

Seven Years and Counting The 1992 Israeli Embassy Bombing in Buenos Aires

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March, 1999

March 17, 1999, marks the seventh anniversary of the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This devastating bombing, which brought Middle Eastern terrorism to South America, remains unsolved to this day. The investigation has seen no positive progress for the past seven years, and not a single person has been identified as responsible.

At times, the Argentine Supreme Court sought to blame Iran or Iranian backed terrorists for the bombing. At other times members of the court actively pursued theories that the Israelis themselves were responsible. In either case, the investigation has rarely focused on the involvement of local individuals and there have been many threats to close the investigation without its being fully resolved. Only when those responsible are brought to justice can this case truly be considered closed.

Background

The Israeli Embassy in Argentina was destroyed by an apparent car bomb on March 17, 1992, killing 29 people and injuring some 250 others. Among those killed were Israeli diplomats and embassy staff members, clergy and worshippers in a church across the street, children in a nearby school, and passersby in the street.

Under Argentina's system of judicial investigation "a system common to many countries in Latin America and Europe" judges investigate and bring cases before the court. In spite of the large number of non-diplomatic deaths and injuries in the case, the Argentine constitution requires that investigations into attacks on diplomatic missions be carried out by the Supreme Court.

The investigation was headed by then Chief Justice Ricardo Levene, who allowed the case to languish. Very little action was taken by the court until another, more devastating attack took place two years later. On July 18, 1994, the AMIA Jewish community center building was destroyed in a similar bombing, killing 87 people and injuring more than a hundred others.

The AMIA investigation was placed in the hands of Judge Juan Jose Galeano, widely considered to be an independent and competent investigator. Though there are thought to be many connections between the two cases, Judge Galeano is concentrating only on the AMIA bombing; the Supreme Court has maintained its jurisdiction over the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing.

The Early Response

In January of 1994, several months before the AMIA bombing, a group of six Lebanese and one Brazilian were arrested in Paraguay and questioned concerning illegal arms trafficking. Argentina requested extradition of the group, who were allegedly building an arms cache on an Island in the Tigre Delta owned by a former military intelligence officer named Alejandro Sucksdorf.

On July 25, 1994 (one week after the AMIA bombing) this group was extradited to Argentina. The government

Two days later, the group was released. Judges cited a lack of evidence to hold them and they were set free. The case continued to languish until Justice Levene retired in late 1995, and the investigation became the responsibility of the entire court effectively becoming no individual judge's responsibility and remaining all but dormant.

Blaming the Victims

The case became a bit more active in the fall of 1996 as the Argentine National Academy of Engineers issued a report concluding that the bomb exploded inside the embassy. Previous reports from Argentine security forces had concluded that the explosion was caused by a car bomb, but the Supreme Court seized upon the engineers' report and began calling witnesses to corroborate the theory.

Jewish groups in Argentina blamed the "internal explosion theory" on anti-Semitism. They insisted that the engineers' report did not take into account important evidence from the scene such as a nine-foot-long crater outside the building as well as pieces of a Ford truck found inside. Reports that the front door of the building was blown completely through to the back were ignored in favor of the computer modeling carried out by the engineers. The fact that Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the bombing shortly after the attack was ignored in favor of theories that an arms cache in the basement of the embassy exploded or that the attack was carried out by Jewish extremists seeking to thwart the peace process.

Supreme Court Justices Adolfo Vázquez and Carlos Fayt led efforts to steer the court in the direction of Israeli culpability in the bombing. Fayt and Vázquez began investigating why certain Israeli diplomatic officials were leaving Argentina the night of the explosion. They sought information on embassy security including the movements of personnel and the duty shifts of the guards on the day of the attack. They even took testimony from truck drivers who delivered construction materials to the embassy on the theory that the explosives may have been hidden in a box of tiles.

Another Supreme Court Justice, Gustavo Bossert, fought this theory and appealed to Chief Justice Julio Nazareno to have it excluded. Bossert was appalled by the insinuation that the victims might be responsible and related it to another painful period in Argentina's past "when the official versions said that those kidnapped and disappeared by the illegal repression were victims of their own companions."

Israeli Ambassador Yitzhak Aviran repeatedly criticized the Argentine Supreme Court for its inaction and for the investigative path it had chosen. He expressed dismay that he learned of this new area of investigation from press reports and not directly from the courts, and he asked that one judge be given responsibility for the investigation instead of allowing the case to wallow under the general responsibility of the Supreme Court. He summed up his criticisms of the lack of progress with the statement "When you look for the truth, you always find it."

By the fifth anniversary of the bombing "March 17, 1997" the court had amassed some 9,000 pages of documents in their investigation, but had yet to arrest or even name a specific individual responsible for the attack. Argentine Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella joined Israeli Ambassador Aviran in calling for a single judge to investigate, but was criticized by the court for interfering.

The issue devolved into a quarrel between Justices Bossert and Vázquez over whether the "internal explosion" theory should be pursued by the court. Vázquez insisted that no theories should be ignored, and one newspaper editorial of the time mocked his position by noting that the possibility of an internal explosion existed but that it was on par with the possibility of the explosion having been caused by a falling object from outer space.

In May of 1997, after a marathon twelve-hour court session to evaluate the case, Judge Fayt cited the lack of results and lack of new evidence in the case as a reason why the case should be closed. Jewish groups in Argentina as well as international organizations such as B'nai B'rith, protested the idea of closing the investigation. The case remained officially open, but in actuality remained dormant. The flurry of activity over the previous eight months resulted in no net advances other than exposing some of the biases and prejudices that

discussed the issue with President Menem. A visit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation followed in April of 1998 to evaluate the Argentine investigation and offer technical suggestions, but this visit concentrated on the 1994 AMIA bombing and largely ignored the Israeli Embassy bombing.

Recent Activity

Another small flurry of activity occurred in May 1998, shortly after the sixth anniversary of the embassy bombing. The Argentine government announced that it had convincing proof that Iran was involved in the embassy bombing and expelled seven officials of the Iranian embassy, leaving only one diplomat to remain as the official Iranian presence.

The actions followed the detention in Germany of former Iranian security officer Moshen Rabbani, who served as Cultural Attache in the Iranian Embassy in Argentina until December of 1997. Rabbani "who was held in "protective custody" by Germany" was alleged to have helped plan the bombings with the assistance of local police officers and four Iranian spies who came into Argentina from the notorious Paraguayan border town of Ciudad del Este'long considered to be a center of Hezbollah activity for the entire region.

The Argentine government reportedly had intercepted telephone conversations from the Iranian Embassy and had obtained corroborative testimony from Ismanian Khosrow, one of the Iranians detained in Argentina. There were high hopes of a breakthrough in the case; unfortunately, no progress followed this activity, and no action has been seen in pursuing the local connection reportedly uncovered at the time.

Recent months have seen more activity toward greater security against terrorism, if not actual progress in the case. Argentina hosted the Inter-American Conference on Terrorism, sponsored by the Organization of American States in November of 1998. Interior Ministers from around the continent gathered to discuss expanding a terrorism database, standardizing extradition rules, and the creation of an Inter-American panel to confront terrorism. The meeting also explored the possibility of expelling suspected terrorists from the continent in an effort to limit the ability to act in the region.

There have also been a number of arrests in the region that, though heartening, did not necessarily provide specific progress in this case. Brazilian authorities arrested Wilson Dos Santos, a Brazilian citizen who tried to warn Argentine authorities of an impending bombing in 1994'which later turned out to be the AMIA Jewish community center. He reportedly learned of the bombings from Nahrin Mokhtari, who discussed her role in the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing with Dos Santos.

Mokhtari was arrested upon arrival at Argentina's Ezeiza international airport in December of 1998 and was interrogated nine times by the Special Secretary of the Supreme Court. The Court soon released her based upon Dos Santos retraction of his earlier claims that Mokhtari was involved in the bombings, in spite of the fact that the justices had not yet received all of Dos Santos' testimony taken by authorities in Brazil. In addition, the Court was swayed by the fact that Mokhtari's neighbor provided an alibi for the time of the Israeli Embassy bombing itself, as well as the fact that she was not even in Argentina during 1994 when the AMIA bombing took place.

Even more recently, weeks before the seventh anniversary of the bombing, the Argentine press began to circulate new rumors of the closing of the investigation. Israeli Ambassador Yitzhak Aviran reportedly visited with Supreme Court justices to discuss the case, though there was unconfirmed speculation that he was requesting that the case remain open.

Argentine Government Response

The response by the Argentine government when this bombing or the AMIA bombing is raised usually consists of a combination of sympathy and frustration. Generally, most high level officials in the Menem government express true sympathy for the victims of the bombing. They express the sense in Argentina that the bombings, particularly the AMIA bombing, were attacks on Argentina and not merely attacks on the Jewish community.

the hands of the independent judiciary branch the AMIA bombing being investigated by Judge Galeano and the Israeli Embassy bombing falling under the auspices of the Supreme Court. While there may be no specific constitutional actions that government officials can take to advance the investigations, some members of the government "such as Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella and Supreme Court Justice Gustavo Bossert" have demonstrated that they do have a voice and that they can advocate loudly in favor of more effective action in these cases.

The Argentine government often seems intent upon blaming the bombing on Iran or Iranian backed terrorists as a solution to the case. While there is no reason to criticize the presentation of evidence implicating Iran in international terrorism, fingering Iran should not be used as a substitute for ignoring the important local aspects of the crime. Information continually points to involvement by corrupt police officers and other local elements, and these individuals must be pursued as well.

The Argentine government often responds to criticism of their handling of these terrorist bombings by listing the positive aspects of their relationship with the Jewish community and with Israel. They note, correctly, that there are several high-ranking Jewish officials in the Menem government, including cabinet level ministers and undersecretaries. They also point out that President Menem was the first Argentine president to visit Israel, and that Israeli-Argentine relations have improved even through the lack of progress in the investigation. Israeli officials confirm that the relationship is very good, and some point to the "shared intimacy" that this bombing created between the two countries. It is unfortunate that these positive achievements are overshadowed by the lack of resolution of these horrible crimes.

Embassy Memorial

Amid the recent activities surrounding the case, the Jewish community in Argentina is planning a memorial on the site of the bombing. Following the disaster, the Israeli Embassy was relocated to an office in a larger, higher security building and the lot where the building once stood has remained empty.

B'nai B'rith in Argentina is working with other local Jewish organizations to build a memorial on the site, which will be dedicated later this year. The specific plans for the memorial should be announced later this month, and construction is scheduled to begin soon after that.

Conclusion

After seven years, the investigation of the bombing of the Israeli Embassy does not seem to have made any progress. After attempts to ignore or close the investigation "and even to blame the victims themselves" the case can only be described as at a standstill. The limited steps that have been taken, even in recent months, demonstrate that there are still significant questions for investigators to pursue. In the interests of justice for the victims and their families, as well as for the Argentine people, the investigation should be pursued and completed.

B'nai B'rith International and other Jewish organizations will continue to press the Argentine government to address the Israeli Embassy and AMIA bombings in Buenos Aires. The government of Argentina should conduct politically unfettered investigations; the culprits "both local and international" should be identified and tried; and the government work to improve the safety and security of the Jewish community in Argentina.



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