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UK Arrests Former Iranian Diplomat

by LADB Staff

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The Aug. 21 arrest of a former Iranian diplomat in Great Britain at the request of an Argentine judge has led to an international diplomatic row affecting all three countries. The case involves the 1994 car bombing of the Jewish community center (Asociacion Mutual Israeli Argentina, AMIA), which killed 85 people and injured more than 300 others.

In March, Argentine Judge Juan Jose Galeano issued the first of several arrest warrants for former Iranian government officials accused of helping to organize and carry out the July 18, 1994, bombing of the AMIA center in Buenos Aires. The AMIA attack was the second deadly anti-Semitic bombing in Argentina in the 1990s. In 1992, the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires was bombed, killing 29 people.

The 400-page ruling by Judge Galeano was the first time Argentina had formally accused Iran of involvement in the blast. Israel and the US have long said they suspected that Iranian-backed Middle Eastern guerrillas were responsible for the attack. Iran has denied involvement.

The highest-ranking Iranian official cited was Ali Fallahian, former minister of security and intelligence. Mohsen Rabbani, former cultural attache in the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires during the mid-1990s, was named in the indictment as operational director of the attack. None of the officials named were in Argentina, and the indictment was accompanied by a request that Interpol apprehend the men.

The accusation brought an angry reaction from Iran, where Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said that "no evidence of Iranian involvement has been provided" and that the charges were "made up by Zionist circles" in Israel and the US.

Argentine president puts new emphasis on bombing case

The lengthy AMIA-bombing investigation has brought frequent complaints from the Jewish community in Argentina and from Israel that Argentine officials have been less than energetic in efforts to apprehend those responsible (see NotiSur, 1994-07-29, 2001-09-28). Representatives of Argentina's Jewish community, the largest in Latin America, have long pressed for secret intelligence-services files to be released, saying they could shed more light on the alleged role of Iran and Hizbollah guerrillas in the bombing.

On June 5, the government of President Nestor Kirchner said it would release the files dealing with the bombing, a move hailed as a breakthrough in the unsolved case. "This is one of the most important pieces of news in nine years," said Abraham Kaul, head of the AMIA center, after a meeting with Kirchner in the government palace.

On July 18, Kirchner publicly promised to end the impunity of those who carried out the bombing. "After nine years of this national shame, that we have not been able to advance in the investigation is a pressing matter for the entire Argentine society," said Kirchner after taking part in a ceremony marking the anniversary of the bombing.

On July 21, Justice Minister Gustavo Beliz said Kirchner had signed a decree ordering the files to be opened to help the judges who are investigating the bombing.

Arrest threatens diplomatic relations

As a result of the Interpol request by Judge Galeano, Iran's former ambassador in Buenos Aires Hadi Soleimanpur was detained in Great Britain on Aug. 21. He was arrested at his home in Durham, in northeast England, where he was doing doctoral studies. The Iranian government held Argentina responsible for the fate of Soleimanpur, but said Israel was behind the arrest.

"This has political motives, it has been carried out under Zionist influences and tries to serve the interests of the Zionist regime (in Israel)," said Hamid Reza Asefi. He called for the swift release of Soleimanpur and warned of "strong action" if that did not happen. Soleimanpur appeared at Bow Street Magistrates Court in London on Aug. 22 to hear the charges against him in the first phase of a complicated British extradition process that could take months.

Police said the warrant alleged that on or before July 18, 1994, Soleimanpur conspired with others to murder people at the AMIA Jewish center when he was ambassador to Argentina. Soleimanpur said he was not in Argentina at the time of the bombing. The court ordered that Soleimanpur remain in custody until his extradition case begins Sept. 19.

BBC correspondent Barnaby Mason said that, while the British government insists that the extradition process is a matter for the courts and that it cannot interfere, this is not entirely true. Under British law the final decision on an extradition request is made by the home secretary, but only after the courts have made their ruling.

In 2000, the British courts ruled that the former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) could be extradited to Spain, but the home secretary freed him on health grounds (see NotiSur, 2000-03-10).

Marta Nercellas, the lawyer representing the AMIA center in Buenos Aires, said she believed Britain would extradite Soleimanpur, who she said did not have diplomatic immunity. "He participated in a very concrete way in organizing the attack," said Nercellas. "The [Iranian] embassy in Argentina was used as the base from which they gathered intelligence information related to the massacre. This will allow us to make progress in finding the international connection."

In the ongoing investigation, the Israeli government says it has confirmed that the vehicle used in the bombing belonged to Lebanese citizen Ibrahim Hussein Berro.

Diplomatic charges and countercharges

On Aug. 24, Iran demanded that Britain apologize for the arrest of its former ambassador and imposed economic sanctions on Buenos Aires for issuing the international arrest warrant. "I hope that the British government will swiftly reverse this incorrect action and apologize," a radio report quoted Iranian President Mohammad Khatami as saying. Khatami warned that Iran would never accept an extradition and "let this ugly and lying conspiracy take place". The day before, the Iranian Foreign Ministry summoned the Argentine and British charges d'affaires, Ernesto Alvarez and Matthew Gould, to protest against Soleimanpur's arrest.

Tehran has had turbulent ties with London since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Diplomatic ties were normalized in 2002 when Iran accepted Richard Dalton as the new British ambassador. Iran is Britain's fourth-largest trading partner in the Middle East.

In 2002, British exports to Iran totalled US\$330 million, while Iranian exports to the UK reached around US\$27 million, according to British figures. The arrest of Soleimanpur adds to Iran's foreign-relations problems, coming on top of charges that it is secretly developing nuclear weapons and problems with Canada following the death in custody of an Iranian-Canadian journalist.

On Sept. 3, shots were fired at the British Embassy in Tehran, after which Britain closed the embassy. Iran then recalled its ambassador in London Morteza Sarmadi for consultations. It was suspected that the shots were a protest against the arrest of Soleimanpur. No one was injured in the incident, and Sarmadi returned to London. But, on Sept. 8, the British Embassy in Tehran was again the target of gunfire.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Ian Gleason said no one was injured and no serious damage resulted. He said no arrests at been made, and the embassy would continue to operate on a restricted schedule. The British government authorized all nonessential personnel and dependents to leave Iran. B

British government sources said Home Secretary Jack Straw was also concerned about the effect of a possible extradition on Britain's efforts in Iraq. Britain's detention of Soleimanpur is having a "destructive effect" on bilateral relations, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi told Secretary Straw.

"The continuing detention...has a destructive effect on relations between Iran and Britain, and Iranian public opinion expects the freeing of Soleimanpour and the two Iranian journalists in Iraq," the ISNA news agency quoted Kharazi as telling Straw in a telephone conversation on Sept. 5. Two Iranian journalists were detained by US forces in Iraq, and Ambassador Dalton has promised to "follow" the case.

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