Cancelled.”
\item \textsuperscript{153}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{155}INTERPOL, “Argentinean Red Notices for Iranian Officials Cancelled.”
\end{itemize}
that “It was important for the relevant Argentine officials and organizations to see that the U.S. Congress and Executive continue to speak with one voice on this issue, that both branches are still watching developments closely, and that the U.S. remains fully involved and willing to assist in any way possible.”

On October 25, 2006, the prosecutors handling the AMIA case, Marcelo Martinez Burgos and Alberto Nisman, released a rambling 800-page document petitioning judge Rodolfo Canicoba Corral to issue arrest warrants for former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, former Iranian intelligence chief Ali Fallahijan, former Iranian foreign affairs minister Ali Akbar Velayeti, Iranian military officials Mohsen Rezai and Ahmad Vahidi, former Iranian embassy officials Mohsen Rabbani and Ahmad Reza Asghari, and Hezbollah leader Imad Mugniyeh. Despite its extensive length and extraordinary complexity, the report offered little new evidence and differed only slightly from the conclusions about the Iran Theory reached during the investigation led by Galeano. In fact, months earlier, U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission in Argentina Hugo Llorens had commented that the nearly-finalized report “will cover familiar ground…i.e. that the attack was planned and financed by the Government of Iran and carried out with the operational assistance of Hezbollah and local Iranian diplomats.”

The report received brief, but widespread attention in Argentina and around the world, especially given the recent ramping up of the long-time U.S. campaign to prevent Iran from pursuing nuclear technologies. The charge d’affaires at the U.S. embassy in Argentina,

---

159 Michael Matera, “06BUENOSAIRES2423 - AMIA Bombing - Request for an International Arrest Order Against Rafsanjani; Us Expert Mark Jones’ Statements on Argentina 10/26/06; Buenos Aires” (U.S. Department of State,
Michael Matera, wrote that the Argentine government “remained largely silent on the issuance and content of the report,” likely in order to mitigate any damage to that country’s relationship with Iran, which had devolved from a strong trading partnership in the early 2000s into what Matera described as “low level” diplomatic relations.\(^{160}\) Perhaps equally importantly, the report’s numerous flaws in both style and substance were glaringly apparent, and were reported contemporaneously in Argentina and even in some international media outlets.\(^{161}\) Despite this, however, the U.S. government clearly planned to use the burst of publicity for the allegations against Iran to support its geopolitical goals.

In another cable, Matera noted that Canicoba Corral was expected to move ahead with issuing the requested warrants sooner than previously thought. “With events moving quicker than anticipated, Embassy can now more logically approach the [Argentine government] about the government’s anticipated next steps and ways we might be able to coordinate outreach to other governments, and efforts in regional and international fora to bring attention to the warrants and pressure to bear on Iran and Hezbollah,” Matera wrote.\(^{162}\) Journalist Marc Perelman, writing in the Jewish newspaper *The Forward*, reported that the administration of U.S. president George W. Bush was “planning to ratchet up pressure on Tehran at the United Nations by invoking the recent Argentine indictment.” The plan, according to Perelman, was “to highlight Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism to convince reluctant U.N. Security Council members -- first and foremost Russia and China -- that Iran’s nuclear ambitions should be neutralized.”

---

\(^{160}\) Michael Matera, “06BUENOSAIRES2437 - Update on AMIA Indictments” (U.S. Department of State, October 27, 2006), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BUENOSAIRES2437_a.html; Tokatlian, “Kirchner, Irán Y La AMIA.”


Perelman also noted that the charges against Iran could provide a reason for Argentina, which at the time held a rotating seat on the Security Council, to vote for anti-Iran measures supported by the United States.163

Over the coming days, U.S. officials showered praise on their Argentine counterparts for the seeming progress in the case against Iran, and they repeatedly brought up the U.S. government’s willingness to provide further assistance as the process moved forward.164 U.S. diplomatic officials also worked quietly to gain support from international partners with regard to the planned request to have INTERPOL issue “red notices” for the suspects named in Nisman and Burgos’ report.165 Apparently unsure of the level of support for the movement on the “red notices” within the Kirchner administration, U.S. Ambassador to Argentina Anthony Wayne chose not to “outline” these measures in a meeting with the Argentine foreign ministry official in charge of coordinating diplomacy regarding the AMIA case.166 When Ambassador Wayne met with families of the victims of the AMIA attack in December 2006, he “noted the great interest he and the [U.S. government] attached to this case,” but said that the United States “had to be careful to allow Argentina to lead efforts with the case” so as to avoid feeding the perception that

his government sought to “politicize the case as being the United States against Iran.”  

That meeting took place at the same time as another visit to Argentina by a staff delegation from the U.S. House of Representatives, which, in Wayne’s words, “expressed strong U.S. support and interest in the case” to prosecutors Nisman and Burgos, and “urged the prosecutors and the [Argentine government] to be proactive in their dealings with INTERPOL.”

The extent of U.S. assistance to Argentina in the process of seeking the issuance of “red notices” from INTERPOL over the next several months was remarkable. The U.S. embassy in Argentina and the Office of International Affairs at the U.S. Department of Justice helped Nisman craft his request for the “red notices” before it was presented to INTERPOL in January 2007. Both the U.S. Congress and the Executive branch made their support for the issuance of the “red notices” known to INTERPOL Secretary General Ronald Noble, a former high-ranking U.S. law enforcement official who seemed disinclined to support the Argentine petition. And these efforts paid off. Ahead of an INTERPOL Executive Committee meeting in March 2007, the INTERPOL General Counsel made a recommendation in favor of issuing several of the requested “red notices,” though it recommended against issuing notices for former Iranian president Rafsanjani and former foreign minister Velayeti due to issues of diplomatic immunity,

---


and determined that there was not enough evidence to support a recommendation in favor of 
reinstating the “red notice” for Soleimanpour, the former Iranian ambassador to Argentina.¹⁷¹

A week after the INTERPOL General Counsel decision, U.S. Secretary of State 
Condoleezza Rice signed off on a widely-distributed missive that instructed various U.S. 
diplomatic posts to “approach host governments at the highest level to convey U.S. strong 
support in this matter,” clearly demonstrating that the U.S. interest in the issuance of the “red 
notices” was rooted in geopolitical motives. “An Argentine trial and conviction of the individuals 
sought would establish the Iranian regime’s and Hizballah’s role in this attack and underscore 
Tehran’s flagrant violation of international law and callous disregard for the lives of innocent 
U.S. counter terrorism policy objectives by supporting Argentina in its effort to prosecute those 
who it believes were responsible for this act of terror; spotlighting Iran’s role as the leading state 
sponsor of international terrorism; increasing the costs to Tehran for its continued support of 
terrorism; and further exposing Hizballah’s illegitimate, extremist agenda and role in carrying 
out terrorist attacks around the world.”¹⁷²

On March 15, 2007, after significant behind-the-scenes lobbying by U.S. diplomats, the 
INTERPOL Executive Committee announced its endorsement of the proposal to issue “red 
notices” for former Iranian intelligence minister Ali Fallahijan, military officials Mohsen Rezai 
and Ahmad Vahidi, former Iranian embassy cultural attaché Mohsen Rabbani, former secretary 
of the Iranian embassy in Argentina Ahmed Reza Asghari, and suspected Hezbollah leader Imad

¹⁷¹ Hernán Cappiello, “Interpol Recomendó Capturar a Seis Ex Funcionarios de Irán,” La Nación, March 1, 2007, 
http://www.lanacion.com.ar/887642-interpol-recomendo-capturar-a-seis-ex-funcionarios-de-iran; Anthony Wayne, 
“07BUENOSAIRES422 - Supporting the AMIA Terror Investigation at INTERPOL” (U.S. Department of State, 
¹⁷² Condoleezza Rice, “07STATE29082 - Demarche Request - Argentina’s Request for USG Assistance in 
Connection with March 13-15 Interpol Executive Committee Meeting in Lyon, France” (U.S. Department of State, 
Mugniyeh. However, as expected, Iran appealed the decision, which, as U.S. Ambassador Wayne wrote, would “ironically, keep the issue alive in the Argentine press in the run-up to a November INTERPOL General Assembly vote” that would serve as the organization’s final decision on the matter.

As the General Assembly meeting approached, the United States continued to offer considerable support for Argentina’s efforts to get the “red notices” approved. In a highly classified cable sent in early October, Ambassador Wayne even requested the assistance of the State Department and the intelligence community “to track down any evidence of Iran lobbying other countries in the run-up to Marrakech.” At the November 2007 meeting in Morocco, the INTERPOL General Assembly did, in fact, vote to issue the “red notices” for the six suspects named in March. But both the Argentine foreign ministry and the U.S. government agreed, in Wayne’s words, that “additional evidence being developed by AMIA prosecutor Nisman -- and possible additional indictments -- could provide another excellent opportunity to more aggressively push this issue.” And the issue was indeed pursued “aggressively.” In January 2008, Belgian authorities mistakenly arrested an Iranian diplomat thought to be Mohsen Rezai,


A month after Mugniyeh’s killing, in March 2008, FBI assistant director Tom Fuentes traveled to Argentina. According to Ambassador Wayne’s summary of the trip, “Much of Fuentes’ discussions with [Argentine government] officials centered on the November 2007 Interpol General Assembly’s overwhelming support of Argentina’s case against Iranian officials charged in the 1994 AMIA bombing.”\footnote{Anthony Wayne, “08BUENOSAIRES367 - Argentina: FBI’s AD Fuentes Discusses Cooperation with Senior Officials” (U.S. Department of State, March 20, 2008), https://wikileaks.org/plsd/cables/08BUENOSAIRES367_a.html.} The visit was part of a strategy of “getting past square one” with the newly installed government of Argentine President Cristina Kirchner, the wife of former president Nestor Kirchner, who had taken over the office from her husband the previous December. A secret cable sent in February 2008 by the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. embassy in Argentina, Tom Kelly, recommended “senior-level visits…to advance U.S. interests in intensified counter-terrorism work, and to resume our valuable partnership with the [Argentine government] to bring the Iranian-sponsored perpetrators of the 1994 AMIA bombing to justice.”\footnote{Tom Kelly, “08BUENOSAIRES235 - Argentina: Getting Past Square One with the Fernandez De Kirchner Government” (U.S. Department of State, February 26, 2008), https://wikileaks.org/plsd/cables/08BUENOSAIRES235_a.html.}

In late May 2008, FBI Deputy Director John Pistole arrived in Argentina for another such visit. His trip, however, was complicated by the fact that Nisman chose the occasion to publicly announce a request for arrest warrants against former Argentine President Menem, former AMIA judge Galeano and others for their alleged roles in covering up the “local connection” to the
The prosecutor had given no hint of his plans to the U.S. embassy, and officials suspected his choice of timing “was driven more by domestic politics than by significant new developments in the case.”

This caused consternation at the embassy. Ambassador Wayne noted that “officers have for the past two years recommended to Nisman that he focus on the perpetrators of the terrorist attack and not on the possible mishandling of the first investigation.” Nisman apologized, but in a separate cable, Wayne wrote that Nisman’s “vigorous defense of his actions rings hollow given that there was no overriding urgency to go public with his findings.” In discussions with President Kirchner and other high-level Argentine officials, Pistole stressed the threat posed by Islamist terrorism and focused on the Argentines’ pursuit of the Iran angle of the investigation, but he did not mention the “local connection.”

Given the amount of effort the United States had put into securing the issuance of “red notices” against the Iranian officials and Mugniyeh, the concern about Nisman’s apparent politicization of the AMIA case is understandable. The previous investigation, headed by Galeano, had fallen apart after the failure to successfully prosecute suspects linked to the “local connection.” However, the episode with Nisman’s suspiciously-timed announcement of arrest warrants for local suspects suggests that the United States had relatively little interest in helping

---

Argentina carry out a thorough investigation of every possible angle. Rather, U.S. interest in the AMIA case appears to have been limited to keeping Iran “in the dock” for the bombing.

The Iran Theory in the Obama Era

During the U.S. presidential campaign of 2007 and 2008, then-candidate Barack Obama made clear that he intended to adhere to the long-time pillars of U.S. policy toward Iran, namely, preventing the country from obtaining nuclear technologies and containing the “threat” it posed to “stability” in the Middle East.187 He did, however, indicate a willingness to break from the Bush administration’s policy of refusing to negotiate with Iranian government officials.188 When Obama won the 2008 election and assumed the presidency in 2009, he seemed intent on following through on those promises, and the importance of the AMIA issue -- at least in the executive branch -- appeared to wane. In fact, a cable sent by the new Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, three days after she took office asked extensive questions about Iranian activities in Latin America, including whether Iran supported terrorism in the region, but it did not mention the AMIA bombing.189

Early in the Obama administration, the AMIA attack did come up periodically, but in most cases, the U.S. response to opportunities to link Iran to the bombing was much less aggressive than it had been during the Bush years. For example, Nisman traveled to the Washington in June 2009, where he attended a seminar on terrorism and declared that “it’s up to the international community to demand Iran to hand over the terrorists” responsible for the

bombing. The administration made little effort to publicize Nisman’s trip, and seems to have paid relatively little attention to a new accusation made by Nisman that a Colombian national known as Samuel El Reda, suspected of being one of the top Hezbollah operatives in Latin America, had participated in the AMIA attack.

In August 2009, the Argentine government denounced Iran’s decision to name one of the AMIA suspects, Ahmad Vahidi, as Defense Minister, just a month after the fifteenth anniversary of the attack. The U.S. embassy noted the condemnation “deserves recognition,” but did not recommend further action by the U.S. government. When U.S. Treasury Department official David Cohen traveled to Argentina in October, he met with Nisman and promised to “follow up” with German and French counterparts on Nisman’s earlier requests for those countries to freeze several bank accounts that he claimed held $48 million associated with the AMIA attack. Notably, in March 2010, INTERPOL hosted a meeting between Argentine and Iranian officials to try to resolve lingering disagreements over the AMIA case. The United States did not publicly oppose the meeting, and the White House even hosted a visit by Nisman later that month as a show of support for his government’s ongoing efforts in the case.

---

Things began to change, however, in 2011, after the opposition Republican Party took control of the U.S. House of Representatives.\textsuperscript{196} In March of that year, Argentine journalist Pepe Eliaschev wrote an article for Clarín accusing the Cristina Kirchner government of trying to help Iran cover up its role in the AMIA attack in exchange for closer economic relations between the two countries.\textsuperscript{197} Then, in June, the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence held a hearing entitled “Hezbollah in Latin America – Implications for U.S. Homeland Security.” Participants in the hearing repeatedly raised the issue of the AMIA attack, which they accused Iran of orchestrating, and speculated that leftist governments in Latin America were cooperating with Iran in order to allow terrorist activity within their borders.\textsuperscript{198} Republican representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Connie Mack and David Rivera went so far as to send a letter to Secretary of State Clinton expressing their concern over questionable reports that Argentina was helping Iran with nuclear technology. The letter forced the State Department statement to issue a response informing that the United States had “no evidence to support the claim that Venezuela serves as an interlocutor between Iran and Argentina on nuclear issues, nor that Argentina is granting Iran access to its nuclear technology.”\textsuperscript{199}

Feeding such conspiracy theories, Argentine Foreign Minister Timerman made an announcement in July 2011 around the anniversary of the AMIA attack that Iran had agreed to

cooperate with Argentina in the investigation. immediately, a number of prominent commentators who opposed a U.S.-Iran rapprochement denounced the agreement, including Roger Noriega, the former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs under President George W. Bush. In the voluminous editorializing in opposition to the Argentina-Iran agreement, no doubts were raised about the strength of the evidence pointing to Iranian involvement in the AMIA bombing. Instead, Noriega -- who had also served as a witness at the June congressional hearing -- wrote that “Argentine and U.S. authorities have concluded that” the AMIA attack was “the work of a Hezbollah cell coordinated and supported by the Iranian embassy,” citing the “red notices” against Rabbani and Vahidi as proof. He also implied that Argentina might have been secretly helping Iran with its “nuclear program.”

All this fueled further speculation about Iranian activities in Latin America in the coming months. In September 2011, the hawkish U.S. congresswoman and Republican presidential candidate Michele Bachmann claimed Cuba was hosting Hezbollah training camps and weapons storage sites. (This information appears to have originated with the Israeli intelligence services.) The following month, the conservative American Enterprise Institute released a report titled “The mounting Hezbollah Threat in Latin America,” co-authored by Noriega and another former senior official in the Bush administration, José R. Cárdenas. It describes Rabbani

202 Noriega, “Argentina’s Secret Deal With Iran?”
as the “mastermind behind the two notorious terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in Buenos Aires, and alleges that he “oversees a...Hezbollah recruitment network” operating in South America. In December, unnamed U.S. and European “diplomatic sources” told the Reuters news agency about their growing concerns over the relationship between Argentina and Iran. “As the rest of us work to pressure Iran to end its nuclear weapons program and stop supporting terrorism, Argentina’s government has been considering moving in the opposite direction,” said one anonymous official.

Such accusations were not only based on extremely thin evidence and heavy doses of speculation, but they also had the potential to damage U.S. efforts to engage in negotiations with Iran about its nuclear program. Indeed, it is likely that this was, at least in part, the intention of the aforementioned congressional hearings and think tank reports. For those who opposed the Obama administration’s goal of negotiating with Iran on nuclear issues, linking Iran to the AMIA attack provided part of the justification for opposing such negotiations -- just as it had helped justify the policies of “dual containment” and “regime change” espoused during the two previous presidential administrations. (It also bolstered the accusations by Obama’s political opponents that he was open to negotiating with “terrorists.”)

In March 2012, Vice President Joe Biden pushed back against recent claims by opponents of rapprochement with Iran when he publicly denied that Iran posed a threat to the U.S. due to its outreach to leftist governments in Latin America. And in late July, the State Department issued its annual Country Reports on Terrorism, which found “no known operational cells of

---

either al-Qa’ida or Hizballah in the hemisphere, although ideological sympathizers in South America and the Caribbean continued to provide financial and ideological support to those and other terrorist groups in the Middle East and South Asia.” Notably, however, no high-level Obama administration officials ever questioned the validity of the Iran Theory.

By late 2012, the AMIA case had become heavily politicized in both Argentina and the United States. In September, the Kirchner government reiterated its intention to open a dialogue with Iran aimed at clearing up unresolved issues related to the AMIA attack. The announcement raised the ire of the Israeli government and Jewish groups. (On the other hand, some of Kirchner’s staunchest supporters were accusing Nisman of taking “orders from the U.S. embassy in Buenos Aires not to investigate any other hypothesis” than the Iran Theory.) In January 2013, Argentina and Iran jointly announced that the two countries had agreed work together to solve the AMIA case. Critics of this deal would go on to claim that the agreement was the result of a secret promise by the Kirchner administration to cover up Iran’s responsibility for the AMIA bombing in exchange for closer economic ties. An analysis of trade data, however, suggests that no such pact was ever realized.

---


Also in late 2012, Nisman began to receive large, unexplained deposits in a New York bank account that he had secretly maintained for several years.  

Financial investigators would later speculate that the suspicious deposits may have originated from a group of politically-active U.S.-based investors who were in the process of waging a multi-million dollar campaign to paint Argentina in a negative light as part of their effort to win a legal case involving a dispute over Argentina’s sovereign debt. One element of this lobbying operation was an ad campaign portraying Argentina’s negotiations with Iran over the AMIA case as a “pact with the devil.”

The same investors backing those efforts also made substantial campaign donations to members of the U.S. congress who were most vocal in their support for the Iran Theory. It is highly likely that the millions of dollars spent on this lobbying operation contributed substantially to the resurgence of the Iran Theory.

In May 2013, after receiving more than $300,000 in questionable deposits to his bank account, Nisman made a filing with the Argentine attorney general’s office reiterating the charges made in his 2006 request for the arrest warrants for Mugniyeh and the Iranian officials, and accusing Iran of having set up a network of spies and terrorist operators across Latin America. Shortly thereafter, members of the U.S House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security invited Nisman to testify at a hearing in Washington titled “Threat to the Homeland: Iran’s Extending Influence in the Western Hemisphere,” but the Argentine

---

216 Ibid.
government prevented Nisman from attending.\textsuperscript{221} The hearing was an attempt by anti-Iran members of congress to push back against the State Department’s consistent finding that Iran’s activities in Latin America did not involve support for terrorist operations.\textsuperscript{222} Representatives on the House Foreign Affairs Committee held another hearing a few weeks later entitled “Examining the State Department’s Report on Iranian Presence in the Western Hemisphere 19 Years after the AMIA Attack,” which was explicitly intended to counter the State Department’s messaging by bringing up Iran’s supposed involvement in the AMIA attack.\textsuperscript{223}

Just days after the latter hearing, Hassan Rouhani took office as Iran’s new president.\textsuperscript{224} By this time, the Obama administration’s negotiations with the Iranian government over its nuclear program had been underway for months, and they would accelerate over the next two years, despite significant opposition from pro-Israel lobby groups and many hawkish members of congress.\textsuperscript{225} As the negotiators neared a final agreement, the issue of Iran’s alleged involvement in the AMIA bombing receded into the background of much more prominent debates about the


details of the final accord, which was announced on July 14, 2015 -- days before the 21st anniversary of the AMIA attack.226

By the time the Iran deal was reached, the long-running AMIA saga had experienced a new twist. On January 18, 2015, Nisman was found dead in the bathroom of his apartment, apparently killed by a single gunshot wound to his right temple.227 Days earlier, he had announced plans to file criminal charges against President Kirchner and members of her administration in connection with the 2013 agreement with Iran regarding the AMIA case, claiming that the deal was an illegal pact to whitewash the involvement of Iranian officials in the attack in exchange for closer economic ties.228 (Argentine courts have since struck down both the 2013 agreement and Nisman’s charges.)229

The timing of Nisman’s death predictably set off a firestorm of theorizing about who might have wanted him dead, or why he might have committed suicide. As of this writing, however, the official investigation is still ongoing.

Conclusion

Nisman’s death, combined with the conclusion of the nuclear negotiations with Iran, appears to signal the decline of the use of the Iran Theory as a political tool in the United States, though it will undoubtedly remain the most widely accepted theory of culpability for the AMIA attack. However, aside from the Iran Theory and the Syria Connection, there exists a third -- and

in this author’s opinion, more believable -- line of conjecture regarding the perpetrators and motive behind the AMIA attack. During the course of the extensive research carried out for this paper, the author was told in numerous off-the-record conversations by various well-informed sources that the most likely culprits were anti-Semitic elements of the Argentine security and intelligence services, who had demonstrated their capacity for committing violence on numerous recent occasions in what were known as the “carapintada” uprisings. Journalists Roberto Caballero and Gustavo Cirelli lay out much of the most convincing evidence for this theory in the book AMIA: La Verdad Imposible. But ultimately, like the Iran Theory and the Syria Connection, the forensic substantiation of this hypothesis remains unsatisfactory.

Still, even if the Iran Theory happens to be accurate, the central point of this essay remains valid. U.S. officials consistently used the limited evidence of Iranian involvement in the AMIA attack to keep that country “in the dock” because they believed that linking the Iranian government to terrorist acts would make it easier to achieve political goals with regard to U.S. foreign policy toward Iran. Legitimate questions about the strength of the evidence supporting the Iran Theory were set aside due to the political expediency of the accusations, and avenues of investigation that deserved serious attention were left largely unexamined. Perhaps the most disturbing implication of the argument presented here is that this phenomenon has been echoed in other cases, such as the bombing of Khobar Towers.

In addition to demonstrating how easily terrorism investigations can become politicized in both the domestic and international arena, the AMIA saga also highlights the necessity of closely and critically examining such cases. If scholars and policy makers want to accurately understand history, engaging in rigorous analysis of primary source documents like the ones

---

cited here should be the first step. Current public discourse and scholarship treats Iranian responsibility for the AMIA attack as virtually an unquestioned fact. But as this essay has demonstrated, a thorough consideration of the available evidence shows that the Iran Theory is substantially less robust than it has been made to seem.

Given the increasing frequency and deadliness of terrorist incidents around the world in recent years, the subjects discussed here unfortunately appear likely to assume greater relevance in the near future. Rather than proposing generalized theories, this essay aimed to present a useful analysis of a single example that can perhaps provide a model for studying other cases in which the United States has provided support to foreign investigators working on terrorism cases. The author hopes that a larger body of such case studies will eventually contribute to the development of broader theories about these little-studied themes of international relations. Considering the central role the United States plays in global counterterrorism operations and investigations of suspected incidents of terrorism, the lessons of the AMIA case should be kept in mind going forward.

---


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Charbonneau, Louis. “Exclusive: Argentina Flirts with Iran as West Watches Nervously.”
idUSTRE7B408T20111205.


