

Hezbollah's 1992 Attack in Argentina Is a Warning for Modern-Day Europe

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Hezbollah is watching Europe closely, much as it watched Argentina twenty-one years ago this week.

Around 2:45 p.m. on March 17, 1992, a Ford F-100 panel van drove down Arroyo Street in tranquil neighborhood of Buenos Aires. It approached the front of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires -- then drove up onto the sidewalk and blew up. The explosion wreaked havoc up and down the street, destroying the front of the building, causing the entire consulate building and part of the attached embassy building to collapse. The 220 pounds of high explosives and shrapnel, concentrated in the back right section of the vehicle, left twenty-three people dead and another 242 injured. Most of the people killed and injured were in the embassy but some were pedestrians, including a priest from the Roman Catholic Church across the street and children at a nearby school.

Hezbollah's most recent international terrorist plots targeted Bulgaria and Cyprus, EU member states on the continent's eastern periphery, prompting debate over designating Hezbollah as a terrorist group at the EU. For those European leaders who remain undecided, this week provides a timely reminder of what happens when the international community fails to respond to Hezbollah terrorism.

This week marks the 21st anniversary of the 1992 Israeli embassy bombing. Failure to respond to that attack emboldened Hezbollah, which incurred no cost for the attack. Two years later Hezbollah struck again, this time escalating from a diplomatic to civilian target and blowing up the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

Yaacov Perry, former director of the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), visited Argentina just a week before the embassy bombing for liaison meetings with his intelligence counterparts. At a polo match and luncheon, the intelligence chiefs discussed "the menace posed by terrorists," though neither had any idea how close the menace was or how soon it would be realized. Within days, Israeli counterterrorism teams would be back in Buenos Aires investigating the embassy bombing alongside Argentinean and American law enforcement and intelligence experts.

An American International Response Team, including U.S. explosives experts, deployed to the site of the bombing and determined the type of explosive used by examining the charred remnants of the car bomb. Within hours of the bombing, investigators found the front section of the vehicle's engine block in a garden below the staircase of an apartment building down the street.

In time, investigators would determine that the Ford van had been parked at a parking lot located just a couple of blocks from the Israeli embassy for the hour and a half immediately preceding the bombing -- to be precise, from 1:18 p.m. to 2:42 p.m., according to the stamp on the ticket. Three minutes after the van's departure, the vehicle bomb exploded outside the embassy.

In its claim of responsibility, delivered to a Western news agency in Beirut, Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization declared "with all pride that the operation of the martyr infant Hussein is one of our continuing strikes against the criminal Israeli enemy in an open-ended war, which will not cease until Israel is wiped out of existence." Hussein was the five-year-old son of Hezbollah leader Abbas Moussawi, both of whom were killed in an Israeli air strike on his car on February 16, 1992. Speaking at Moussawi's funeral, Hezbollah leader Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah warned that "Israel will not escape vengeance. We have received the message that there is no need to respond in an emotional fashion." Fadlallah assured his listeners in another statement that "there would be much more violence and much more blood would flow."

The CIA noted in a July 1992 intelligence report that Hezbollah held the United States and Israel equally responsible for Moussawi's death and threatened to target American interests in retaliation. According to the CIA, this was no empty threat: "Hezbollah elements began planning a retaliatory operation against U.S. interests in Lebanon shortly after Moussawi's death." Hezbollah, the CIA reminded policymakers in a July 1992 report, had executed two successful attacks targeting U.S. interests in Lebanon the previous year -- firing missiles at the U.S. embassy on October 29, 1991, and destroying the administration building at the American University of Beirut in a car bombing on November 8, 1991.

These plans never did materialize, perhaps because Hezbollah was supremely focused on an attack it was planning well beyond Lebanon's borders. Just eight days after the assassination, the vehicle used in the embassy bombing was purchased in Buenos Aires by an individual with a Portuguese accent who signed documents with a last name different from the one on his identification. Three weeks later, the embassy was in ruins. The speed at which the operation was executed is easier to understand, however, in light of evidence that Iran decided to carry out an operation in Argentina well before Moussawi was killed. Mohsen Rabbani -- an Iranian operative based in Buenos Aires who would play a key role in the bombing -- spent ten months in Iran from January to December 1991. According to Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman, Hezbollah used the Moussawi assassination 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.

Now, as then, the strategic relationship between Hezbollah and Iran is resulting in a campaign of terrorism across the globe. Hezbollah seeks to murder Israeli tourists, often targeting them in places frequented by American and other tourists, while Iran has set its sights on Western diplomats, including American, British, Israeli, Saudi and other officials. Thankfully, the only successful attack to date was in Bulgaria, where a Hezbollah bus bombing killed five Israelis and a Bulgarian. Two weeks earlier, a Swedish Hezbollah operative was arrested in Cyprus, where he was surveilling Israeli tourists boarding buses at the airport.

Hezbollah is watching Europe closely, much as it watched Argentina 21 years ago this week. Argentina failed to respond to Hezbollah's challenge then, and suffered the repercussions two years later. Europe has an opportunity now to avoid that same mistake and should designate Hezbollah -- in whole or in part -- a terrorist group for executing terrorist plots in Europe. History suggests that failure to do so could result in still more attacks by an

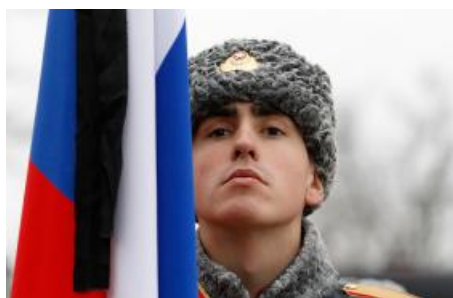
emboldened Hezbollah.

Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and 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>). ❖

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