



Examining the State Department's Report on Iranian Presence in the Western Hemisphere Nineteen Years After the AMIA Attack

Dr. Matthew Levitt
Director, Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence,
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
Testimony submitted to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
and Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
August 1, 2013

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Chairman Salmon, Ranking Member Sires, distinguished members of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa and the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, it is an honor to appear before you this afternoon to discuss the State Department's recent report on Iran's presence in the Western Hemisphere.

On the one hand the State Department report *Iranian Activity and Influence in the Western Hemisphere* downplayed Iran's activities in the region. On the other, the authors of the report themselves conceded, in the unclassified annex to the full report, that some of their conclusions were actually based on certain assumptions. One assumption noted that "Iranian interest in Latin America is of concern," yet another stated that as a result of U.S. and allied efforts, "Iranian influence in Latin America and the Caribbean is waning."¹ But 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 also maintains a network of intelligence agents specifically tasked with sponsoring and executing terrorist attacks in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, Iran and Hezbollah both have worked long and hard over many years to build up their presence and influence in Latin America.

But before we get into any detailed discussion of Iran and Hezbollah's presence and activities in the Western Hemisphere, it is worth noting that nineteen years ago this month, Iran and Hezbollah colluded in the bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

Bombing AMIA

The following excerpt from my forthcoming book, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*, details the AMIA attack nineteen years ago:

It was around 9:45 a.m. on July 18, 1994, and Monica Lucía Arnaudo was in her bedroom, which looked out onto Pasteur Street. As she watched television, Monica heard a car outside speed up and then slam on the brakes. "The tires creaked," she would later recall, "and then [there was] a sort of a crash or collision." She sat

¹ "Annex A, Unclassified Summary of Policy Recommendations," Appended to press release "Duncan Releases Statement on the State Department's Report on Iranian Activity and Influence in the Western Hemisphere," June 26, 2013

upright in bed, just in time to hear a tremendous explosion and feel “something like sand and dust” bursting in through her window.² It was 9:53 a.m.

What Ms. Arnaudo had actually felt and heard were the shock waves and debris from the explosives-laden van that had just blown the face off the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), just across the street—the community center for the largest Jewish community in South America. The Renault Trafic van carried 300–400 kilograms of explosives composed of ammonium nitrate, combined with aluminum, a heavy hydrocarbon, TNT, and nitroglycerine. The explosion killed eighty-five people and wounded some one hundred fifty more. The force of the blast instantly destroyed roughly 2,000 of the AMIA building’s 4,600 square meters, killing many instantly and trapping others beneath the rubble.³

Within forty-eight hours of the attack, the United States sent thirteen International Response Team (IRT) investigators to help investigate the bombing—including FBI investigators, Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) explosive experts, and State Department Diplomatic Security agents.⁴ By Friday July 22, Israeli forensic police, part of a Disaster Victims Identification group, arrived in Buenos Aires as well.⁵ For twelve days, the American IRT members worked side by side at the bomb site with their Israeli and Argentinian police and emergency response counterparts sifting through the debris for pieces of the bomb, the van, and the victims.⁶ The attack was classified as a double aggravated homicide owing to its nature as a “racial or religious crime” carried out in a manner intended to create “public hazard” and kill and wound as many people as possible.⁷

Within weeks, Argentinian federal police had released the 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. Other sketches were publicized of the person who parked the van used in the bombing in a nearby garage three days before the attack.⁸

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 “hit team,” they were too late to help apprehend them before they escaped the country. The Iranian diplomatic support network left the county in waves in the weeks leading up to the attack.

The exception was Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian who lived in Argentina for eleven years. Rabbani, the primary architect of the AMIA plot, reportedly had come from Iran for the express purpose of heading the state-owned al-Tauhid mosque in the Floresta neighborhood, but he also served as a representative of the Iranian Ministry of Agriculture, which was tasked with ensuring the quality of Argentinian meat exported to Iran.⁹ Prosecutors would later conclude that Rabbani was “the driving force behind these efforts [to establish an Iranian intelligence network in Argentina].... From the time of his arrival in the country in 1983, Mr. Rabbani began laying the groundwork that allowed for the later implementation and further development of the [Iranian] spy network.”¹⁰

² Buenos Aires, Argentina Judicial Branch, AMIA Indictment, Office of the National Federal Court No. 17, Criminal and Correctional Matters No. 9, Case No. 1156, March 5, 2003 (hereafter cited as AMIA indictment), p. 16-17.

³ Argentina, Buenos Aires, Investigations Unit of the Office of the Attorney General. *Office of Criminal Investigations: AMIA Case*. Report by Marcelo Martinez Burgos and Alberto Nisman, October 25, 2006 (hereafter cited as Burgos and Nisman), 20, 378.

⁴ Statements of Robert Bryant and Ambassador Philip Wilcox, *Terrorism in Latin America/AMIA Bombing in Argentina*.

⁵ Gabriel Levinas, “Report About the Investigation of the AMIA Attack.”

⁶ Ambassador Philip Wilcox, *Terrorism in Latin America/AMIA Bombing in Argentina*.

⁷ Burgos and Nisman.

⁸ The sketches were published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Clarín* on August 1 and 6, 1994 and again on September 28, 1995; see copies of the paper and details in written answers to Question for the Record for Ambassador Philip Wilcox in *Testimony at Hearing on “Terrorism in Latin America/AMIA Bombing in Argentina, 111-117*.

⁹ AMIA indictment, 62.

¹⁰ Burgos and Nisman, 14.

Rabbani had never traveled abroad before this assignment, but wasted no time establishing himself as a religious leader in the local Muslim community. Rabbani's political views permeated his religious and cultural activities to the point that congregants described his religious activities as a "mask" used to promote the Iranian revolution and condemn Zionism. By one account, for example, several students at the mosque told another congregant that on many occasions, Rabbani exhorted them to "export the revolution," stressing to them "we are all Hezbollah."¹¹

It was widely known within the local Muslim community that the network of followers Rabbani cultivated proactively collected intelligence on his behalf for Iran; they were commonly referred to as "the antennas." Indeed, Rabbani deployed trusted members of his network as spotters to scout potential Jewish and American targets.¹² Some, like intelligence agent Mohammad Reza Javadi-Nia, went so far as to work as taxi drivers to better carry out the surveillance, targeting, and other intelligence functions assigned by Rabbani.¹³ According to an FBI report, Javadi-Nia was believed to be an agent of Iran's Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad), which, together with other Iranian government agencies such as the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the Cultural Bureaus and the Foreign Ministry, along with the Qods Force, was believed to have provided cover for Iranian intelligence activities. In the case of Ershad, these activities would have occurred under the guise of religious activity. Previously, the FBI determined, Javadi-Nia had served in similar capacities in Belgium, Spain, Columbia, and Brazil in the mid-to-late 1980s. Then, from 1988 to 1993 he served as a cultural attaché at the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires, before Rabbani took over that position in 1994.¹⁴

Just four months before the attack, Rabbani suddenly was named an official Iranian diplomat, complete with diplomatic credentials and immunity. As for the Hezbollah operatives brought in to execute the bombing, Argentinean law enforcement and intelligence officials would later determine that they left the country about two hours prior to the actual explosion.¹⁵

Some of the operatives, including the suicide bomber, entered the country at Argentina's highly unregulated border crossings in the tri-border area, where Argentina meets Brazil and Paraguay. Others arrived—presumably with false documents—at Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires on July 1, 1994, and left the morning of the attack through Jorge Newberry Metropolitan Airport, also in Buenos Aires, some on flights to the tri-border area.¹⁶ Investigators would later trace phone calls placed from pay phones at these airports, as well as calls from pay phones near the AMIA building during the operatives' stay, to a cellular phone in Foz do Iguazu, on the Brazilian side of the Friendship Bridge spanning the Parana River in the tri-border area. From Foz, as it is locally known, a network of Hezbollah supporters coordinated the activities of the terrorist cell members operating in Buenos Aires. Frequent calls were made between phones in Argentina and the cell phone in Foz as preparations for the bombing progressed. Then, the day of the attack, the flow of calls suddenly stopped.¹⁷

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 224-6.

¹² Burgos and Nisman, 243.

¹³ Burgos and Nisman, 212; AMIA indictment 130, 141.

¹⁴ "Report of the Task Force of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI): Analysis of the Attack on the Seat of the Mutual Israeli Argentinean Association (AMIA), 18th of July, 1994, Buenos Aires, Argentina," August 1998 (original copy in Spanish, translated to English for the author by Yair Fuxman).

¹⁵ Burgos and Nisman, 245.

¹⁶ Burgos and Nisman's 2006 report states the suicide bomber likely came in through the tri-border area. But in a 2009 interview with the author, a senior Argentinean law enforcement officer confirmed the investigation had "definitively" determined that Berro entered through the tri-border area. Author interview, senior Argentinean law enforcement official, Washington D.C., August 16, 2009.

¹⁷ Burgos and Nisman, 14-15.

Ultimately, Argentinean authorities would conclude 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...to carry out the attack.”¹⁸

Iran in South America

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 AMIA bombing, [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, in addition to a number of others. He concluded, “In other words, the AMIA bombing did not constitute an isolated event.”¹⁹

Nisman’s earlier 2006 report on the AMIA bombing already demonstrated how Iran established a robust intelligence network in South America in the early 1980s.²⁰ 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.”²¹

Nisman concluded that the driving force behind Iran’s intelligence efforts in Argentina was the man discussed in the above book excerpt, Mohsen Rabbani, who 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 ultimately executed two large-scale attacks in Argentina. In 1992, Iran and Hezbollah bombed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 people.²² Two years later, they targeted the AMIA center, killing 85.

In addition to the Nisman report, other branches of the U.S. government reached very different conclusions. This March, General John F. Kelly, head of U.S. Southern Command, testified that “members and supporters of Iran’s partner, Lebanese Hezbollah, have established presence in several countries in the region. The Lebanese Shi’a diaspora in our area of responsibility may generate as much as tens of millions of dollars for Hezbollah through both licit and illicit means.” And, “while regionally-based Shi’a who support Lebanese Hezbollah are involved in drug and other illicit trafficking, we have only a partial understanding of possible interconnections and overlap between terrorist financing and illicit revenue streams, both within the hemisphere and on a global scale.” Therefore, he concluded, “any group seeking to harm the United States—including Iran—could view

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ “AMIA Case,” [http://www.defenddemocracy.org/stuff/uploads/documents/summary_\(31_pages\).pdf](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/stuff/uploads/documents/summary_(31_pages).pdf)

²⁰ Burgos and Nisman, 13.

²¹ Buenos Aires, Argentina Judicial Branch, AMIA Indictment, Office of the National Federal Court No. 17, Criminal and Correctional Matters No. 9, Case No. 1156, March 5, 2003, p. 61.

²² Burgos and Nisman.

criminal middlemen, facilitators, and support networks as potential operational *enablers*, although not necessarily operational *requirements*.”²³

The U.S. Treasury Department, too, has more thoroughly detailed Iranian activity in the Western Hemisphere in several recent press releases. In May, the department imposed sanctions on the Iranian Venezuelan Bi-National Bank for engaging in financial transactions on behalf of the previously sanctioned Export Development Bank of Iran.²⁴ In June 2012, four additional individuals and three entities involved in drug kingpin Ayman Joumma’s narcotics trafficking network were designated. Joumma himself had previously been designated in January 2011 and at one point was laundering “as much as \$200 million per month” on behalf of Hezbollah.²⁵ In June 2008, two Venezuelan supporters of Hezbollah were designated as terrorists; in addition to facilitating fundraising, these supporters were working on operations including discussions of possible kidnappings, terrorist attacks, and arranging travel to Iran of others for training.²⁶

Iran’s activity is based on a global strategy, and it is therefore worth mentioning the EU’s decision last week in Brussels to take a long-overdue step in the right direction by designating the “military wing” of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, thereby making it clear to the group that it will pay a political price for continued acts of terrorism, crime, and militancy. The incident that sparked the debate in Europe was Hezbollah’s attack in Burgas—conducted with logistical support from Iran—just over a year ago, killing six and injuring several more on July 18. There is much to be discussed on Burgas, but since today’s hearing focuses on the Western Hemisphere, it is worth taking a step back and focusing on Iran’s role in the AMIA bombing, which occurred 19 years to the day before the Burgas bombing.

Not New: Iran in the AMIA Plot

As detailed above, Iranian intelligence and logistics support for the AMIA bombing was extensive. Within weeks after the meeting in Mashhad at which Iranian officials approved the AMIA bombing based on Rabbani and Asghari’s briefings, Iranian diplomats started requesting diplomatic visas for visits to Argentina. Visas were requested in October 1993 for Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) undersecretary Ali Janati and Ahmad Alamolhoda, the director of the Cultural Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Coming on the heels of Rabbani’s appointment as cultural attaché, these officials’ proposed six-day visit raised concerns among investigators—not least because of Janati’s seniority and witness descriptions of his brother as a Revolutionary Guard official and “a well-known terrorist and member of the hard line faction.”²⁷ For reasons unknown, this trip never happened. Nearly simultaneous visa requests would later be submitted for Alamolhoda at the Argentinean embassies in The Hague and Berlin on June 7 and 8, 1994. Alamolhoda arrived in Argentina within days, and despite specifically requesting a thirty-day visa, he departed just four days later for Madrid, site of the MOIS regional office that oversees activities in Latin America.²⁸

²³ Southern Command Commander General John F. Kelly, statement before the House Armed Services Committee, March 20, 2013.

²⁴ U.S. Treasury Department, “Treasury Targets Iranian Attempts to Evade Sanctions,” press release, May 9, 2013.

²⁵ U.S. Treasury Department, “Treasury Targets Major Money Laundering Network Linked to Drug Trafficker Ayman Joumma and a Key Hizballah Supporter in South America,” press release, June 27, 2012. <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1624.aspx>

²⁶ U.S. Treasury Department, “Treasury Targets Hizballah in Venezuela,” press release, June 18, 2008. <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1036.aspx>

²⁷ AMIA indictment, 28.

²⁸ Burgos and Nisman, 189-90.

As for the funding of the AMIA bombing, much appears to have flowed through bank accounts controlled by Rabbani. In December 1993, two months after he returned from the go-ahead meeting in Mashhad, Rabbani opened an account at a local branch of Deutsche Bank. He already had two active bank accounts, one opened at Banco Sudameris in April 1989, and another at Banco Tornquist, opened in March 1992, but the new account was to serve a very specific purpose. Just four months before the AMIA bombing, a total of \$150,812 was deposited in Rabbani's new bank account. Rabbani withdrew a total of \$94,000 from this account in the period leading up to the July 18 bombing, and another \$45,588 was withdrawn within two months following the attack. These funds arrived through international bank transfers, at least three of which were sent from Iran's Bank Melli through Unión de Bancos Suizos.²⁹ Only later, in October 2007, would the U.S. government reveal that Bank Melli was an established financial conduit through which Iran purchased sensitive materials for its nuclear and missile programs and moved money for the IRGC and Qods Force.³⁰

Rabbani apparently received funds from Iran in his Banco Tornquist account as well. According to Argentina's federal tax office, there is no evidence that funds deposited into that account originated in Argentina. Prosecutors believe that "Rabbani used the funds from the aforementioned account to defray various expenses related to the execution of the AMIA attack."³¹ Over the course of 1994—both before and after the attack—Rabbani withdrew a total of \$284,388 from his accounts, underscoring Mesbahi's testimony that "Rabbani was the main person in charge of the local logistics for the operation."³²

Alongside Iran's use of diplomatic cover to build an intelligence network in Argentina, Tehran likewise provided cover stories and day jobs to Hezbollah operatives. A close contact of Imad Mughniyeh's, the *New Yorker* reported, "is a sheikh named Bilal Mohsen Wehbi, a Lebanese who was trained in Iran, and who reports to the Iranian Cultural Affairs Ministry."³³ This ministry, along with the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and the Foreign Ministry, effectively embedded agents abroad to support Hezbollah plots. At the Foreign Ministry, for example, the director for Arab affairs, Hossein Sheikh al-Islam, coordinated with the IRGC "to place its members in Iranian embassies abroad and participate in Hezbollah operations," according to Hezbollah expert Magnus Ranstorp.³⁴ Members of the IRGC's Qods Force also played key support roles in the AMIA attack, according to a Defense Department report on Iran's military power.³⁵

Two days before the attack, as the explosives-filled van was being parked in a garage near the AMIA center, Mohsen Rabbani placed calls to GTC from his cell phone. Cell tower logs confirm Rabbani was in the vicinity of the parking garage and the AMIA at the time.³⁶ This drew the attention of investigators, not only because GTC was believed to be a front for Iranian intelligence, but also because the Ministry for Reconstruction "was used as a cover for activities by Qods Force representatives."³⁷

²⁹ Ibid., 235-7.

³⁰ U.S. Treasury Department, "Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism," October 25, 2007.

³¹ Burgos and Nisman, 235-7.

³² Ibid, 247.

³³ Goldberg, "In the Party of God."

³⁴ Ranstorp, "Hizbollah's Command Leadership," 319-20.

³⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran," April 2010.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ Ibid., 175-6.

Interviewing witnesses and investigating GTC and other companies, investigators found that Mohsen Rabbani maintained such close ties with Iranian front companies that he often determined who they employed. In one intercepted telephone call, the head of a suspected front company, South Beef, was overheard explaining that “Rabbani was the one who provided all the personnel for the companies,” and therefore hiring new employees was not up to him.³⁸

Iranian Plotting Continues

Rabbani's terrorist activities in South America, however, did not wane despite him 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.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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.⁴² He was carrying a computer drive with photographs featuring

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

³⁹ Associated Press, “U.S.: ‘Unthinkable’ terror devastation prevented,” June 3, 2007, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/18999503/ns/us_news-security/t/us-unthinkable-terror-devastation-prevented/#.UdH4zTvVD_J

⁴⁰ FBI, “Most Wanted Terrorists,” http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/wanted_terrorists/adnan-g.-el-shukrijumah

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² U.S. Attorney's Office, “Russell Defreitas Sentenced to Life in Prison for Conspiring to Commit Terrorist Attack at JFK Airport,” press release, FBI, <http://www.fbi.gov/newyork/press-releases/2011/russell-defreitas-sentenced-to-life-in-prison-for-conspiring-to-commit-terrorist-attack-at-jfk-airport>

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.⁴³

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. In the words of one Brazilian official, "Without anybody noticing, a generation of Islamic extremists is appearing in Brazil."⁴⁴

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Venezuela in January 2012 at the surface seemed rather unremarkable beyond his normal inflammatory personality and his efforts to deepen ties with Latin America. However, according to Western intelligence officials, "a senior officer in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) traveled secretly with the presidential delegation and met with Venezuelan military and security chiefs." The purpose of this officer's presence was to hold a meeting with Venezuelan intelligence agents "to set up a joint intelligence program between Iranian and Venezuelan spy agencies." After a secret meeting, Venezuela "agreed to provide systematic help to Iran with intelligence infrastructure such as arms, identification documents, bank accounts and pipelines for moving operatives and equipment between Iran and Latin America."⁴⁵ And today, it is Rabbani who continues to run Iranian intelligence networks in Latin America, although now he is doing so from Iran, where he directs ideological and operational training for recruits who are brought to Iran. According to Latin American transnational crime and terrorism expert Douglas Farah, "The recruitment efforts have been continuous and ongoing since at least 2007, and each year hundreds of recruits—and possibly thousands—are taken to Iran for training. After six years, well over 1,000 people have made the trip and, even if only a relatively small group remains loyal to the Iranian regime, it is a significant network."⁴⁶

So, while the State Department's *Iranian Activity* report states that in the Western Hemisphere, "There were no known operational cells of either al-Qa'ida or Hizballah," the department's annual terrorism report separately noted a noticeable increase in Iranian activity in all other parts of the world.⁴⁷ At least some of that activity has been seen here in the Western Hemisphere. Just last week, seven Iranians were caught using fake Israeli passports at the Vancouver International Airport.⁴⁸ In December 2011, U.S. officials began investigating reports that Iranian and Venezuelan officials were plotting cyberattacks from the Venezuelan embassy in Mexico.⁴⁹ In February 2012, authorities in Azerbaijan arrested 22 people on suspicion of spying for Iran, and accusing them of having links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁵⁰ Also that month, attacks by Iran took place in India, Georgia, and

⁴³ A. G. Sulzberger, "Trial Focuses on Iran Ties of Kennedy Plot Suspect," *New York Times*, July 24, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/22/nyregion/22kennedy.html?_r=0

⁴⁴ Robin Yapp, "Brazil latest base for Islamic extremists," *The Telegraph*, April 3, 2011 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/brazil/8424929/Brazil-latest-base-for-Islamic-extremists.html>

⁴⁵ Sebastian Rotella, "The Terror Threat and Iran's Inroads in Latin America," *ProPublica*, July 11, 2013, <http://www.propublica.org/article/the-terror-threat-and-irans-inroads-in-latin-america>

⁴⁶ Douglas Farah, statement before House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency, July 9, 2013, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM09/20130709/101046/HHRG-113-HM09-Wstate-FarahD-20130709.pdf>.

⁴⁷ U.S. State Department, "Country Reports on Terrorism," May 30, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2012/209978.htm>.

⁴⁸ "Iranians caught using fake Israeli passports at Vancouver airport," *Jerusalem Report*, July 26, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Iranians-caught-using-fake-Israeli-passports-at-Vancouver-airport-321150>

⁴⁹ S. Smithson, "U.S. authorities probing alleged cyberattack plot by Venezuela, Iran," *Washington Times*, December 13, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/dec/13/us-probing-alleged-cyberattack-plot-iran-venezuela/?page=all>.

⁵⁰ "Azerbaijan arrests 22 suspects in alleged Iran spy plot," *BBC*, March 14, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17368576>.

Thailand.⁵¹ The following month, an Iranian PhD student in India was deported for spying on Israeli nationals.⁵² In May 2012, Israeli officials prevented an attack tied to Iran and Hezbollah in South Africa.⁵³ The following month, two IRGC members were discovered in Kenya and were later found guilty of planning to attack Western targets.⁵⁴ And, just weeks after Hezbollah conducted the bus bombing in Burgas, an Iranian-sponsored agent was arrested outside a synagogue in Sofia, Bulgaria.⁵⁵ In October 2012, just three months after a dual Swedish-Lebanese Hezbollah agent was arrested for conducting surveillance on Israelis arriving in the airport, an attack was thwarted when security officials seized explosives intended to target an Israeli cruise ship visiting Cyprus.⁵⁶ In December 2012, a man in Nigeria was arrested, confessing to having received training in Iran and planning to target Western and Israeli interests in Mombassa.⁵⁷ In February of this year, three men were arrested in Spain for spying on behalf of Iran.⁵⁸ In April, an Iranian was arrested in Nepal outside the Israeli embassy with a fake Israeli passport he had been using.⁵⁹ In April, acting on a tip from Israeli intelligence officials, Bosnia asked two Iranian diplomats to leave and warned about a third who had been present in Thailand, Georgia, and India.⁶⁰

The growth of the Iranian extremist network in the Western Hemisphere 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.⁶¹ 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."⁶²

⁵¹ Isabel Kershner and Michael Schwartz, "Israel Blames Iran for Attacks in India and Georgia," *New York Times*, February 13, 2012; "Bangkok Blast Suspects 'Targeting Israeli Diplomats'," *BBC*, February 16, 2012.

⁵² Gitesh Shelke, "Iranian spy was PhD student at UoP," *PureMirror*, April 26, 2012, <http://www.punemirror.in/index.aspx?page=article§id=62&contentid=2012042620120426023814437667f66ee>.

⁵³ Itamer Eichner, "PM reveals: South Africa attack against Israelis thwarted," *Ynet*, July 20, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4258237,00.html>

⁵⁴ Associated Press, "Members of Iranian regime's IRGC convicted for planning terrorist attacks," May 2, 2013, <http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/terrorism-fundamentalism/13577-members-of-iranian-regime-s-irgc-convicted-for-planning-terrorist-attacks>.

⁵⁵ Author interview, Israeli Intelligence officials, September 13, 2012.

⁵⁶ Philip Podolsky, "Terror attack against Israeli targets said thwarted in Cyprus," *Times of Israel*, October 18, 2012, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/terror-attack-against-israeli-targets-said-thwarted-in-cyprus/>.

⁵⁷ Reuters and jpost.com Staff, "Kenya finds 2 Iranians guilty of terror attack plot," *Jerusalem Post*, May 2, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Kenya-finds-2-Iranians-guilty-of-terror-attack-plot-311867>.

⁵⁸ Associate Press, "Spain arrests 3 men for allegedly spying for Iran," *Daily Star (Beirut)*, February 22, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Feb-22/207550-spain-arrests-3-men-for-allegedly-spying-for-iran.ashx#axzz2Lv7r9civ>.

⁵⁹ "Nepal: Iranian with fake Israeli Passport Arrested," Associated Press, April 24, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/nepal-iranian-fake-israeli-passport-arrested>.

⁶⁰ Benjamin Weinthal, "Bosnia expels two Iranian diplomats," *Jerusalem Post*, April 28, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Bosnia-expels-two-iranian-diplomats-311310>; AFP, "Two Iranian spies expelled from Bosnia," *Defence.pk*, May 17, 2013, <http://www.defence.pk/forums/world-affairs/252646-two-iranian-spies-expelled-bosnia.html#ixzz2WlbXvqqT>.

⁶¹ Benjamin Weiser, "Man Sentenced in Plot to Kill Saudi Ambassador," *New York Times*, May 30, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/31/nyregion/mansour-arbabsiar-sentenced-for-plot-to-kill-saudi-ambassador.html>

⁶² Eric Schmitt, "Intelligence Report Lists Iran and Cyberattacks as Leading Concerns," *New York Times*, January 31, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/world/intelligence-chief-sees-al-qaeda-likely-to-continue-fragmenting.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Prospects for Terrorism under New Iranian President

A final comment is warranted not on Iran's presence or activities in the Western Hemisphere per se, but on the likelihood that Hassan Rouhani's election might lead Iran to curb its support for, and own involvement in, international terrorism. Rouhani's victory has been widely heralded as a protest vote against the hardliners and a window of opportunity for diplomatic breakthrough with Western powers.⁶³ But such assumptions beg the question: just how much moderation should be expected from a "moderate" Iranian president, particularly with regard to state sponsorship of terrorism? Past precedent suggests that expectations should be tempered.

Rouhani is not the first Iranian "moderate" to win the presidency. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, elected in 1989, was frequently described as a moderate as well. According to U.S. intelligence, however, he oversaw a long string of terrorist plots during his eight years in office. The CIA linked Rafsanjani to terrorist plots as early as 1985, when he was serving as speaker of parliament. In a February 15, 1985 memo, the agency assessed that "Iranian-sponsored terrorism is the greatest threat to US personnel and facilities in the Middle East...Iranian-backed attacks increased by 30 percent in 1984, and the numbers killed in Iranian-sponsored attacks outpace fatalities in strikes by all other terrorist sponsors. Senior Iranian leaders such as Ayatollah Montazeri,...Prime Minister [Mir Hossein Mousavi], and Consultative Assembly speaker Rafsanjani are implicated in Iranian terrorism."

In August 1990, the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence authored a more in-depth assessment titled "Iranian Support for Terrorism: Rafsanjani's Report Card." According to the agency, the regime's sponsorship of terrorist activities had continued unabated since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini the previous June: "Although Rafsanjani has sought to improve relations with some Western nations since directly assuming the presidency last August, events of the past year prove that Tehran continues to view the selective use of terrorism as a legitimate tool."⁶⁴ Iranian terrorist attacks targeting "enemies of the regime" over the previous year "were probably approved in advance by President Rafsanjani and other senior leaders," the report assessed, but "the planning and implementation of these operations are...probably managed by other senior officials, most of whom are Rafsanjani's appointees or allies."⁶⁵ The CIA concluded that "Rafsanjani and [Supreme Leader] Khamenei would closely monitor and approve planning for an attack against the US or Western interests."⁶⁶

Looking forward, CIA analysts assessed in 1990 that "Rafsanjani and other Iranian leaders will continue selectively using terrorism as a foreign policy tool to intimidate regime opponents, punish enemies of Islam, and influence Western political decisions."⁶⁷ Two years later, such assessments appeared prescient. In 1992, the CIA recorded a long list of Iranian terrorist activities, from attacks targeting Israeli, Saudi, and American officials in Turkey, to plots targeting Jewish émigrés from the former Soviet Union and anti-regime dissidents abroad.⁶⁸

⁶³ Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Moderate Wins Presidency by a Large Margin," *New York Times*, June 15, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/world/middleeast/iran-election.html?pagewanted=all>; Jason Rezaian and Joby Warrick, "Moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani wins Iran's presidential vote," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iranians-await-presidential-election-results-following-extension-of-polling-hours/2013/06/15/3800c276-d593-11e2-a73e-826d299ff459_story.html

⁶⁴ US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Directorate of Intelligence. "Iranian Support for Terrorism: Rafsanjani's Report Card." *Terrorism Review*, August 9, 1990.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Directorate of Intelligence. "Iran: Enhanced Terrorist Capabilities and Expanding Target Selection." April 1, 1992.

Additionally, in May 1997, Muhammad Khatami was elected as Iran's fifth president after running on a distinctly reformist platform. Supporters of Iranian radicalism, including Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, had strongly supported Khatami's more overtly revolutionary opponent, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri.⁶⁹

In a December 1997 memo, the CIA asserted that Hezbollah leaders were shocked by Khatami's victory and "scrambled to ensure that his election would not diminish Iran's support" for the group. Their concerns would prove unfounded, however—when Nasrallah visited Tehran in October 1997, Khatami and other officials pledged their continued support, emphasizing that the regime had not changed its position regarding the group or its operations against Israel.⁷⁰

According to the CIA memo, Khatami "probably joins other Iranian leaders who maintain that support to Hezbollah is an essential aspect of Tehran's effort to promote itself as leader of the Muslim world and champion of the oppressed."⁷¹ More important, the CIA assessed that Khatami would have been unable to withdraw Iran's sponsorship of Hezbollah even if he had wanted to. As the memo put it, Khatami "probably does not have the authority to make such a change without the approval of Khamenei, who has long been one of the group's foremost supporters."⁷²

The fact that the least radical candidate won Iran's latest presidential election has many observers excited about the prospect of more moderate policymaking in Tehran. Yet regardless of how Rouhani's election might affect the nuclear impasse, the Islamic Republic's history indicates that "moderate" or "reformist" presidents do not translate into moderation of Iran's terrorism sponsorship. Even if Rouhani were inclined to curb such policies, there is no evidence that he has the authority to do so without the Supreme Leader's approval, which seems highly unlikely at present.

Indeed, as Iran geared up for its June 14 presidential election, the activities of its powerful intelligence services were also kicking into high gear across the globe. The U.S. State Department's [annual terrorism report](#), released May 30—while not mentioning the Western Hemisphere—does highlight a "marked resurgence" of Iranian state sponsorship of terrorism over the past 18 months through the IRGC and its connections with Hezbollah. Specifically, the report notes that "Iran and Hizballah's terrorist activity has reached a tempo unseen since the 1990s, with attacks plotted in Southeast Asia, Europe, and Africa."⁷³ And of course, there is also Iran and Hezbollah's active support for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown against his own people.

Conclusion

As the new Nisman report clearly indicates—and as detailed above—Iran has run intelligence networks in America's backyard to "sponsor, foster and execute terrorist attacks" for decades.

Some in the region have yet to get serious about the threat Iran and Hezbollah pose. The need for attention is perhaps greater today than it has been in years past, since Iran and Hezbollah—as a result of both necessity and opportunity—appear to have renewed operational planning focused on South America. Confronting the threat this terrorist network poses will require close law enforcement, intelligence, and policy coordination throughout

⁶⁹ US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Directorate of Intelligence. "Hizballah's Reactions to Khatami's Election, December 22, 1997, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001280265.pdf.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ U.S. State Department, "Country Reports on Terrorism," May 30, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2012/209978.htm>

the Western Hemisphere. And with Iran and Hezbollah actively plotting terrorist attacks around the world, such cooperation should take shape as quickly as possible.