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LADB Staff

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Anit-Jewish Bombing Prompts Argentina to Create a Special Security Ministry

by LADB Staff

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In the aftermath of the July 18 bombing of a Jewish center in Buenos Aires, President Carlos Saul Menem has set up a powerful security "super ministry" that will have control over all security matters. The move comes in response to criticism that security is lax in Argentina and that terrorists act with impunity. Meanwhile, government investigations into the bombing continue, although so far most evidence indicates that extremist groups from the Middle East are responsible. The death toll continues to climb, and the final count is expected to exceed 100.

On July 19, a powerful car bomb ripped through the offices of the Mutual Israeli-Argentine Association, (Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina, AMIA) in Buenos Aires, destroying the building. The AMIA is the principal umbrella group for Jewish organizations in Argentina, overseeing assistance programs for Jewish people, as well as cultural, sports, and recreational activities. The destroyed building also housed the most important documentation center on Judaism and the largest Jewish library in Latin America, the Instituto Cientifico Judio. On July 19, the day after the bombing, Menem signed a decree creating the Ministry of Security and Community Protection (Secretaria de Seguridad y Proteccion a la Comunidad) in an effort to demonstrate swift government action to crack down on terrorism in Argentina.

Menem named Air Force Brig. Gen. Andres Antonietti to head the ministry, which will control the activities of the Federal Police, the Coast Guard, and the Border Patrol. According to Interior Minister Carlos Ruckauf, the new ministry will act as the central coordinating body for all of the country's security forces to combat "terrorism and federal crimes." Despite public support for tighter security, however, the ministry's formation created a political crisis for Menem. Opposition political leaders charged that the ministry would in effect become a repressive force that could be used against the Argentine population in case of public disturbances. There were also charges that Menem was using the bombing to push through the unpopular project, since Menem first proposed the new ministry in May, but dropped the idea due to objections by other cabinet officials, opposition politicians, and even some members of Menem's own party.

Menem's decision to relaunch the plan provoked the Chief of the Federal Police, Jorge Luis Passero, and his assistant, Juan Beltran Varela, to immediately resign in protest. Antonietti, the new super ministry head, is a personal friend of Menem who previously directed all security operations for the office of the presidency (1989-1992). He will be in charge of 60,000 members of the various security forces and he will report directly to the president. Antonietti will also preside over the Internal Security Council, which deals with natural disasters as well as public disturbances and terrorist acts. The Council includes the ministers of defense, interior, and foreign relations; the secretary of state intelligence; and the chiefs of staff of the three branches of the military.

Shortly after being sworn in, Antonietti admitted that Argentina's intelligence apparatus has serious weaknesses. Acknowledging the outcry over the creation of the super ministry, Antonietti stressed that he has the necessary experience to carry out the job and effectively combat terrorism. Meanwhile, investigations continue into the bombing. On July 23, Alberto Piotti, the head of metropolitan security in the province of Buenos Aires, said that more than 300 kg. of explosives had been used in the car bomb, which were packed inside a small Renault truck. The attack is being blamed on Middle Eastern terrorists, possibly with Iranian connections.

On July 27, Argentina recalled its ambassador to Iran pending further investigation. Federal Judge Juan Jose Galeano, in charge of the investigation, travelled to Caracas to interview a former Iranian diplomat who is in protective custody. Argentina has 300,000 Jews, the largest Jewish community in Latin America, and an Arab Muslim community of approximately 500,000. Antisemitic attacks have occurred frequently in recent years, including defacing Jewish cemeteries and buildings. There is also a thriving publishing business for antisemitic literature.

The government of Juan Domingo Peron provided safe haven to many Nazi war criminals after World War II, and the Argentine Jewish community was active in pressing for extradition of discovered war criminals. Both neonazi organizations and religious fundamentalists feed the latent antisemitism in Argentina. After the bombing, some observers, including Nobel laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel, charged that the lack of an effective investigation into another bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 contributed to the new attack.

Critics charge that the government had been warned about the likelihood of new attacks on Jewish targets because of poor security, and US government offices including the Department of Transportation and the Federal Aviation Administration had complained about inadequate security at Argentine airports. Tom Sheets, an expert on Latin American military matters living in Buenos Aires, said Argentine security resembles "a sieve." He added that the state intelligence service is "nothing more than a party organism for whoever is in power," limited to "spying on political opponents during democracy, and helping to disappear persons during the military dictatorship."

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