

## Another Neocon Attempt to Frame Iran Falls Apart



In January 2008, it was scary speed-boats, now, it's a bogus link to a bombing in Argentina that elements within the Bush Administration are trying to blame on Iran, whom they are depicting as the main sponsor of international terrorism.

Although nukes and Iraq have been the main focus of the Bush Administration's pressure campaign against Iran, US officials also seek to tar Iran as the world's leading sponsor of terrorism. And Team Bush's latest tactic is to play up a thirteen-year-old accusation that Iran was responsible for the notorious Buenos Aires bombing that destroyed the city's Jewish Community Center, known as AMIA, killing eighty-six and injuring 300, in 1994. Unnamed senior Administration officials told the Wall Street Journal on January 15, 2007 that the bombing in Argentina "serves as a model for how Tehran has used its overseas embassies and relationship with foreign militant groups, in particular Hezbollah, to strike at its enemies."

This propaganda campaign depends heavily on a decision in November 2007 by the General Assembly of Interpol, which voted to put five former Iranian officials and a Hezbollah leader on the international police organization's "red list" for allegedly having planned the July 1994 bombing. But the Wall Street Journal reports that it was pressure from the Bush Administration, along with Israeli and Argentine diplomats, that secured the Interpol vote. In fact, the Bush Administration's manipulation of the Argentine bombing case is perfectly in line with its long practice of using distorting and manufactured evidence to build a case against its geopolitical enemies.



After spending several months interviewing officials at the US Embassy in Buenos Aires familiar with the Argentine investigation, the head of the FBI team that assisted it and the most knowledgeable independent Argentine investigator of the case, I found that no real evidence has ever been found to implicate Iran in the bombing. Based on these interviews and the documentary record of the investigation, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the case against Iran over the AMIA bombing has been driven from the beginning by US enmity toward Iran, not by a desire to find the real perpetrators.

US policy toward the bombing was skewed from the beginning by a Clinton Administration strategy of isolating Iran, adopted in 1993 as part of an understanding with Israel on peace negotiations with the Palestinians. On the very day of the crime, before anything could have been known about who was responsible, Secretary of State Warren Christopher blamed "those who want to stop the peace process in the Middle East" - an obvious reference to Iran.

William Brencick, then chief of the political section at the US Embassy in Buenos Aires and the primary Embassy contact for the investigation, recalled in an interview with me in June 2007 that a "wall of assumptions" guided the US approach to the case. The primary assumptions, Brencick said, were that the explosion was a suicide bombing and that use of a suicide bomb was prima facie evidence of involvement by Hezbollah - and therefore Iran.

But the suicide-bomber thesis quickly encountered serious problems. In the wake of the explosion, the Menem government asked the United States to send a team to assist in the investigation, and two days after the bombing, experts from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms arrived in

Buenos Aires along with three FBI agents. According to an interview the head of the team, ATF explosives expert Charles Hunter, gave to a team of independent investigators headed by US journalist Joe Goldman and Argentine investigative journalist Jorge Lanata, as soon as the team arrived, the federal police put forward a thesis that a white Renault Trafic van had carried the bomb that destroyed the AMIA.

Hunter quickly identified major discrepancies between the car-bomb thesis and the blast pattern recorded in photos. He wrote a report two weeks later noting that in the wake of the bombing, merchandise in a store immediately to the right of the AMIA was tightly packed against its front windows and merchandise in another shop had been blown out onto the street - suggesting that the blast came from inside rather than outside. Hunter also said he did not understand how the building across the street could still be standing if the bomb had exploded in front of the AMIA, as suggested by the car-bomb thesis.

The lack of eyewitness evidence supporting the thesis was just as striking. Of some 200 witnesses on the scene, only one claimed to have seen a white Renault Trafic. Several testified they were looking at the spot where the Trafic should have been when the explosion occurred and saw nothing. Nicolasa Romero, the wife of a Buenos Aires policeman, was that lone witness. She said she saw a white Renault Trafic approach the corner where she was standing with her sister and her 4-year-old son. But Romero's sister testified that the vehicle that passed them was not a white Trafic but rather a black-and-yellow taxi. Other witnesses reported seeing a black-and-yellow taxi seconds before the explosion.

Argentine prosecutors argued that pieces of a white Trafic embedded in the flesh of many of the victims of the explosion proved their case for a suicide bomb. But that evidence was discredited by Gabriel Levinas, a researcher for AMIA's own legal team. Levinas is a member of a leading Jewish family in Buenos Aires who had published a human rights magazine during the dictatorship (his uncle's car was used to kidnap war criminal Adolf Eichmann and spirit him off to Israel for trial in 1982.)

He discovered that the manufacturer of the white Trafic had been sent fragments of the vehicle recovered by the police for analysis and had found that none of the pieces had ever been put under high temperature. That meant that these car fragments could not have come from the particular white Trafic that police had identified as the suicide bomb car - since that vehicle was known to have once caught fire before having been recycled and repaired.

Yet despite the lack of eyewitness testimony and the weakness of the forensic evidence, the State Department publicly embraced the suicide-bomb story in 1994 and 1995.



Independent investigators have also long puzzled over why Iran would have carried out an action against Argentine Jews while its Hezbollah allies were embroiled in armed struggle with the Israeli military in Lebanon. In their 2006 indictment of several Iranian nationals in the bombing, Argentine prosecutors argued that Iran planned the AMIA attack because Carlos Menem's administration had abruptly cancelled two contracts for the transfer of nuclear technology to Iran.

But the indictment actually provides excerpts from key documents that undermine that conclusion. According to a February 10, 1992 cable from Argentina's ambassador in Iran, the director of the American Department of Iran's foreign ministry had "emphasized the need to reach a solution to the problem [of nuclear technology transfer] that would avoid damage to other contracts." Iran thus clearly signalled its hope of finding a negotiated solution that could reactivate the suspended contracts and maintain other deals with Argentina as well.

On March 17, 1992, a bomb blast destroyed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires - an incident for which the Argentine prosecutors also held Iran responsible. The indictment, however, quotes a top official of INVAP, an Argentine nuclear firm that dominated the National Commission on Atomic Energy, as saying that during 1992 there were "contacts" between INVAP and the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran "in the expectation that the decision of the national government would be revised, allowing the tasks in the contracts to be resumed." The same official confirmed that negotiations surrounding the two cancelled projects continued from 1993 to 1995 - before and after the AMIA explosion. Those revelations suggest that the Iranian attitude toward Argentina at the time of the bombing was exactly the opposite of the one claimed in the indictment.

The Hezbollah motive for involvement in the AMIA bombing, according to the indictment, was revenge against the Israeli bombing of a Hezbollah training camp in the Bekaa Valley in early 1994 and the Israeli kidnapping of Shiite leader Mustapha Dirani in May. That theory fails to explain, however, why Hezbollah would choose to retaliate against Jews in Argentina. It was already at war with the Israeli forces in Lebanon, where the group was employing suicide bomb

attacks in an effort to pressure Israel to end its occupation. Hezbollah had a second easy retaliatory option available, which was to launch Katyusha rockets across the border into Israeli territory.

That is exactly what Hezbollah did to retaliate for the Israeli killing of some 100 Lebanese civilians in the town of Qana in 1996. That episode inspired greater anger toward Israel among Hezbollah militants than any other event in the 1990s, according to Boston University Hezbollah specialist Augustus Richard Norton. If Hezbollah responded to this Israeli provocation with Katyusha rockets on Israeli territory, it hardly makes sense that it would have responded to a lesser Israeli offense by designing an ambitious international attack on Argentine Jews with no connection to the Israeli occupation.

The keystone of the Argentine case was Carlos Alberto Telleldin, a used-car salesman with a record of shady dealings with both criminals and the police - and a Shiite last name. On July 10, 1994, Telleldin sold the white Traffic the police claimed was the suicide car to a man he described as having a Central American accent. Nine days after the bombing Telleldin was arrested on suspicion of being an accomplice to the crime.

The police claimed they were led to Telleldin by the serial number on the van's engine block, which was found in the rubble. But it would have been a remarkable lapse for the organizers of what was otherwise a very professional bombing to have left intact such a visible identification mark, one that any car thief knows how to erase. That should have been a clue that the attack was likely not orchestrated by Hezbollah, whose bomb experts were well-known by US intelligence analysts to have been clever enough, in blowing up the American Embassy in Beirut in 1983, to avoid leaving behind any forensic evidence that would lead back to them. It should also have raised questions about whether that evidence was planted by the police themselves.



It is now clear that the Menem government's real purpose in arresting Telleldin was to get him to finger those they wanted to blame for the bombing. In January 1995, Telleldin was visited by retired army Capt. Hector Pedro Vergez, a part-time agent for SIDE, the Argentine intelligence agency, who offered him \$1 million and his freedom if he would identify one of five Lebanese nationals detained in Paraguay in September 2004 - men the CIA said might be Hezbollah militants - as the person to whom he had sold the van. After Telleldin refused to go along with the scheme, an Argentine judge found that there was no evidence on which to detain the alleged militants.

The Buenos Aires court, which threw out the case against Telleldin in 2004, determined that a federal judge, Luisa Riva Aramayo, met with Telleldin in 1995 to discuss another possibility - paying him to testify that he had sold the van to several high-ranking figures in the Buenos Aires provincial police who were allies of Menem's political rival, Eduardo Duhalde. In July 1996, Judge Juan Jose Galeano, who was overseeing the investigation, offered Telleldin \$400,000 to implicate those police officers as accomplices in the bombing. (A videotape made secretly by SIDE agents and aired on television in April 1997 showed Galeano negotiating the bribe.) A month after making the offer to Telleldin, Galeano charged three senior Buenos Aires police officials with having involvement in the bombing, based on Telleldin's testimony.

In an interview in May 2007, James Cheek, Clinton's Ambassador to Argentina at the time of the bombing, told me, "To my knowledge, there was never any real evidence [of Iranian responsibility]. They never came up with anything." The hottest lead in the case, he recalled, was an Iranian defector named Manoucher Moatamer, who "supposedly had all this information." But Moatamer turned out to be only a dissatisfied low-ranking official without the knowledge of government decision-making that he had claimed. "We finally decided that he wasn't credible," Cheek recalled. Ron Goddard, then deputy chief of the US Mission in Buenos Aires, confirmed Cheek's account. He recalled that investigators found nothing linking Iran to the bombing. "The whole Iran thing seemed kind of flimsy," Goddard said.

James Bernazzani, then the head of the FBI's Hezbollah office, was directed in October 1997 to assemble a team of specialists to go to Buenos Aires and put the AMIA case to rest. Bernazzani, now head of the agency's New Orleans office, recalled in a November 2006 interview how he arrived to find that the Argentine investigation of the AMIA bombing had found no real evidence of Iranian or Hezbollah involvement. The only clues suggesting an Iranian link to the bombing at that time, according to Bernazzani, were a surveillance tape of Iranian cultural attaché Mohsen Rabbani shopping for a white Traffic van and an analysis of telephone calls made in the weeks before the bombing.

Shortly after the bombing, the biggest Buenos Aires daily newspaper, Clarin, published a story, leaked to it by Judge Galeano, that Argentine intelligence had taped Rabbani shopping for a white Traffic "months" before the bombing. A summary of the warrants for the arrest of Rabbani and six other Iranians in 2006 continued to refer to "indisputable documents" proving that Rabbani had

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visited car dealers to look for a van like the one allegedly used in the bombing. In fact, the intelligence report on the surveillance of Rabbani submitted to Galeano ten days after the bombing shows that the day Rabbani looked at a car dealer's white Traffic was May 1, 1993 - fifteen months before the bombing and long before Argentine prosecutors have claimed Iran decided to target AMIA.

In the absence of any concrete evidence, SIDE turned to "link analysis" of telephone records to make a circumstantial case for Iranian guilt. The SIDE analysts argued that a series of telephone calls made between July 1 and July 18, 1994, to a mobile phone in the Brazilian border city of Foz de Iguazu must have been made by the "operational group" for the bombing - and that a call allegedly made on a cell-phone belonging to Rabbani could be connected to this same group. The FBI's Bernazzani told me he was appalled by SIDE's use of link analysis to establish responsibility. "It can be very dangerous," he told me. "Using that analysis, you could link my telephone to bin Laden's." Bernazzani said the conclusions reached by the Argentine investigators were merely "speculation" and said that neither he nor officials in Washington had taken it seriously as evidence pointing to Iran.

Then, in 2000, one more defector surfaced with a new tale of Iranian responsibility. Abdolghassem Mesbahi, who claimed he was once the third-ranking man in Iran's intelligence services, told Galeano the decision to bomb the AMIA had been made at a meeting of senior Iranian officials, including President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, on August 14, 1993. But Mesbahi was soon discredited. Bernazzani told me American intelligence officials believed that by 2000, Mesbahi had long since lost his access to Iranian intelligence, that he was "poor, even broke" and ready to "provide testimony to any country on any case involving Iran."



Bernazzani admitted to me that until 2003, the case against Iran was merely "circumstantial." But he claimed a breakthrough came that year, with the identification of the alleged suicide bomber as Ibrahim Hussein Berro, a Lebanese Hezbollah militant, who, according to a Lebanese radio broadcast, was killed in a military operation against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon in September 1984, two months after the AMIA bombing. "We are satisfied that we have identified the bomber based on the totality of the data streams," Bernazzani told me, citing "a combination of physical and witness evidence." But the Berro identification, too, was marked by evidence of fabrication and manipulation.

The official story is that Berro's name was passed on to SIDE and the CIA by a Lebanese informant in June 2001. The informant claimed he had befriended a former Hezbollah chauffeur and assistant to top Hezbollah leaders named Abu Mohamad Yassin, who told him that a Hezbollah militant named "Brru" was the suicide bomber. That story is suspicious on several counts, the most obvious being that intelligence agencies almost never reveal the name, or even the former position, of an actual informant.

The September 2003 court testimony of Patricio Pfinnen, the SIDE official in charge of the AMIA bombing investigation until he was fired in January 2002, casts serious doubt on the informant's credibility. Pfinnen testified that when he and his colleagues went back to the informant with more questions, "something went wrong with the information, or they were lying to us." Pfinnen said his team ultimately discarded the Berro theory because the sources in Lebanon had "failed and were not certain." He concluded, "I have my doubts about [Berro] being the person who was immolated."

After Pfinnen was fired in a power struggle within the intelligence agency, SIDE named Berro as the suicide bomber in a secret report. In March 2003, just after that report was completed, Ha'aretz reported that Mossad had not only identified the bomber as Berro but possessed a transcript of Berro's farewell telephone call to Lebanon before the bombing, during which he told his parents that he was going to "join" his brother, who had been killed in a suicide bombing in Lebanon. When the 2006 indictment was released, however, it became clear that no evidence of such a call existed.

In September 2004, a Buenos Aires court acquitted Telleldin and the police officials who had been jailed years earlier, and in August 2005 Judge Galeano was impeached and removed from office. But Galeano's successors, prosecutors Alberto Nisman and Marcelo Martinez Burgos, pressed on, hoping to convince the world that they could identify Berro as the bomber. They visited Detroit, Michigan, where they interviewed two brothers of Berro and obtained photos of Berro from them. They then turned to the only witness who claimed she had seen the white Traffic at the scene of the crime - Nicolasa Romero.

In November 2005, Nisman and Burgos announced that Romero had identified Berro from the Detroit photos as the same person she had seen just before the bombing. Romero, on the other

hand, said she "could not be completely certain" that Berro was the man at the scene. In court testimony, in fact, she had said she had not recognized Berro from the first set of set of four photographs she had been shown or even from a second set. She finally saw some "similarity in the face" in one of the Berro photographs, but only after she was shown a police sketch based on her description after the bombing.

Bernazzani told me that the FBI team in Buenos Aires had discovered DNA evidence that was assumed to have come from the suicide bomber in an evidence locker, and Nisman took a DNA sample from one of Berro's brothers during his visit in September 2005. "I would assume, though I don't know, that once we got the brother's DNA, they compared them," he said. But Nisman claimed to a reporter in 2006 that samples had been contaminated. Significantly, the Argentine indictment of the Iranians makes no mention of the DNA evidence.



Despite a case against Iran that lacked credible forensic or eyewitness evidence and relied heavily on dubious intelligence and a discredited defector's testimony, Nisman and Burgos drafted their indictment against six former Iranian officials in 2006. However, the government of Néstor Kirchner displayed doubts about going forward with a legal case. According to the Forward newspaper, when American Jewish groups pressed Kirchner's wife, Christina, about the indictments at a UN General Assembly in New York in September 2006, she indicated that there was no firm date for any further judicial action against Iran. Yet the indictment was released the following month.

Both the main lawyer representing the AMIA, Miguel Bronfman, and Judge Rodolfo Canicoba Corral, who later issued the arrest warrants for the Iranians, told the BBC in May 2007 that pressure from Washington was instrumental in the sudden decision to issue the indictments the following month. Corral indicated that he had no doubt that the Argentine authorities had been

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urged to "join in international attempts to isolate the regime in Tehran."

A senior White House official has now called the AMIA case a "very clear definition of what Iranian state sponsorship of terrorism means." In fact, the US's insistence on pinning that crime on Iran in order to isolate the Tehran regime, even though it had no evidence to support that accusation, is a perfect definition of cynical creation of an accusation in the service of power interests.

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