

IRAN IN LATIN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between Argentina and Iran have gone through a number of phases, including a period of nuclear cooperation that began in the mid-1980s.

However, this collaboration in the nuclear field suffered after the deadly bombings in Argentina in the early 1990s during the era of President Carlos Menem, who was in power from 1989 to 1999.

Relations were tense while Nestor Kirchner was president, between 2003 and 2007, but communication was restored during the term of President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, who succeeded her husband in 2007. During this time the volume of trade between the two countries increased to record levels.

However, the relationship deteriorated once again during President Mauricio Macri's era (2015-2019) and under the current president, Alberto Fernandez, who changed the course of Argentina's political relations toward the West,

and away from Iran's periphery and its influence in the region.

There is no doubt that the bombings in Buenos Aires of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) in 1994 had a crucial effect on the natural development of political and commercial relations between Argentina and Iran, causing them to crumble.

Ultimately, the relationship has been marked by political tensions, with Argentina seeking to put pressure on Iran internationally while maintaining aspects of economic relations.

Iran in turn has sought to maintain diplomatic relations with Argentina and other Latin American countries as part of its efforts to pursue its foreign-policy objectives relating to them.

This report aims to shed light on the nature of the nuclear cooperation between Iran and Argentina, and aid understanding of the dimensions and repercussions of the AMIA and Israeli embassy bombings, in addition to the effects they had on bilateral relations and their international dimensions.



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THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

The relationship between Argentina and Iran has been affected by a series of historical events that had a fundamental impact on the normalcy and development of relations between the countries.

Fatal bombings in the Argentine capital Buenos Aires represented important turning points that had significant implications on the political relationship between the nations. To understand how these events developed and the effect they had on the nature of bilateral relations, it is necessary to analyze the historical context and the role of the main party involved in the implementation of these terrorist operations.

Iran has supported Hezbollah since the movement was established in Lebanon in 1982, and has worked to expand its network across five continents. The party has evolved to the point where it is able to carry out deadly operations and raise tens of millions of dollars each year through illegal activities. It has become a fully functional organization capable of attracting supporters, training

In this July 8, 1989 photo, Carlos Menem, accompanied by his wife Zulema Yoma, waves from the balcony of the Government Palace after being sworn in as president of Argentina, in Buenos Aires. AP

recruits, and directing activists.

Hezbollah began its operations in Latin America in the early 1990s, using the region's lucrative illegal economy to launch terrorist attacks¹. Two Israeli/Jewish locations were attacked in Argentina. The first, on March 17, 1992, was the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, which was targeted with a car bomb that killed 29 people and injured hundreds². And on July 18, 1994, 85 people were killed and hundreds wounded when a bomb went off at the AMIA Jewish community center, also in the capital.

Many sources identify the regime in Tehran as the main suspect behind both attacks, including US authorities who have for years shared suspicions about the involvement of Hezbollah and Iran. For example, a month prior to a Supreme Court ruling in 1999 that found Hezbollah to have been involved in the 1992 embassy attack, the US State Department's annual report on terrorism stated that Hezbollah "attacked the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992" and that the majority of Argentine citizens believed Iran participated, either directly



Picture dated 18 July 1994 showing rescue teams searching the site where a powerful explosion destroyed a seven story building housing, the Jewish Mutual Association of Argentina, in Buenos Aires. Local officials reported that at least 20 people died. AFP

or indirectly, in that attack and the one that followed two years later³.

Hezbollah claimed responsibility for the 1992 embassy bombing, and there is evidence that suggests Iran and Syria were involved as well⁴. Some Islamic organizations affiliated with Hezbollah in Argentina — namely the Islamic Jihad Association, and the Islamic Society in Argentina — claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it was in response to the assassination of former Hezbollah leader Abbas Al-Musawi and members of his family by Israel in February 1992.

Notably, the Islamic Society and its members, who are led by Abdullah Madani⁵, have close links to Iran; posters of former Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini are raised during protests, and images of him appear on its website.

The suffering caused by the two attacks in Argentina led South American countries to realize the danger posed by the role of Iran and its proxies in the region. Israeli political scientist Eli Karmon suggests that the suicide bombing of the Israeli embassy in 1992 was arguably the first Islamist terrorist attack in the Western Hemisphere⁵.

A 2010 report by the Federal Research Unit at the US Library of Congress reveals that extremist groups — specifically Hezbollah and Hamas — received between \$50 million and \$500 million between 1999 and 2001 from the Arab population in Brazil, channeled through financial institutions in Paraguay⁶.

According to testimony from Abu Al-Qasim Mesbahi, an Iranian defector who worked for the country's intelligence service, the idea of carrying out an attack in Argentina was a fundamental part of Tehran's plans to export the Iranian revolution to other countries. He said the AMIA attack was planned during a meeting in Mashhad, Iran, in August 1993. He confirmed that senior Iranian officials attended the meeting, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Hashemi Rafsanjani, Intelligence Minister Ali Fuleihan, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati and Mohsen Rabbani, who was later appointed cultural attache at the Iranian embassy in Argentina.

According to Mesbahi, those who had gathered are the ones responsible for choosing the AMIA center as a target. He said that members of Hezbollah in the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay

had contacted Rabbani to plan the details of the attack. Mesbahi said that Rabbani led the intelligence forces assembled for the suicide attack. A van, believed to have been supplied by Iranian intelligence, was packed with explosives and parked at the AMIA Center two days before the explosion. According to the Argentine public prosecutor, Rabbani had been using local "Shiite scouts" to assess Jewish and American targets in Buenos Aires since 1983⁷.

In 2004, while Nestor Kirchner was president, Argentine authorities appointed lawyer Alberto Nisman as a special prosecutor to investigate the AMIA bombing, including the role of Iran. He partially succeeded, and in 2007 relations between Argentina and Iran stalled when Argentine authorities obtained arrest warrants from Interpol for five Iranians suspected of involvement in the attack.

Although Kirchner sought justice in the case while he was in office, the investigation was neglected for a number of years after he stepped down in 2007, and in particular while his wife, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, was president, from 2007 to 2015.

In 2011, Argentina joined the majority of UN member states in voting for a resolution condemning Iran for its human rights violations. Soon after, however, there were signs of change as Fernandez de Kirchner informed the US that Argentina was ready to enter into talks with Tehran, and had urged Iran to fulfill its promises to assist the investigation into the AMIA bombing⁸.

In January 2015, Nisman accused Fernandez de Kirchner of covering up Iran's role in the attack to preserve the relationship between the countries⁹. He published a 500-page report on the case, in which he stated that Iran had been operating for decades in the region¹⁰.

Days later, Nisman was found dead, with a gunshot wound to the head, just hours before he was due to appear in front of a congressional committee to give more details of his allegations against Fernandez de Kirchner. He had said that she — and other senior officials with close ties to trade unions, social movements and La Campora, a political youth movement that supported her — tried between 2011 and 2013 to negotiate a deal with Iran for the export of agricultural goods in return for imported Iranian oil.

It was alleged that as part of the agreement her government was asked to try to have the names of eight Iranians removed from an Interpol's list of suspects in the AMIA bombing¹¹.

In addition, three former Venezuelan government officials who had defected from the regime of President Hugo Chavez told a Brazilian magazine that their country had helped to broker a deal between Argentina and Iran to remove the names of Iranians from the list of suspects in the bombing.

Sources claimed that the agreement secured funds that were used in Fernandez de Kirchner's election campaign. The US Justice Department and other American government agencies were alarmed by Nisman's death as his report covered more than simply the attack on the AMIA community center; it also included details of Iran's wider activities throughout Latin America¹².

HEZBOLLAH: A FUNDRAISING NETWORK AND FROZEN ASSETS

In 2018 the Argentine government targeted the Barakat network, which was suspected of raising funds in the tri-border area for Hezbollah. Argentina's Financial Information Unit investigated possible criminal activity by Lebanese citizens living in Argentina and suspected of involvement in money-laundering and the financing of terrorist activities. As a result, the Argentine government froze the assets and funds of several individuals linked with the network.

The head of the network, Asaad Ahmed Barakat, was designated a terrorist by the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, along with a number of other suspects in the tri-border area. As a result his assets in the US were frozen and his ability to operate financially there was blocked¹³.

On July 18, 2019, the 25th anniversary of the AMIA bombing, Argentine authorities designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization and froze its assets in the country. The decision coincided with a visit by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Argentina was the first nation in Latin America to do this¹⁴. Many other countries have designated some or all parts of the Hezbollah organization a terrorist organization, including Canada, the UK,

Australia and New Zealand, and several Arab states in the Gulf¹⁵.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ARGENTINA'S STANCE ON IRAN

There have been continual calls in Argentina for justice for the victims of the AMIA bombing, and the Argentine Congress has for years passed resolutions demanding this and that Iran be held accountable for the attack¹⁶. When President Mauricio Macri was in power, from 2015 to 2019, the government restored a traditional hard-line policy on Iran.

On the 25th anniversary of the bombing, Argentina's ambassador to the US, Fernando Oris de Roa, described it as "the most brutal attack" in Argentine history, and accused the Tehran of protecting a number of former high-ranking regime officials who Interpol want to stand trial in an Argentine court on charges relating to the atrocity¹⁷.

Argentina's current president, Alberto Fernandez, last year told Jewish leaders he wanted to conclude the decades-long court case that followed the attack, which was complicated by allegations of corruption and the alleged assassination of Nisman¹⁸.

The US has often warned that Hezbollah and other Islamist groups pose a serious threat in Latin America. After the assassination of Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, Argentine authorities stepped up security at airports, along its borders and at the US embassy in Buenos Aires in readiness for potential retaliatory attacks¹⁹.

NUCLEAR COOPERATION

Argentina's nuclear ambitions evolved from unilateral activities in the 1970s and 1980s into bilateral and multilateral commitments in the 1990s and beyond. Even before it became the first country in Latin America to use nuclear energy, in 1974, it defended the right of nations to use nuclear development as a tool for peace²⁰.

Its efforts to advance its own nuclear research and development included establishing with a number of countries, including Brazil, Australia and Caribbean nations, cooperation agreements and mechanisms such as the Brazilian-Argentine

Supporters of Lebanon's militant Shiite Muslim movement Hezbollah take part in a parade during the Ashura commemorations that mark the killing of Imam Hussein - one of Shiite Islam's most revered figures - on November 4, 2014 in the capital Beirut's southern suburbs. AFP



Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials. The international cooperation also included joint projects with Iran in the 1980s.

The US had supplied Tehran with a research reactor in 1967²¹. However Washington halted the export of the highly enriched uranium to power it after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. By order of Khomeini, the Iranians asked Argentina for help to revive and develop its nuclear program, and complete the work on the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant²².

After 18 months of negotiations, on May 5, 1987, Argentine company INVAP signed an agreement worth \$5.5 million with the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran to provide Tehran with a new core for the research reactor given to the Tehran Nuclear Research Center²³ by the Americans 20 years earlier. The converted core would use 20 percent enriched uranium instead of 93 percent enriched fuel.

Argentina ignored objections by Washington and provided Iran with nuclear supplies and expertise. In 1992, however, cooperation in the nuclear field was suspended following the attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. Since 1994, Argentina has been an outspoken critic of Iran's nuclear program, and all trade of nuclear resources has ceased. Nevertheless, Iran is still interested in expanding economic cooperation with Argentina.

In February 2008, the idea of resuming the supply of nuclear fuel from Argentina was raised when the Iranian government told the International Atomic Energy Agency it was "interested in purchasing nuclear fuel from any supplier, including Argentina²⁴."

During his investigation of the 1992 and 1994 bombings, Nisman suggested the attacks were related to the president's decision to halt Argentina's cooperation with Iran's nuclear program.

In 2011, US congressional leaders called for the Department of State to investigate whether Iran and Argentina had renewed their nuclear cooperation in a deal brokered and paid for by Venezuela²⁵. Some reports claimed that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then the president of Iran, had asked authorities in Venezuela to intervene in an effort to persuade Argentina to share its technology with Tehran and assist with its nuclear program²⁶.



During his investigation of the 1992 and 1994 bombings, Nisman suggested the attacks were related to the president's decision to halt Argentina's cooperation with Iran's nuclear program.

During the Fernandez de Kirchner presidency, diplomatic relations between Iran and Argentina strengthened. Chavez, Venezuela's president at the time, reportedly mediated talks between Tehran and Buenos Aires. This caught the attention of members of the US Congress who, in July 2011, wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warning her about possible cooperation between Argentina, Venezuela and Iran²⁷, and the potential for the transfer of nuclear resources and technologies.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between Argentina and Iran initially was built on trade in a number of sectors. Their cooperation extended to the nuclear sector in the 1980s and 1990s, with Argentina providing Iran with resources and expertise.

However, the bombings at the Israeli embassy and the AMIA community center in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s caused a rift. Tensions between the two countries reached a peak while Nestor Kirchner was president, but relations improved when Fernandez de Kirchner was in power, only to again deteriorate under the reigns of Macri and Alberto Fernandez.

The bombing cases remain unresolved. Tehran has repeatedly rejected accusations that it was involved, and failed to provide any significant cooperation to investigations, despite Interpol issuing a number of arrest warrants for Iranian suspects accused of involvement in the attacks.

Argentina has been waiting, as successive governments came and went, for real cooperation from Iran to resolve the cases. Achieving justice by identifying the culprits and holding them responsible has value and is considered a political card as part of Argentina's foreign policy. It could constitute an element of a political rapprochement with Iran. If it remains unresolved, however, the issue will represent a political risk.

Despite these complications, Iran seeks to sustain its diplomatic relationship with Argentina and other Latin American countries, as part of its efforts to preserve its foreign-policy objectives in the region. It also wants to maintain and preserve aspects of economic and trade relations, despite the tensions and the variable nature of the political relationship over time.

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