

# Argentina's Jews After The Bomb:

## From Scapegoats to Pariahs

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**E**very Monday morning at a few minutes before 10:00, the precise moment on July 18 that a car bomb leveled the Argentinian Jewish Mutual Agency in Buenos Aires and killed 99 people and injured 157, a group of Argentinian Jews marches in front of the city's Supreme Court carrying signs reading "No to Impunity." The protestors are demanding to know why investigators have failed to identify and apprehend the perpetrators of the bombing, which not only destroyed the "AMIA" (the Jewish center's Spanish acronym, pronounced "AH-mee-ya"), but ripped a hole in the heart of the 250,000-strong community.

The word "impunity" was not chosen lightly; "*impunidad*" can be understood as a code word for the government's failure to punish those responsible for the death of thousands in the late 1970s during the military government's "dirty war" on Peronists and leftists. For an embittered, fearful and suddenly isolated Jewish community, there is no reason to believe that the country's ugly recent history and what some are calling a botched, lackadaisical investigation are unrelated.

Unfortunately, the case is not easily cracked—and the sheer number of scenarios underlines how beleaguered the Jewish community is feeling. At first, the leading contender was Hezbollah, the Islamic Party of God, the Iranian-sponsored organization that has been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks in Israel's security zone in southern Lebanon, as well as in Israel itself.

The case against Hezbollah is intimately related to the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992, an attack which killed 28. No arrests were made in that case either, but Israel is convinced that Hezbollah was responsible: The attack against the embassy occurred a month after an Israeli attack-helicopter killed the Hezbollah leader in Lebanon, Sheikh Abbas Musawi, together with his wife and son. Similarly, July's attack



Before it was destroyed by a bomb in July (above), the six-story Buenos Aires Jewish headquarters known as AMIA was the community's nerve center, home to its day school network, social organizations, burial societies and a priceless library. On August 16, Argentinian Jews took to the streets (opposite) to mourn the 100 victims and to denounce terrorism.



on AMIA occurred soon after Israel had attacked Hezbollah bases in southern Lebanon and had apprehended another important Hezbollah leader, Mustafa Dirani.

Both the embassy bombing and the bombing of the AMIA, according to this reasoning, could have been revenge attacks perpetrated by Hezbollah, each time using a car bomb operated by a suicide driver, a *modus operandi* common in Lebanon (reports say the police have identified some of the remains and clothing of the suspected driver in the AMIA investigation).

The charge against Hezbollah was initially bolstered by the testimony of Monousheh Moatamer, an Iranian defector who claimed close ties with the Iranian foreign ministry. Four Iranian diplomats in Argentina were detained based on Moatamer's testimony, but were later released by the Argentina Supreme Court because it found Moatamer unreliable. The influential Buenos Aires daily *Clarín* reported that British diplomats were surprised that the Iranians were detained on the basis of testimony of a source with so little credibility. British sources told *Clarín*, "Moatamer is not what he says he is and we do not believe his information to be true. It's a total bluff." Discredited, Moatamer was taken by United Nations' officials first to Ecuador, and ultimately the United States, which he entered with the permission of the U.S. State Department.

Still, some see a motive in Hezbollah's relationship with Iran, and their shared antipathy for the current Mideast peace process. Israel has informed the United Nations that "investigations of both attempts point clearly to Iranian participation." Thus far, however, the Iranian government has taken no concrete steps to obstruct the current peace process. Moreover, an attack in Argentina would hardly have much political impact on the parties. If the aim were to unbalance the region, wouldn't it have been easier to carry out an attack in, say, Jordan while Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin or Foreign Minister Shimon Peres were signing their various agreements with King Hussein?

Others have tried to tie the bombing to other parts of the Arab world. Argentinian President Carlos Menem has had his dif-

ferences with various Arab factions, among whom there is some feeling that Menem has "betrayed them." Before his election, he boasted of his anti-Zionist position; Libyan strongman Moammar Qaddafi contributed \$4 million to Menem's 1989 presidential campaign. Once in office, however, Menem completely changed his attitude, and in 1991 became the first Argentinian president to visit Israel, presumably to impress Washington. Menem's parents, incidentally, were Syrian immigrants who came to Argentina before he was born. Menem converted from Islam to Catholicism as a youth. He and his wife Zulema were married in an Islamic ceremony, and she has sometimes drawn criticism for connections she maintains with and favors she has performed for officials in Damascus. The president himself, however, is considered *persona non grata* in Syria because of his pro-Israel position. But bombing the AMIA to express dissatisfaction with Menem's change in position seems excessive and unlikely.

Although many of these foreign leads seem to have run dry, the government, at least in its public expressions, has practically left aside the possibility that elements inside Argentina lay behind the attack or, at most, has relegated them to a secondary role. President Menem's original response to the AMIA bombing was to attribute the attack to a combination of Nazi groups and to rebels from the Argentinian army which had revolted four times between 1987 and 1990. But within four days of the attack he insisted that responsibility lay with outside elements, and announced that he was giving Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, absolute freedom in its investigation in the belief that the perpetrators had come from overseas.

Others, however, like the well-known investigative journalist Rogelio Garcia Lupo, continue to pursue the possibility of "homegrown" terrorists. That trail also picks up at the Israeli embassy bombing, which occurred only five weeks after the Argentinian government opened its police archives, sealed for more than 50 years, regarding German Nazis in Argentina.

A few weeks before the bombing of the AMIA, Italy had requested the extradition



Jewish demonstrators march in front of the Supreme Court in Buenos Aires, demanding that the authorities "confront terror" and bring the perpetrators of the AMIA bombing to justice. The demonstration takes place weekly, and is modeled on similar protests calling for the punishment of those who led the oppressive military regime of the 1970s.

of Erich Priebke, a captain in Hitler's SS, given refuge in Argentina since 1948; Priebke was charged with giving the orders in the murders of 335 Italian civilians during the Second World War. At this writing, the extradition case remains unresolved and Priebke is still in Argentina. But his case has once again raised the subject of Argentina's infamous role in harboring Nazis. Coincidentally or not, a Jewish research committee investigating Nazi activities was scheduled to meet in the AMIA building on the day of the bombing; their lives were saved only because the meeting was postponed. The community's own massive documentation of the Nazi period was kept in a separate building, and also survived the attack.

Another possible Nazi connection involves Alejandro Sucksdorf, a former Argentinian army intelligence service agent and Nazi supporter. A short time before the

AMIA bombing, he was arrested after his wife accused him of participating in the Israeli embassy attack. Investigators found no evidence linking him to the bombing, but they did find an arsenal in his home. When brought before a judge after his arrest, Sucksdorf declared "I'm a Nazi and the majority of the members of the [Argentinian] army are Nazis."

Yet it is hard to tie all these tenuous connections to the AMIA bombing in any logical way. Close observers of the Nazi contingent in Argentina say it is highly doubtful that they have the means to perpetrate an attack of this magnitude.

What about the Argentinian army itself and its allied intelligence services? Their prestige and standing in Argentinian society have plummeted since the last military government was ousted in 1983, and the army's budget has been drastically reduced.

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## Argentina's Jews

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Yet the Argentinian army still includes soldiers who were active between 1976 and 1983, when the military regime liquidated its enemies in the name of combating terrorism of the extreme left. Anti-Semitism was an undeniably important component of the regime, and the ideology of its supporters has not changed. Many of those who left

the army maintain a formidable presence in organized crime, and the deadly attack on the AMIA would pose no moral or ethical problems for them. Ruben Beraja, head of DAIA, Argentina's counterpart of the Anti-Defamation League, has been demanding that Argentinian authorities fully pursue these native connections.

Homegrown anti-Semitism in Argentina is like a chronic virus: in some contained, even suppressed, but never

eradicated. Eastern European Jews began immigrating en masse starting in the 1880s, and built a formidable network of religious, social and charitable organizations. But a backlash came in 1919, when Argentinian anti-Communists staged a week-long pogrom against the "Russian" Jews, regardless of their politics. The president condemned the attacks, and immigration continued apace through the 1920s. In the 1930s, a new, pro-German government rose to power and official policies severely limiting Jewish immigration were matched by an increase in individual anti-Semitic acts. Juan Peron declared sympathy for the Jews and Israel when he came to power in the late 1940s, but Argentina nevertheless became a haven for Nazis and a worldwide center of anti-Semitism. There were at least two more waves of politically inspired anti-Semitism even before the 1970s, when the military regime seized power. An estimated 8 to 10 percent of the 30,000 *desaparecidos*—the "disappeared ones" who were simply never heard from during the years of terror following the 1976 coup—were Jews, and subjected to "special treatment" by government torturers.

But the bombing of the Jewish center opens a new chapter. Previous incidents were considered isolated, or motivated by politics as much as anti-Semitism. Even the attack on the Israeli embassy was different, seen as part of a conflict affecting another state. The AMIA bombing was a frontal attack on all Jews in Argentina, even those uninvolved in Jewish community life. And the non-Jews who now shun the Jews are doing so out of simple fear for their own lives and property. Argentina's Jews, who periodically served the country as scapegoats, have now become its pariahs.

On Friday, August 12th, 25 days after the bombing, the government put the entire nation on a state of alert and mobilized police and intelligence agents because of the reported fear of another terrorist attack. The attack never came, but the result of the alert was a kind of collective psychosis. Memories of military repression have left many Argentinians wary of any mobilization of the police or military. They especially fear a more active intelligence apparatus, even though it might deter terrorist bombs.

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tory, ordinary Argentines are distancing themselves from anyone and anything Jewish not out of anti-Semitism, but out of fear. In the weeks after the attack, weekend athletic competitions that included Jewish teams were cancelled by their opponents. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee reported that neighborhood associations want to oust synagogues because of the possibility of terrorist violence and decreased property values. Students at a non-Jewish school near a Jewish community center asked to be moved to another school out of fear of future terrorist attacks, while some Jewish students were likewise withdrawing from the day schools, according to the Joint.

No one thinks that Jews will be forced into ghettos, but the defenses being built around Jewish community buildings, schools, and synagogues—often sand-filled drums meant to thwart a potential car bomber—give a similar feeling of segregation. Formerly inconspicuous Jewish institutions now stand out like urban fortresses, and there is a tendency for everyone—Jew and non-Jew alike—to avoid routes that pass nearby. Says Chief Rabbi Salomon Ben Hamu, “It may now appear that it is not possible to cohabitate with Jewish people in the Republic.”

Another isolating element have been the reporters and politicians, who, knowingly or not, emphasized the “otherness” of the Jews. “Many Jews and innocent victims had died” in the bombing, it was said—by television personality Marcelo Tonelli and others—as if the Jews had been guilty of something. There has been a tendency to identify Argentinian Jews so closely with Israel as to put into question their status as Argentinians. In the week after the AMIA bombing, many newspaper and magazine reports used “Israeli” and “Jewish” interchangeably. The government news agency Telem referred to the AMIA building as “the seat of the Israelite Mutual Association,” omitting the word “Argentinian” and making it sound like a foreign entity. President Menem contributed to the confusion when he expressed his condolences for the casualties to Rabin—as if the victims were citizens of Israel, not Argentina. As a prominent professor of philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires, Ezekiel

de Olaso, noted at the time, “When a father loses a son, he does not *send* condolences...he *receives* them. The fact that Menem hurried to give his condolences is a serious symptom. It’s a way of saying, ‘These dead people are not ours.’”

On August 5th, an article in *Clarín* identified the Argentinian counterpart of the ADL as “the political arm of the Jewish community in Argentina and, in practice, its leader states everything that the Israeli Embassy, from its diplomatic position, cannot say.” Neither the association nor the Israeli embassy denied this characterization; indeed, there has long been a quiet power struggle between the Jewish establishment and the Israeli embassy for the loyalties of the community.

At a demonstration set up by the Jewish leadership four days after the attack, people sang “*Hatikva*,” the Israeli national anthem. Three Israeli representatives delivered speeches. Messages from Rabin and Peres were read. But not a single non-Jewish public personality spoke, not even a religious leader, and the majority of demonstrators were, of course, Jewish. This over-representation of Israelis left a bad taste in the mouths of many Argentinian Jews.

The Jews of Argentina have begun the slow process of rebuilding their shattered communal life. The AMIA building was the mother institution of Argentinian Jews of Ashkenazi origin, representing more than 70 percent of Argentina’s Jewish population. The Jewish school network, the community’s social organizations, synagogues, cemeteries, the most important Jewish library endowed with unique and irreplaceable documents, were all concentrated and coordinated there. The blast destroyed all but the rear of the six-story building. The dead included most of the staff of the welfare department, all of the unemployment department and the burial society.

Their functions are now being carried out by others in other buildings. There has been little talk of emigration, either to Israel or elsewhere, and much talk of healing. But until the perpetrators of the attack on AMIA are apprehended, that process may be a long time in coming. ❁

## Intermarriage

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As already noted, people who were raised as gentiles, provided they had one Jewish parent, are counted as Jews and their marriage to (another) gentile is counted as a Jewish-gentile intermarriage. As might be expected, given their non-Jewish upbringing, they all married gentiles. This inflates the intermarriage figure by about two points.

Next: To determine whether a Jewish respondent’s spouse was Jewish, the NJPS interview did not simply ask, “Is your husband/wife Jewish?” or words to that effect. Instead, it asked three separate questions: (1) What was your spouse’s religion at birth; (2) in what religion was your spouse raised; (3) what religion is your spouse now? To each of these questions, the questionnaire provided five possible answers: Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Other, and None. Over 20 percent of the recently married (the group included in the 52 percent intermarriage rate) answered “other” or “none” to all three questions on the religion of their spouse, making it difficult to determine whether their spouses are really Jewish or gentile. *Highlights* arbitrarily treated almost all spouses described as having “other” religion as Gentiles and almost all those with “none” as Jews. Truth to tell, the identities of some marginal Jews are so murky and the NJPS evidence is so inconclusive that it is extremely difficult to decide who is a Jew; different researchers can easily come to different conclusions. I searched the data myself for other clues such as holiday observance, organizational affiliation, etc. as to whether marginal spouses (those characterized as “Other” or “None”) were Jews. In almost four percent of cases, my judgment was different from the *Highlights* researchers’.

A more important deficiency involves the “weighting” procedure used by the *Highlights* researchers. Weighting is a technique researchers use when certain types of people (for example, those with less schooling) respond to a request to be interviewed, say, less frequently than people with more schooling. If we know that a sample should contain a certain percentage of people with little schooling, we can “correct” for this imbalance by

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