

Iranian and Hezbollah Operations in South America Then and Now

BY MATTHEW LEVITT

Since at least the early 1980s, Iran has operated an intelligence network in Latin America – Hezbollah soon followed suit. Iran and Hezbollah leveraged support from these networks to carry out the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Despite the public exposure of Iranian and Hezbollah operatives in this deadly attack, both continue to develop intelligence and logistical support networks in the region without restraint. While the initial investigation into the AMIA bombing suffered from corruption and mismanagement, it was rejuvenated with the appointment of special prosecutors Marcelo Burgos and Alberto Nisman, who reinvestigated the case from the very beginning (Burgos would later leave this office, but Nisman would stay on until his untimely death in January 2015). In addition to identifying key new suspects and gathering evidence that firmly placed Iran and Hezbollah behind the bombing, the office of the special prosecutor uncovered evidence of Iranian efforts to “export the revolution” across South America.

Tensions over the AMIA bombing and the indictment of senior Iranian officials for their roles in the attack resulted in poor diplomatic relations between Argentina and Iran for many years. Then, in 2007, Argentine representatives suddenly ceased their years-long policy of walking out of UN meetings whenever an Iranian official spoke. Despite the standing Argentinean indictments of Iranian officials, Argentina and Iran agreed in 2011 to form a “truth commission” to jointly investigate the 1994 bombing. The merits of this “partnership” were questionable from the outset, but were cast into severe doubt with Nisman’s mysterious death in 2015. Nisman filed charges that the Argentinean administration, specifically President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman, planned a cover-up of Iran and Hezbollah’s role in the AMIA bombing in exchange for a political deal between the government of Iran and Argentina. The day before Nisman was due to present his case to the Argentine parliament, he was found dead in his apartment. Despite his tragic and untimely death, the work Nisman and his team had already

Dr. Matthew Levitt is a Fromer-Wexler Fellow and the Director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

conducted exposed not only the circumstances behind the AMIA attack, but Iran's ongoing intelligence operations in South America – and at a time when Hezbollah's activities in the region are on the rise. This article will explore the origins of Iranian and Hezbollah presence in Latin America, which dates back to the 1980s, and examine their continued and growing influence today.

Iran and Hezbollah Arrive in South America

Throughout the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) large numbers of Lebanese immigrants arrived in South America. Hezbollah and Iran both exploited this refugee migration by planting numerous agents and recruiting sympathizers among Arab and Muslim immigrants on the continent. Their efforts led to the establishment of formal terrorist cells throughout the region, which ultimately enabled them to carry out several deadly terror attacks in Argentina in the 1990s.¹

One notable Iranian operative who immigrated to South America in the 1980s was Mohsen Rabbani. Rabbani arrived in Argentina on a tourist visa in 1983 and permanently settled in Buenos Aires. In spite of his status as a tourist, he initially served as a representative of the Iranian Ministry of Meats.² After arriving in the country, however, Rabbani began teaching religion and became heavily involved with the at-Tauhid mosque. He reportedly maintained ties with the Iranian government by serving as a member of the Islamic Propaganda Organization, which was charged with identifying groups and individuals that sympathized with the "envisaged terrorist activities."³ Rabbani eventually assumed leadership of the at-Tauhid mosque and began to search for potential targets for Iranian-backed terror

attacks. During later testimony, three of Rabbani's students at the at-Tauhid mosque remarked that he had told them in 1990 to "export the revolution, and that 'we are all Hezbollah.'"⁴

That planning ultimately led to the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires on March 17, 1992, when a Ford F-100 panel van filled with explosives drove onto the sidewalk in front of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and exploded, destroying much of the embassy compound, killing 23 people, and wounding 242.⁵

Ironically, only a week prior to the attack, Yaacov Perry, then director of the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), visited Argentina and discussed "the menace posed by terrorists" with intelligence counterparts. Within the week, Israeli intelligence teams, assisted by American and Argentine teams, proceeded to Buenos Aires in order to investigate this new terror attack.⁶

Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO) declared responsibility and released surveillance video supporting their claim.⁷ While the operation had been in the planning stages for some time, Hezbollah was apparently intent on avenging deaths of their leader Abbas al-Musawi and his five-year-old son Hussein – who were killed in an Israeli airstrike on February 16, 1992 – beyond Lebanon's borders. The emerging Israeli embassy operation provided them with the opportunity to do so. Only eight days after the assassination, the group purchased the vehicle that would be used in the bombing – three weeks later, the embassy was in ruins.⁸

The operation occurred quickly, but was facilitated by Iranian plans to carry out an operation in Argentina well before al-Musawi was killed. The year before al-Musawi's death,

Argentina suspended shipments of nuclear material to Iran due to “concrete indications that Iran had non-peaceful plans for its nuclear capacities.”⁹ According to Nisman, the al-Musawi assassination was used by Hezbollah to justify the embassy bombing to its supporters, but the attack was carried out at the behest of Tehran in response to Argentina’s suspension of nuclear cooperation with Iran.¹⁰

The Argentine Supreme Court investigation into the embassy bombing identified IJO chief Imad Mughniyeh as “one of the persons that was responsible for the attack.”¹¹ American intelligence concurred with this finding. The key piece of evidence was handwriting on the paperwork for the purchase of the truck used in the attack that matched with that of known Hezbollah operatives. As further proof, Argentine investigators eventually released communication intercepts captured in the wake of the embassy bombing that included a conversation between Tehran and the Iranian embassy in Moscow alluding to a forthcoming attack.¹²

The investigation also began to reveal the central role Rabbani had in Hezbollah’s Latin American operations. Two weeks after the bombing, on April 3, 1992, Rabbani placed a call from his home phone to the secretary of Sheikh Fadlallah, a Lebanese Shi’ite religious leader with close ties to Hezbollah. Argentine intelligence detected the call and prosecutors pointed to it as timely evidence, not only of his relationship with Hezbollah, but of the leadership role he played in their operations. Less than two years later, as investigators were still piecing together the facts of the 1992 embassy bombing, Hezbollah and Iranian operatives struck again.

AMIA Bombing

On July 18, 1994, at approximately 9:45 in the morning, a large explosion occurred at the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish center, leveling the building, killing 85 people, and wounding an additional 150. The bombing was the deadliest in Argentine history and sent shockwaves around the world. The United States and Israel immediately sent teams to aid Argentina in the investigation process. Investigators quickly learned that the bombing was the result of a suicide car bomb attached to a Renault Trafic van carrying 300 to 400 kilograms of explosives.¹³

Argentine federal police released a composite sketch of the suicide bomber to the local press from testimony that included a door to door survey of neighborhood residents shortly after the bombing. But, as quickly as authorities produced these sketches, and as useful as they would later be in definitively identifying the perpetrators as members of a Hezbollah team, they were too late to help apprehend the suspects before they escaped the country. Additionally, the Iranian diplomatic support network had already left the country in waves in the weeks leading up to the attack.¹⁴

According to the testimony of Abolghasem Mesbahi, an Iranian intelligence defector, a group of senior Iranian officials selected the AMIA building as the bombing target during a meeting in Mashhad, Iran on August 14, 1993. At the meeting, the officials discussed the Palestinian situation, the future of Iraq, and the strategy of exporting the revolution abroad. The idea of carrying out an attack in Argentina was reportedly at the core of the discussion about exporting the revolution. Final approval for the attack was given by the Committee for

Special Operations within Iran's Supreme National Security Council. Attendees at this meeting included Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Rafsanjani, Minister of Intelligence Ali Fallahian, Foreign Minister Ali Velayeti, Ahmad Asghari, a suspected IRGC official stationed at the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires, and Mohsen Rabbani.¹⁵

Shortly thereafter, Rabbani was named Cultural Attaché at the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires – a move meant to provide him diplomatic immunity prior to the AMIA attack.¹⁶ Rabbani led intelligence efforts for the operation. He had been using local Shi'ite scouts to assess Jewish and American targets in Buenos Aires since 1983. Prosecutors later stated that his surveillance reports would prove to be “a determining factor in the making of the decision to carry out the AMIA attack.”¹⁷ In addition to his scouting support, Rabbani

used his various bank accounts at Deutsche Bank, Banco Sudameris, and Banco Tornquist to receive Iranian funds in support of the attack. Most of these funds arrived through international bank transfers, including several sent from Iran's Bank Melli through Union de Banco Suizos.

While Rabbani attended to the necessary logistical details in Buenos Aires, Hezbollah operatives in the tri-border area planned the details of the operation. These two groups stayed in close touch as the plot slowly came together. Based on a joint investigation with its Argentinian counterpart, an FBI task force noted that “in the months prior to the attack, there were many calls from the mosque in the city of Iguazu Falls to Iran, the Embassy of Iran in Buenos Aires, the Embassy of Iran in Brasilia, the at-Tauhid mosque in Buenos Aires, and the office of the cultural attaché



Israel Defense Forces

Families of AMIA victims commemorate an anniversary of the 1994 bombing that killed 85 people and injured over 300.

where Rabbani worked."¹⁸ On two occasions, tri-border plotters called Rabbani at home, reflecting either sloppy tradecraft or perhaps an especially pressing operational need.

On July 16, 1994, the explosives-laden Renault Trafic van used for the bombing was parked at a garage near the AMIA center. Rabbani placed a call from his cellphone while in the vicinity of both the garage and AMIA to the Iranian-owned Government Trade Corporation (GTC), which was believed to be a front for Iranian intelligence.¹⁹ Two days later, the van exploded and the AMIA center was destroyed.

Investigation Revamp and the Iran Deal

Initially, the AMIA investigation went very poorly. The late Argentine president Nestor Kirchner once called it a national disgrace.²⁰ Judge Juan Jose Galeano originally kept his full caseload when he took on this major case. In March 2003, Judge Galeano filed his indictment, but some of the arrest warrants he called for were ultimately deemed too weak to enforce. Former Iranian ambassador to Argentina Hadi Soleimanpour was arrested in England in August 2003, on the basis of his indictment in Argentina and an INTERPOL Red Notice calling for his arrest and extradition to Buenos Aires. British officials, however, released Soleimanpour on \$1.2 million bail in September and concluded shortly thereafter that the extradition request failed to meet the prima facie evidentiary threshold under British law. Soleimanpour returned to Iran in November 2003.

Yet that was a relatively minor hiccup – things got worse. In December 2003, Judge Galeano was removed from the case for “irregularities,” such as bribing a defendant to accuse four police officers of corruption. The

defendant and the four officers involved were acquitted in 2004 and Galeano was impeached in 2005.²¹ Meanwhile, the AMIA-related trial of former Argentine president Carlos Menem began that summer.²² Menem, who was president at the time of the bombing, had long maintained close ties to Iranian intelligence and accepted a \$10 million bribe from Iran to cover up the Islamic Republic’s role in the attack.²³ The scandal led the Argentine Supreme Court to rule that the evidence in the case was inadmissible. Fortunately, the investigation began to turn around under Nestor Kirchner’s presidency.

Judge Galeano had focused on the local connections of the bombers and refused to go further in his indictments than to say that “it was a small group of fanatics that served as a shield for an Islamic fundamentalist group that presumably had ties to Hezbollah.”²⁴ And, even though a claim of responsibility for the AMIA attack was issued under one of Hezbollah’s known affiliated names, Galeano concluded that “no evidence has come to light as yet indicating that Hezbollah could have known of the plans, and subsequent to that, could have been implicated in the consequences.”²⁵ Following Galeano’s removal in 2005, Judge Rodolfo Canicoba Corral took over and assigned a team of experienced federal prosecutors to the investigation, led by Alberto Nisman. The team started the new investigation from scratch and turned more attention to the Iranian and Hezbollah angles, covering hundreds of files, leveraging telephone intercepts, and producing some 113,600 pages of documentation.

While concluding that the evidence did not suffice to call for the indictment and arrest of some of the individuals indicted by Galeano in March 2003, prosecutors determined in

2006 that several additional Iranian suspects should be indicted. Moreover, the prosecutors' report reserved particular criticism for Galeano's findings regarding Iran and Hezbollah. Nisman's report determined, "that the decision to carry out the attack was made not by a small splinter group of extremist Islamic officials, but was instead a decision that was extensively discussed and was ultimately adopted by a consensus at the highest levels of the Iranian government."²⁶

Since the 1994 bombing, relations between Argentina and Iran had been consistently and predictably frosty. This changed in 2007. The Brazilian weekly magazine *Veja* reported that, in exchange for cash, Iran asked for Argentine nuclear technology and for the

AMIA bombing to be covered up. *Veja* also claimed that Venezuela's late president Hugo Chavez, one of Iran's closest allies, was instrumental in facilitating a deal.²⁷ Venezuela made large purchases of Argentine debt and in August a Venezuelan businessman was caught at Argentine customs with \$800,000 – Iranian cash reportedly meant for the political campaign of Cristina Kirchner. Whether Iran actually received the nuclear technology, or whether the basis of the deal was simply financial, Argentine-Iranian relations changed markedly.²⁸

In 2011, Iranian officials expressed a willingness to "engage in constructive dialogue" with Argentina about the AMIA case, although they continued to insist that talk of an Iranian



Argentines have been taking to the streets in 2015 to demand justice for the death of prosecutor Alberto Nisman.

link was nothing more than “plots and political games.” By January 2013, this Iranian willingness to look for any non-Iranian perpetrators of the plot had translated into a bilateral agreement between Tehran and Buenos Aires to jointly investigate the bombing.²⁹ For Nisman and his fellow prosecutors and investigators – whose tireless pursuit of justice in this case led to an exhaustive investigation and the issuing of arrest warrants and Interpol Red Notices for the arrest of several Hezbollah operatives and Iranian officials – this new deal was akin to inviting the fox into the henhouse. After all, Iranian officials working on the deal reported directly to one of the investigation’s primary suspects: Mohsen Rabbani. In May 2014, a federal court ruled the deal unconstitutional, though the government quickly appealed to the Argentine Supreme Court.

On January 14, 2015, Nisman filed a legal complaint formally accusing President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and Foreign Minister Hector Timerman of trying to cover up Iran’s role in the 1994 AMIA bombing. Kirchner and Timerman, Nisman claimed, were covering Iran’s tracks in exchange for improved business and political ties with Iran. Four days later, and the day before he was scheduled to appear before Argentina’s Congress to present new evidence backing up his accusations, Nisman was found dead in his apartment. After Nisman’s untimely and highly suspicious death, many fear the alleged deal between Argentina and Iran may no longer be necessary to derail the AMIA investigation.

Iran’s Expanding South American Footprint

Iran’s intelligence penetration of South America has expanded significantly in the years since the 1994 AMIA bombing. Testifying

before the U.S. Congress in the weeks following the attack, the State Department’s coordinator for counterterrorism expressed concern that Iranian embassies in the region were stacked with larger-than-necessary numbers of diplomats, some of whom were believed to be intelligence agents and terrorist operatives: “We are sharing information in our possession with other States about Iranian diplomats, Iranian terrorist leaders who are posing as diplomats, so that nations will refuse to give them accreditation, or if they are already accredited, to expel them. We have had some success in that respect, but we have not always succeeded.”³⁰ Another witness recounted meeting with senior government officials in Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina regarding overrepresentation at Iranian embassies in the region in March 1995. Officials in Chile and Uruguay indicated that “the activities of those at the [Iranian] embassy were being monitored and that this was very clearly a concern.”³¹

Fifteen years later, the commander of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), indicated the Iranian presence in the region had grown still larger, expanding from just a handful of missions a few years earlier to twelve by 2010. That, plus Iran’s traditional support for terrorism, concerned General Douglas Fraser. “Transnational terrorists – Hezbollah, Hamas – have organizations resident in the region,” Fraser noted.³² Two years later, in a statement before the House Armed Services Committee, Fraser warned of Iran’s success circumventing international sanctions by establishing modest economic, cultural, and security ties, mostly in nations like Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Iran, Fraser added, also propagates its agenda through its 36 Shi’ite cultural centers. The Fundación Cultural Oriente, for example, an Iranian outreach

center dedicated to strengthening Iranian ties to Latin America, was run by none other than Mohsen Rabbani.³³

In 2007, evidence emerged that Rabbani's activism and involvement in terrorism in South America had not waned since Argentina indicted him and Interpol issued a Red Warrant arrest notice for his role in the AMIA bombing. According to court documents, Rabbani helped four men of Latin American descent who were plotting to bomb the John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) in New York. Three of the plotters were Guyanese; a fourth coconspirator, Kareem Ibrahim, was an imam and leader of the Shi'ite Muslim community in Trinidad and Tobago. All four men were ultimately convicted in federal court in the Eastern District of New York.

The four men sought technical and financial assistance for their plot, which they gave the code name Chicken Farm.³⁴ After failing to link up with al-Qaeda and Jamaat al Muslimeen operatives in the Caribbean, Ibrahim, already an Iranian confidant, recommended the plotters present their plan to the Iranian revolutionary leadership. Ibrahim arranged for Abdul Kadir, one of the plotters, to meet his contacts, including Rabbani, in Iran.³⁵

This meeting was not Kadir's first run-in with the Iranian revolutionary leadership. Under cross-examination, Kadir admitted that he had drafted reports for the Iranian ambassador to Venezuela in the mid-1980s, which focused on Guyana's economy, foreign policy, and military. His handwritten reports included details such as the low morale in the army and a "five-year development plan" that referred to infiltrating the military, police, and other government agencies.³⁶

Although Kadir had been active from at least the mid-80s, his first contact with Rabbani seems not to have occurred until 1994. After this point, contact between the two was regular, and Kadir became a "direct subordinate" and "man of trust" for Rabbani.³⁷ Rabbani had a wide network in Latin America, but the section of Nisman's 2013 report entitled "The Relationship between Abdul Kadir and Mohsen Rabbani" runs over twelve pages.³⁸ Nisman referred to Kadir as Rabbani's main deputy in Guyana and alleged that his role in the region was "directly supported and promoted by the Islamic Republic of Iran" – a clear example of an Iranian operative heading an "intelligence base" in the region.³⁹ The Chicken Farm operation enabled the two to collaborate directly. In a handwritten letter to Rabbani from 2006, Kadir agreed to perform a "mission" to determine whether a group of individuals in Guyana and Trinidad were capable of executing an unidentified task.⁴⁰ Kadir played an instrumental role not only in the recruitment of operatives, but in logistical elements as well. In financing the plot to attack the JFK airport in 2007, Kadir decided "that the funds allocated to finance the terrorist attack against the Airport in New York, [would be] deposited in the bank account opened and allocated to funds raised for the construction of a mosque in Linden, [Guyana]."⁴¹

Kadir was ultimately arrested on June 1, 2007 in Trinidad aboard a plane headed to Venezuela, en route to Iran.⁴² He was carrying a computer drive with photographs featuring himself and his children posing with guns that were intended, according to prosecutors, to prove his intent and capability to carry out an attack.⁴³ Documents seized after Kadir's arrest also revealed a wide range of contacts in the Iranian regime and with organizations closely

associated with the government. A report released by Nisman and his team concluded that “the conspiracy to attack John F. Kennedy Airport in New York was organized under [Tehran’s] protection...[and] had the approval of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁴⁴

Four years later, around the same time the last defendants in the JFK Airport bomb plot were convicted, reports of Rabbani’s continued activities in South America emerged in the Brazilian press. Security had become a priority in Brazil as the country prepared to host first the 2014 World Cup and then the 2016 Olympic Games. As international security experts looked closely at Brazil, they expressed concern about the country’s lax counterterrorism legal regime and weaker still enforcement. In April 2011, *Veja* ran an article citing FBI, CIA, Interpol, and other documents about terrorist activity in Brazil which warned that Rabbani “frequently slips in and out of Brazil on a false passport and has recruited at least

24 youngsters in three Brazilian states to attend ‘religious formation’ classes in Tehran.”⁴⁵ In the words of one Brazilian official quoted by the magazine, “Without anybody noticing, a generation of Islamic extremists is appearing in Brazil.”⁴⁶ Further, according to a former FBI agent who worked on Hezbollah and the AMIA bombing, Hezbollah’s role in criminal activities and fraud have grown. The group now engages in shipping fraud, for example, involving containers that enter Brazil at the port of Sao Paulo and then “disappear on their way up the river toward Foz in the tri-border area.”⁴⁷

To be sure, Iran and Hezbollah remain hyperactive in South America – a fact that has the full attention of U.S. intelligence officials and their counterparts south of the border. Consider, for example, that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to Washington in October 2010 reportedly also included



Former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is greeted in Tehran by the former President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

possible plans to attack the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Buenos Aires.⁴⁸ In a July 2012 report, the State Department concluded that although the department knew of no credible information indicating Hezbollah operatives were engaged in “terrorist training or other operational activity” in the tri-border area, Washington “remained concerned that these groups used the region to raise funds from local supporters.”⁴⁹ A year later, in May 2013, Nisman released a 500 page report focused on how the Iranian regime has, since the early 1980s, built and maintained “local clandestine intelligence stations designed to sponsor, foster, and execute terrorist attacks” in the Western Hemisphere.⁵⁰ Nisman wrote that “through the ‘policy for the export of the revolution’ Iran has developed an elaborate and rigid support structure...and intelligence bases that proved to be a crucial instrument when the time comes to carry out – or seek to carry out – terrorist attacks.”⁵¹

Rabbani’s “portfolio” was fairly expansive. He was “allocated the task to establish, develop, support, and indoctrinate the Shi’ite Muslim organizations of” Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia.⁵² In Colombia, for example, Rabbani was updated on the everyday activities of the Shi’ite community. He was also active in the tri-border area between Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, a Hezbollah hotspot, where he maintained links to Hezbollah leaders such as Farouk Abdul Omairi and Salman al-Reda. Al-Reda, a prominent Hezbollah operative and key player in the AMIA bombing, had been groomed by Rabbani in the 1980s. He is a dual Lebanese-Colombian citizen, who lived at various times in Colombia, Buenos Aires, and the tri-border area, immigrated to Argentina in 1987, initially settling in Buenos Aires and joining Rabbani’s at-Tauhid mosque.

Immediately after beginning his association with Rabbani, al-Reda became intensively involved in hatching terror plots against Israeli, American, and Jewish interests in Argentina.⁵³ Omairi was sentenced in 2007 to eleven years in a Brazilian prison for drug trafficking, while al-Reda is still at large.⁵⁴

Rabbani’s position as Iran’s coordinator for Latin America was facilitated by his role as the head of the at-Tauhid mosque in Buenos Aires, which gave him numerous opportunities to travel to Islamic institutions throughout the region. At-Tauhid “operated as the center of operations from which funding was provided to other Iranian centers in South America and took decisions on policies and activities related to these branches.”⁵⁵ Recruiting and indoctrination were significant aspects of Rabbani’s activities; he would oversee the education and indoctrination of Guyanese and other South American Muslim youth in Iran.⁵⁹ He often sent followers to study in Qom, Iran, including Abdul Kadir’s son, for political indoctrination and religious and paramilitary training.⁵⁷

With the exception of Argentina and Guyana, the networks established in Latin American countries are not yet known to have attempted any overt terrorist activity. Yet, as the Nisman report points out, they are in a position to become active if and when needed. Many members of these networks use the covers of diplomatic or cultural emissaries. In the conclusion of the report, Nisman specifically warns the authorities of Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, and Colombia to be vigilant. As the experience of AMIA and the JFK airport shows, Iran’s policy of exporting the revolution cannot be taken as mere rhetoric, even as far afield as the Americas.

Snapshot: Iran and Hezbollah in South America, 2015

The same day that Nisman's report on Iran's presence in South America was released in May 2013, the State Department released its annual terrorism report, which documented a "marked resurgence" of Iran's terrorist activities around the world. The release of these reports coincided with the sentencing of Mansour Arbabsiar, an Iranian-American used-car salesman from Texas, for his role in an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to Washington. In the assessment of the Director of National Intelligence, General James Clapper, that plot demonstrated that "some Iranian officials – probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – have changed their calculus and are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived U.S. actions that threaten the regime."⁵⁸

Iran's brazen Western Hemisphere posture is clear in its dogged pursuit of a joint "truth commission" with Argentina to uncover the "real" culprits behind the AMIA bombing. Tellingly, while Ali Akbar Velayati, Iran's Foreign Minister in 1994 and today an advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, declined to appear before an Argentinean court, he insisted to Argentina's C5N TV that charges against him amount to a "baseless accusation," adding that Argentina is "under the influence of Zionism and the U.S."⁵⁹

Meanwhile, the man described by Argentinean authorities as the driving force behind the AMIA bombing, Mohsen Rabbani, told Argentinean TV that Nisman's investigation was based on nothing more than "the inventions of newspapers without any proof against Iran." In fact, the most powerful proof

against Iran was evidence of Rabbani's own role in the plot, from running a network of intelligence agents in Buenos Aires to purchasing the van used as the car bomb in the attack. And he remains active: according to Nisman's more recent investigations, Iranian agents in Argentina acting at Rabbani's behest and reporting directly back to him were conspiring to concoct fake "new evidence" to supplant the real evidence collected in the case.

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In one intercepted conversation, one of Rabbani's agents, Jorge Khalil, reported to Rabbani by phone on a meeting with an Argentine official. "Send me the details so I can evaluate them," Rabbani responded.⁶⁰ Exchanges such as this made "it completely clear that Rabbani retains decision-making authority within the regime in all matters related to the Argentine Republic," Nisman concluded, later adding that "Khalil has been Rabbani's man of confidence who has constantly reported back to him from Buenos Aires."⁶¹ In another intercepted telephone exchange, Khalil assures Rabbani further reports are forthcoming: "...Sheikh, don't worry because tonight when I get home I'll send you a report on everything that I'm doing." Such assurances, Nisman determined, demonstrate Khalil's subordination to Mohsen Rabbani.⁶²

Meanwhile, Hezbollah activities in the region have picked up pace significantly. In its 2014 annual terrorism report, the State

Department highlighted the financial support networks Hezbollah maintains in places like Latin America and Africa. The report concluded that Hezbollah is, “capable of operating around the globe.”⁶³ This conclusion was underscored in November 2014 when Brazilian police reports revealed that Hezbollah helped a Brazilian prison gang, the First Capital Command (PCC), obtain weapons in exchange for the protection of prisoners of Lebanese origin detained in Brazil.⁶⁴ The same reports indicated that Lebanese traffickers tied to Hezbollah reportedly helped sell C4 explosives that the PCC allegedly stole in Paraguay.⁶⁵

Hezbollah is not strictly an Israeli concern. “Beyond its role in Syria,” Matt Olsen, the then-director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) warned in September 2014, “Lebanese Hezbollah remains committed to conducting terrorist activities worldwide.”⁶⁶ The NCTC director continued: “We remain concerned the group’s activities could either endanger or target U.S. and other Western interests.”⁶⁷ NCTC officials note that Hezbollah “has engaged in an aggressive terrorist campaign in recent years and continues attack planning abroad.”⁶⁸ Indeed, one of the group’s most recently foiled plots was in Peru and involved a Hezbollah operative married to a U.S. citizen. Peruvian counterterrorism police arrested the Hezbollah operative in Lima in November 2014, the result of a surveillance operation that began several months earlier. In that case, Mohammed Amadar, a Lebanese citizen, arrived in Peru in November 2013 and married a dual Peruvian-American citizen two weeks later. They soon moved to Sao Paulo, Brazil, but returned to Lima in July 2014. Authorities were clearly aware of Amadar at the time, because they questioned him upon arrival at the airport and began watching him

then. When he was arrested in October, police raided his home and found traces of TNT, detonators, and other inflammable substances. A search of the garbage outside his home found chemicals used to manufacture explosives. By the time of his arrest, intelligence indicated Amadar’s targets included places associated with Israelis and Jews in Peru, including areas popular with Israeli backpackers, the Israeli embassy in Lima, and Jewish community institutions.

It warrants noting that Hezbollah activity in the Southern Hemisphere is of direct concern to the United States. This was underscored in January 2015 when the FBI’s Miami field office released a “request for information” bulletin about a dual Venezuelan-Lebanese and Hezbollah operative Ghazi Nasr al-Din, known both for raising money for the group and meeting with Hezbollah officials in Lebanon to discuss “operational issues.”⁶⁹ It is not clear what prompted the FBI to issue its request for information bulletin, but Nasr al-Din had long been on the U.S. government’s radar. In June 2008 the U.S. Treasury Department designated him a global terrorist, noting that he “utilized his position as a Venezuelan diplomat and the president of a Caracas-based Shi’ite Islamic Center to provide financial support to Hezbollah.” Nasr al Din had met with senior Hezbollah officials in Lebanon, Treasury reported, for the purpose of discussing “operational issues” and also facilitated the travel of Hezbollah members to and from Venezuela, and for travel to Iran to attend a training course there.⁷⁰ Hezbollah today is more invested in operations in South America than ever before.

Conclusion

American officials are deeply concerned about the rise of Iranian intelligence activities in the region, as well as Hezbollah operational activities in the region that are now complimenting the group's longtime logistical and financial support activities there. While Hezbollah continues to raise significant sums of money through illicit business and smuggling in the tri-border area and other free trade zones in the region, it's activities have spread far beyond these well-known hot spots and include not only logistics and financing, but terrorist operational planning as well. Iran, for its part, has also been tied to operations in the region, but is far more invested in building up a robust intelligence network spanning the length of the southern half of the Western Hemisphere. Coming on the heels of the Iran nuclear deal, these activities are even more disconcerting. Whether, or how soon, Iran cheats on its nuclear commitments, U.S. officials cannot say. But there is broad consensus that the international community needs to be prepared to deal with Iran's ongoing non-nuclear "malign activities" and "menacing behavior," as Treasury Secretary Jack Lew put it.⁷¹ U.S. officials have similarly noted the administration's commitment to "target the full range of Hezbollah's activity, including terrorism, criminal activity, and its destabilizing conduct in the [Middle East] region."⁷²

In light of their long history of "menacing behavior" in South America, and even more so given the increased tempo and nature of their "malign activities" in the region, it is critical that the necessary attention and resources be devoted to tracking and countering the threats they portend. In the age of the Iran Deal, foreign terrorist fighters, and the rise of Islamic

State, there is tight competition for bandwidth and dollars for other priorities. Though recently much of Latin America has aligned with western interests, that alignment can not be taken for granted. American influence in the region now competes with influence from highly motivated extra-regional powers. As the U.S. adapts to a rapidly changing global security environment, the threat posed by Iran and Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere, a key geo-strategic interest and historic stronghold of American influence, should be recognized as a clear and present danger. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Georgetown University Press, 2013): 79.

² Investigations Unit of the Office of the Attorney General, "AMIA Case" signed by District Attorney Marcelo Martinez Burgos, Attorney General Alberto Nisman, and Secretary of the Office of the Attorney General Herman Longo, (October 25 2006): 405.

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⁴ Investigations Unit of the Office of the Attorney General (2006), 46.

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