Peaceful Uruguay Troubled by Terrorist Intrigue

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Peaceful Uruguay Troubled by Terrorist Intrigue
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Peaceful Uruguay has been convulsed by a series of reports that label it a future target of international terrorism. The troublesome prediction followed three evocative discoveries of phony bombs near both the old and new Israeli Embassies in the capital, Montevideo, something the Israeli government attributed to Iranian diplomats (NotiSur, April 3, 2015).

In a country that has not registered any incidents of political or social violence since the 1970s, the population was stirred. But public perception changed soon after the impact of the first incident because of the revelation of certain details and objective analysis. Since July 2, the only one suspected of having placed the fake bombs is a security guard at the Israeli Embassy, and he is now under investigation by Uruguayan legal authorities.

Since then, a statement by former President José Mujica in mid-January seems better understood. Following the appearance of the second device, referring to the deep differences between Israel and Iran, Mujica said, "We should be careful lest they try to pull us into a conflict that doesn’t concern us and isn’t ours."

The first of these supposed explosives—which turned out to be an empty suitcase—was found on Nov. 24, 2014, near the building the Israeli Embassy used to occupy in the Uruguayan capital. Nevertheless, the opposition press and the Israeli government presented it as a sign of an imminent terrorist attack.

Just two months earlier, coincidentally, the Israeli Embassy had organized the Third International Conference on New Security Technologies in Montevideo. The keynote speaker was Aviv Staroselsky, touted as an Israeli expert on security and anti-terrorism. Interviewed Oct. 2 by the conservative newspaper El País, which has kept the campaign about the bomb threats alive, Staroselsky surprised people by saying, "Uruguay could be a terrorist target as there are attractive things here such as bridges, seaports, airports, and the movement of trucks and merchandise, and no one is looking for terrorists."

Considering the potential targets the Israeli expert cited, Susana Pereyra, a deputy from the ruling party, said, "We are no different from the other 189 countries of the world."

**Israeli officials visit Uruguay**

Since then, visits from notable Israelis have been constant. A Jan. 8 report in the weekly magazine Búsqueda said, "In the first few days of December, Ambassador Nina Ben-Ami and agents from the Israeli intelligence service Mossad visited Foreign Minister Luis Almagro to show proof that the Iranians were involved in the frustrated Nov. 24 attempt."

Israeli Internal Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch arrived March 1. He indicated he agreed with what had been done so far regarding the two attempts, the first at the old diplomatic headquarters and the next at the new embassy building. However, he advised, "You should be very alert to Iran’s actions and the presence of Hezbollah."
On March 23, Dana Benvenisti, regional security and counterterrorism director, and Yifat Amedy, head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s Middle East Department of the Center for Political Investigation, took their turn. They came to meet with members of the Grupo Parlamentario Uruguay-Israel. The report of the meeting in El País said, "They told our legislators an advance of the terrorist threat from groups like Hezbollah could be seen."

On June 17, the "third foiled terrorist attempt" occurred. As in November, the explosive was an empty suitcase. On Jan. 8, it was a little container that turned out to be a small sardine can with wires inside.

Ever since the first episode, spokespersons from the Uruguayan security services and the government said that it was about "clumsy Israeli attempts aimed at seeing Uruguay’s ability to respond to emergencies of this type."

Finally, after analyzing videos from 46 security cameras in the office complex that houses the new embassy headquarters during the 72 hours prior to finding the sardine can, there was a surprise: the person who placed the supposed explosive device in a garden about 70 meters from the diplomatic mission is a security employee working for the embassy, an agent of Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security service. From the day of that discovery, El País, which had kept the story on its front page for the previous 45 days, never again made mention of what its July 28 front-page headline had called the "Panic from the fear of attack."

**Efforts to block Uruguay’s diplomatic aspirations fail**

The campaign occurs within the framework of a complex world context in which Iran plays a primary role. That’s why Deputy Alfredo Fratti of the ruling Frente Amplio believes "the version of the supposed attack was created to capitalize on the anti-Iranian world climate and to discredit our aspirations of occupying strategic places in international diplomacy," specifically in the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS). The legislator said that three events happened in that scenario.

First, the death in Buenos Aires of prosecutor Alberto Nisman, the man in charge of the investigation of the bloody July 1994 attack on the most important cultural institution of the Jewish community in the neighboring country. Although, after 10 years investigating this case, little substantial contribution had been made, days before his death, Nisman had put together a packet of reports from Israeli and US intelligence services that accused Iran of being behind the attack. Nisman maintained the current Argentine government was an accomplice of Tehran, and for that reason he had asked for the prosecution of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The world press had focused on this story for several weeks (NotiSur Nov. 3, 2006, Feb. 16, 2007, Feb. 6, 2015, and May 8, 2015).

Second, when the series of false bombs began, Israel was involved in a major campaign to derail nuclear treaty negotiations between the P5+1 (the US, Great Britain, France, Russia, and China, plus Germany) and Iran, which finally resulted in the signing of an accord that was lauded worldwide.

Third, during these months Venezuela has been the center of an international campaign to paint the government of President Nicolás Maduro as an enemy of democracy and Iran’s main Latin American ally.
Journalist Ricardo Scagliola said in the Uruguayan weekly Brecha that the first phony bomb that appeared in the area where the old Israeli Embassy was "is the ‘leading case’ of a bigger dispute." The accusation against an Iranian diplomat as responsible for leaving an empty suitcase on the street—not a bomb or a simulated bomb—Scagliola wrote, is put into the framework of the complex relations between Israel and Uruguay. The Iranian suspect was Ahmad Sanad Gol who left the country before the government could make a decision about what to do with him.

The journalist explained that the Israeli government is uncomfortable not only with Montevideo’s repeated condemnations of Israel’s incursions into the Gaza Strip but also with the country’s closer relations with the Arab world as expressed by growing trade relations and the opening of Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Palestine Embassies in Montevideo.

The criticism, plus the good relations with the Arab world, are seen in Israel as the work of former foreign minister Almagro whose first diplomatic assignment was to Uruguay’s Embassy in Tehran. On several occasions, various Israeli sources expressly said that they were concerned Almagro would become the new secretary general of the OAS—the organization in charge of coordinating continental defense. That actually did occur last March 18 when the 33 Latin American and Caribbean countries that make up this organization voted for him.

But more than the leadership of the OAS, what worried Israel was the possibility that Uruguay might occupy one of the 10 rotating seats on the UN’s Security Council where the situation in the Middle East and disputes with Iran are a constant issue. Finally, the same 33 countries again acted as a bloc and gave their support to the incorporation of Uruguay, a vote that will be ratified at the UN General Assembly in October (NotiSur, April 10, 2015).

The journalist cited sources close to Almagro to say that the campaign against the former foreign minister—and which include a request that Congress explain what happened on topics as diverse as Sanad Gol’s departure and the supposed interfamilial violence involving a group of Syrian refugees in Uruguay—was a clear example that the real goal wasn’t to bring down a minister whose term would expire in a few weeks when the new administration assumed office on March 1. Rather it was to tarnish his image to keep him from being given the leadership post at the OAS.

Without rejecting these speculations, spokespersons for President Tabaré Vázquez, Mujica’s successor who is also in the Frente Amplio, believe that the message was directed at the new government to pressure it to change its vote in the UN on issues related to the Middle East.

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