

# Exporting Terror in America's Backyard

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

## The United States and other countries should avoid downplaying the threat from Iranian agents in Latin America.

**A**s Iran has been gearing up for its June 14 presidential election, the activities of its powerful intelligence services have also been kicking into high gear across the globe. The U.S. State Department's annual terrorism report, released May 30, headlined the "marked resurgence" of Iran's terrorist activities -- and with good reason. "Iran and Hizballah's terrorist activity has reached a tempo unseen since the 1990s, with attacks plotted in Southeast Asia, Europe, and Africa," the report reads. And that's before we even get to Iran and Hezbollah's active support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown against his own people.

But that's not all. Closer to the United States, Iran not only continues to expand its presence and bilateral relationships with countries like Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, but it also maintains a network of intelligence agents specifically tasked with sponsoring and executing terrorist attacks in the Western Hemisphere.

The same day the State Department released its report, highly respected Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman, who served as special prosecutor for the investigation into the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, released a 500-page document laying out 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.

Nisman found evidence that Iran is building intelligence networks identical to the one responsible for the bombings in Argentina across the region -- from Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, and Colombia to Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname.

Nisman's 2006 report on the AMIA bombing already demonstrated how Iran established a robust intelligence network in South America in the early 1980s. One document, seized during a court-ordered raid of the residence of an Iranian diplomat north of Buenos Aires, included a map denoting areas populated by Muslim communities and

suggested an Iranian strategy to export Islam into South America -- and from there to North America. Highlighting areas densely populated by Muslims, the document informed that these "will be used from Argentina as [the] center of penetration of Islam and its ideology towards the North American continent."

Nisman concluded that the driving force behind Iran's intelligence efforts in Argentina was Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian who lived in Argentina for 11 years and played a key role in the Islamic Republic's intelligence operations in South America. Rabbani, the primary architect of the AMIA plot, reportedly had come from Iran for the express purpose of heading the state-owned al-Tawhid mosque in Buenos Aires, but he also served as a representative of the Iranian Ministry of Agriculture, which was tasked with ensuring the quality of Argentine meat exported to Iran. The Argentine prosecutor reported that Rabbani began laying the groundwork for his spy network after arriving in the country in 1983. Indeed, just prior to his departure for South America, Rabbani met Abolghasem Mesbahi, an Iranian intelligence official who would later defect, and explained to Mesbahi that he was being dispatched to Argentina "in order to create support groups for exporting the Islamic revolution," according to Nisman's 2006 report.

Rabbani advanced his vision of the "Islamic revolution" through a variety of means -- including the execution of two large-scale attacks in Argentina. In 1992, Iran and Hezbollah bombed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 people. Two years later, they targeted the AMIA Jewish community center, killing 85 people. Based on Nisman's investigation, in 2007 Interpol issued six "red notices," which request international cooperation to arrest and extradite a suspect, for the key players behind the AMIA bombing. Two of those red notices were for Mohsen Rezaei and Ali Akbar Velayati, both of whom are running for president in Iran's upcoming election.

Rabbani's terrorist activities in South America, however, did not wane despite being indicted in Argentina. According to Nisman and U.S. District Court documents from the Eastern District of New York in Brooklyn, Rabbani helped four men who were plotting to bomb New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport in 2007 and who sought technical and financial assistance for the operation, codenamed "Chicken Farm." All four men were ultimately convicted in federal court.

The four men first sought out Yasin Abu Bakr, leader of the Trinidadian militant group Jamaat al-Muslimeen, and Adnan el-Shukrijumah, an al Qaeda operative who grew up in Brooklyn and South Florida and fled the United States for the Caribbean in the days before the 9/11 attacks. Unable to find Shukrijumah, the plotters "sent [co-conspirator] Abdul Kadir to meet with his contacts in the Iranian revolutionary leadership, including Mohsen Rabbani," according to a news release issued by the U.S. attorney's office for the Eastern District of New York.

One co-conspirator was Kareem Ibrahim, an imam and leader of the Shiite Muslim community in Trinidad and Tobago. During cross-examination at trial, Ibrahim admitted that he advised the plotters to approach Iranian leaders with the plot and use operatives ready to engage in suicide attacks at the airport. In one of the recorded conversations entered into evidence, Ibrahim told Russell Defreitas -- a plotter who was a JFK baggage handler and a naturalized U.S. citizen -- that the attackers must be ready to "fight it out, kill who you could kill, and go back to Allah."

Documents seized from Kadir's house in Guyana demonstrated that he was a Rabbani disciple who built a Guyanese intelligence base for Iran much like his mentor had built in Argentina. In a letter written to Rabbani in 2006, Kadir agreed to perform a "mission" for Rabbani to determine whether a group of individuals in Guyana and Trinidad were up to some unidentified task.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Rabbani also oversaw the education and indoctrination of Guyanese and other South American Muslim youth, including Kadir's children, in Iran. Kadir was ultimately arrested in Trinidad aboard a plane headed to Venezuela, en route to Iran. He was carrying a computer drive with photographs featuring himself

and his children posing with guns, which prosecutors suggested were intended as proof for Iranian officials of his intent and capability to carry out an attack.

In 2011, not long before the last defendant in the JFK airport bomb plot was convicted, evidence emerged suggesting Rabbani was still doing intelligence work in South America. An April 2011 article in the Brazilian magazine *Veja*, citing documents from the FBI, CIA, and Interpol, reported 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," according to an article in the *Telegraph*.

In the word of one Brazilian official quoted by the magazine, "Without anybody noticing, a generation of Islamic extremists is appearing in Brazil."

The growth of this Iranian extremist network in South America has immediate repercussions for the security of the United States. The same day that Nisman and the State Department released their reports, an Iranian-American used-car salesman from Texas was sentenced to 25 years in prison for his role in an Iranian plot to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States at a popular Washington restaurant. In the assessment by James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, this plot "shows 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."

Strangely, one of the countries most vulnerable to this terrorist threat appears more interested in placating, rather than opposing, the country responsible. In February, Argentina approved a deal with Iran for a joint "truth commission" to investigate the 1994 AMIA bombing -- a step that insults the Argentine victims of the attack and makes a mockery of the rule of law. Of course, Nisman, Argentina's own special prosecutor, left no doubt in his 2006 report and his latest 500-page report about the truth of who was behind the bombing -- Iranian agents.

The State Department has it right: There has indeed been a "marked resurgence" of Iranian state sponsorship of terrorism over the past 18 months. But as the new Nisman report drives home, here's an even more disturbing fact - Iran has run intelligence networks in the United States' backyard to "sponsor, foster and execute terrorist attacks" for decades.

*Matthew Levitt directs The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and is author of the forthcoming book Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*

*(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god>). He served as an expert witness in the criminal trials stemming from the JFK Airport bomb plot. ❖*

*Foreign Policy*

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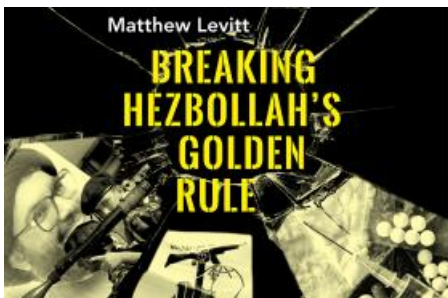
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