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Iranian Doublespeak on the Anniversary of the AMIA Bombing

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Iran's recent offer to assist in the 1994 AMIA bombing investigation is nothing more than a political game.

Seventeen years ago this week, Hezbollah operatives working closely with Iranian intelligence blew up the Israeli-Argentine Mutual Association (AMIA) building in Buenos Aires, killing 85 people and wounding 300 more. Now, after years of obstructing investigation into the attack, Iran claims it is ready to "engage in constructive dialogue" with Argentina about the case, but insists that talk of an Iranian link is nothing more than "plots and political games."

In fact, it is Iran that is playing games.

Argentinean authorities conducted an extensive investigation into the AMIA attack, with significant international cooperation, and concluded that "the decision to carry out the AMIA attack was made, and the attack was orchestrated, by the highest officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the time, and that these officials instructed Lebanese Hezbollah -- a group that has historically been subordinated to the economic and political interests of the Tehran regime -- to carry out the attack."

Iran and Hezbollah each had their own reasons for wanting to attack Israeli or Jewish targets in Argentina in 1994, as they had just two years earlier when they bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. At the time, Tehran was furious over Buenos Aires' decision to cease all nuclear cooperation with Iran in 1992 for fear that Iran's nuclear program was not limited to peaceful purposes. In 1994, Argentina terminated its nuclear cooperation. Hezbollah, meanwhile, sought to avenge the Israeli assassination of its leader, Abbas Moussawi, in 1992, and then Israel's capture of Hezbollah ally Mustapha Dirani in Southern Lebanon in May 1994. Such coincidence of interests, coupled with Hezbollah's prized status as Tehran's primary proxy, and operational considerations such as Argentina's porous borders, Iran's heavy diplomatic and intelligence presence there, and the existence of a strong Hezbollah financial/logistical support network in South America, all combined to make Argentina a particularly attractive target for Iranian intelligence and Hezbollah operatives.

According to Argentinean intelligence, as early as May 1993 -- a full year before Dirani's capture by Israeli commandos -- and again in November 1993, Iranian operative Mohsen Rabbani visited Buenos Aires car dealerships inquiring about purchasing a Renault Trafic van of the kind later used in the 1994 AMIA bombing. Rabbani's fieldwork in support of Iranian intelligence dates to his arrival in Argentina in 1983, when he began recruiting local Shia -- described by others in the community as his "antennas" -- who served as an informal intelligence network, carrying out surveillance on his instructions. Assessments from Rabbani's scouts on potential Jewish and American targets in the city served as the basis for targeting reports that Rabbani drafted and passed along to senior intelligence officials in Iran. Rabbani was the imam at the al-Tawhid mosque, which served as a base for his activities on behalf of Iran, and was also intimately involved in staffing Iranian front companies in Argentina. According to prosecutors, Rabbani's surveillance reports would later prove to be "a determining factor in making the decision to carry out the AMIA attack."

Based on evidence gathered in the AMIA investigation, including the testimony of Abolghasem Mesbahi, a defector from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), prosecutors concluded that the decision to bomb the AMIA building was made at a meeting held by Iran's Supreme National Security Council in Mashhad on Saturday, August 14, 1993.

During this meeting, senior Iranian leaders approved the bombing plot and selected the AMIA building as the target.

According to Argentinean intelligence, once the committee reached its decision, intelligence chief Ali Fallahian was given overall operational responsibility for the attack, and Qods Force Commander Ahmad Vahidi -- who today serves as Iran's Minister of Defense and is a wanted fugitive in Argentina -- was instructed to provide any necessary assistance. Fallahian turned to Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyeh to execute the attack. Rabbani was put in charge of local logistics, including all details pertaining to the purchase, hiding and arming of the van to be used in the bombing. Rabbani was also suddenly appointed Cultural Attache at the Iranian embassy, providing him with diplomatic immunity. Asghari, already a diplomat, was tasked with activating Iran's "clandestine networks" in support of the operation.

In time, investigators would uncover records of phone calls between the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires and suspected Hezbollah operatives in the tri-border area who helped coordinate the attack out of a mosque and a travel agency there.

Argentina's foreign ministry issued a statement saying it had yet to receive a formal word from Tehran but, if confirmed, Iran's offer to cooperate with the AMIA investigation would be "unprecedented and positive."

Iran's offer should be immediately tested with renewed requests for those indicted to be made available to stand trial. But the families of the victims should not hold their breath waiting for Iran's response. In light of the evidence linking Iran and Hezbollah to the AMIA bombing, the odds are overwhelming that Iran's offer to assist in the investigation is, to borrow Iran's phrase, nothing more than "plots and political games."

Matthew Levitt, director of The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](#), is author of the forthcoming book Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's 'Party of God.'