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Argentina

A death in Argentina

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Argentinian prosecutor Gerardo Pollicita announced in February 2015 that he would pursue charges against President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. The allegations were supposedly prepared by Alberto Nisman, a special prosecutor who died by a gunshot to the head under mysterious circumstances the previous month. Kirchner's center-left government has come under increasing fire from opposition forces for her handling of both Nisman's death and his investigation into a 1994 terrorist attack on a Jewish cultural center. However, many people feel the issue is being used by the right wing as a cover to discredit the government.

The commotion caused by the death of Argentinian prosecutor Alberto Nisman doesn't simply revolve around the question of how he died. Questions abound: Why was he given the gun, why were his guards absent, why was medical help slow to arrive, and why did it never seem like a suicide?

His death added a new mystery to those that arose after the bombing of the Mutual Aid Association of Argentina (AMIA) in 1994, which left 85 people dead. In fact, this prosecutor was intimately involved in covering up clues in the investigation of who was responsible for the attack, and it's not at all clear how he got caught up in this trap.

Twenty-five years after the murder of 85 people, no one has been held responsible, sent to prison or even indicted. The only thing that has been talked about is whether or not the government has engaged in negotiations to absolve the Iranian state of any responsibility, based on the assumption that the Ayatollahs were behind the attack. Nisman made this accusation without any evidence, and the majority of the media went along, silencing other more likely possibilities.

All traces of the attack were immediately erased by the Israeli, U.S. and Argentine governments. They diverted the investigation to focus on Iran, rejecting signs pointing to Syria and providing a cover for any local connection.

In the mid-1990s, Israel was negotiating with Syria for the eventual extension of the peace agreement signed by Egypt, and it wasn't convenient for them to involve their negotiating partner in what had taken place in Buenos Aires. The AMIA and the DAIA (Argentine Delegation of Israeli Associations) subordinated themselves to Zionist diplomacy and helped deceive the victims' family members.

The U.S. threw blame onto Iran, its principal geopolitical adversary in the Middle East. Then-President Carlos Menem—a longtime power broker in the Justicialist Party, which is based on the legacy of Juan and Eva Peron—backed this cover-up in order to hide his own responsibility in the massacre. Some analysts argue that the explosion was revenge for breaking a promise during arms trafficking that the ex-president oversaw. Others have suggested that Menem broke commitments to transfer nuclear or missile technologies to foreigners who provided funding for his electoral campaigns.

These theories coincide with a string of scandals that accompanied his administration. The tragedy at AMIA cannot be separated from the sale of arms to Croatia, the violation of neutrality in the conflict between Ecuador and Peru, the privileges extended to the drug trafficker Monzer al-Kassar, the explosion at the Rio Tercero arsenal or the strange helicopter accident which claimed the life of the president's son, Carlitos Menem, in 1995.

Intelligence and judicial agencies worked together to obscure what had taken place at the AMIA. They cleaned up the crime scene, destroyed recordings of telephone conversations and protected the real suspects, while inventing

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accusations and bribing witnesses. Claudio Lifschitzâ€”a former secretary of Juan José Galeano and the first presiding judge in the AMIA investigationâ€”was kidnapped and tortured.

Current Argentinian President Cristina Fernandez de Kircher raised these irregularities during her time in the Senate, but after becoming president, Cristina, who succeeded her deceased husband Néstor Kirchner, maintained the cover-up and continued to harass Iran (as her husband had done). Both gave speeches at the United Nations putting their complaints against Iran on par with their claims to the Malvinas Islands, which Britain had seized from Argentina during the so-called Falklands War in 1982. And both of them validated the unlikely reports that Nisman received from his superiors in the CIA and the Mossad.

The Kirchners (who also come from the Justicialist Party) initially upheld a governing pact (less open hostility between the factions in exchange for impunity) that had been made between Menem and Eduardo Duhalde, Menem's one-time vice president, who was subsequently elected president himself in 2002 after the collapse of the Argentinian economy. Later, this same agreement was invoked to improve relations with the U.S. and Israel.

The inconsistencies in the accusations against Iran led to one embarrassment after another. One person, who was supposedly involved in the attacks and who carried out diplomatic functions and Argentina, was detained and then immediately released in Europe for lack of proof. Meanwhile, senior Israeli officials boasted of having killed those responsible for the crime.

But the story put forward by Nisman began to fall apart over the course of the last two years for other reasons. The government distanced itself from manipulations by the U.S. and moderated its complaints against Iran, exchanging their arrest warrant for negotiations that culminated in the signing of a Memorandum between the two governments.

This turn coincided with the new situation created by talks undertaken by the U.S. and Iran with the aim of dismantling the latter's nuclear program. Israel continued to advocate bombing these installations, but Washington began to prioritize its campaign against Syria, up to and including the demolition of the country, following the precedents set in Libya and Iraq.

In this new context, Nisman found himself out on a limb and someone encouraged him to raise the stakes. He floated speculations of a ridiculous charge against Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, accusing her of pardoning the Iranians (lifting the "red flags" at Interpol) in exchange for increased trade of grain for oil. Nobody believed this nonsense. Nisman lost an important U.S. supporter (Ronald Noble, who left his post as Interpol chief), the complicity of key Argentine judges (Rudolfo Canicoba Corral and MarÃ-a Servini de CubrÃ-a) and the security services (Antonio Stiusso).

The right has tried to present Nisman as a crusader seeking the truth. In fact, the U.S. embassy was mixed up in the investigation, as reported by WikiLeaks. The presence of the main representative of the U.S. diplomatic delegation at Nisman's wake is enough to remind us of this close relationship.

The right-wingers are working to once again realign Argentina's foreign policy with that of the U.S. and Israel. Thus, they are proposing the creation of an international commission, established in Washington, D.C., to find out what happened to Nisman.

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They also aim to block an upcoming trial focused on how the attack was covered up and involved several figures among Menem's supporters, the Justicialist Party, the DAIA and insiders in Mauricio Macri's Buenos Aires city administration. In addition to Galeano and Ruben Beraja (former president of the DAIA), Fino Palacios, one of Macri's close advisors, could soon be parading through the courts.

In order to conceal their complicity, the right is trying to blame Nisman's death directly on Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's government. ClarÃn, Argentina's largest daily newspaper, which is critical of the current president, is aiding and abetting this campaign by claiming that inconsequential telephone conversations between Kirchner aids (Luis D'ElÃa) and people close to Iran constitute a felony. The aim of all this is to demonstrateâ€”at a minimumâ€”that the president cannot handle the current crisis.

Meanwhile, the government appears confused. The president polemicizes by Twitter, first suggesting Nisman's death was a suicide, and then later a crime. At the same time, she has accused Diego Lagomarsino (an IT specialist in the prosecutor's office who lent Nisman the gun that killed him) without even checking with the powerful chief of the intelligence services.

Aside from all this, presidential support would have been sufficient to pursue a serious judicial investigation. But the death of the prosecutor came a few weeks after a major conflict had arisen between the president and the higher-ups in the security services. And the government has also recently been at odds with judges investigating hotels owned by the Kirchner family and their connections to money laundering.

These palace intrigues aren't designed to punish corruption. They always proliferate when the end of a presidential term comes close and confrontations erupt between the various groups who are fighting for preeminence in the state apparatus.

Nismans death may also have an impact in the electoral arena. Until Nisman's death, the government had regained the initiative with its anti-vulture funds campaign (U.S. investors holding discounted Argentinian bonds who are demanding billions of dollars in claims) and plans to promote the presidential candidacy of Fernandez de Kirchner's former vice president Daniel Scioli in this year's elections.

In a context of recession and high inflation, the president intended to resume borrowing, peg the dollar, postpone cutting subsidies and revive consumptionâ€”all in order to pass along any cutbacks to the next president. Will she be able to stick to this plan in the new context?

In the middle of all this turmoil, the president has proposed a reform of government services in order to overcome what she calls the "great democratic deficit." She forgets to add alongside this pronouncement that she has governed for an entire decade without addressing it.

Her real aim is to simply change the names, but leave the structures of spies in tact. The old SIDE (State Security Secretariat) was changed into the SI (Secretariat of Intelligence) and will now be called the AFI (Federal Intelligence Agency), maintaining its existing personnel and its enormous budget. The National Congress would appoint the intelligence directors under the new plan, but the executive could then replace them. No changes are envisioned for military or police agency spies, and judicial supervision will only be extended over some controversial wiretaps.

All of this means that the supposed dissolution of the SI is really nothing more than a reorganization. As there will be

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no investigations or clearing out of the old staff, it represents cosmetic change in place of real transformation. The project also eliminates previously announced plans for the declassification of intelligence files. Likewise, it is worth remembering that there have been several spy scandals over the last decade and none of these diminished the security service's power (bribes in the Senate in 2001 and the dismissal of Justice Minister Gustavo Béliz in 2004).

Moreover, Army Chief César Milani has been confirmed as the new strongman in the security services despite the serious allegations brought against him for the disappearance of a soldier during the dictatorship. Officialism (a term describing the Justicialist Party) has not talked a great deal about Stiusso and his fortunes. This may be because this super-spy has compromising files on hand that he could use against the party's leaders.

But for the first time, the huge network of informants, operating as a state within a state, is being forced to the surface. This apparatus has built up its own businesses and is involved in numerous crimes. Its officers and outside agents are involved in drug trafficking, police protection rackets, looting and the murky management of prisons. They resolve their disputes through murder and grease the wheels of power that connect them to mayors, governors and political bosses.

Clarifying what really happened at the AMIA could be the first step toward dismantling this Mafioso structure. This case concentrates all the nefarious spies and their actions into one place. The formation of an Independent Investigation Commission, as suggested by the Council to Investigate the Unpunished Massacre at AMIA (APEMIA), might open such a path.

The Congress and the Justice Department have demonstrated their total incapacity for fulfilling this task. As was the case with the National Commission for the Disappearances of Persons (CONADEP), only an independent body with broad powers and staffed by well-respected public figures and family members of the victims will be able to conduct this investigation.

This is the moment to act quickly and with conviction. There is a generalized feeling of indignation in the face of governmental impunity. The left and progressives must take the initiative in the face of dangerous attempts to manipulate the protests by the right wing, middle-class activists and the DAIA. Parliamentary actions or meetings with the government's ministers are not enough. Congress has never been the central arena for the people's demands.

The most important thing is to prioritize mobilizations. This week will see the first march in a series of demonstrations that must grow. The powers-that-be need the security services to hide their outrages, but the people want transparency, democracy and justice.

Translated by Todd Chretien.

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[1] First published at [La Izquierda Diario](#).