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War in Pieces:
AMIA and The Triple Frontier in Argentine
and American Discourse on Terrorism

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Nadie es inmune a los episodios de violencia, de terrorismo, pero al menos sería posible evitar que el terrorismo y la violencia sean la única posibilidad de creatividad, la única expresión imaginativa, sentimental, romántica, erótica, de una Nación.

Preso sin nombre, Celda sin número
—Jacobó Timerman

Introduction

July 18, 2010 marked yet another anniversary of the still unsolved terrorist attack that shook Argentina some sixteen years ago. Prior to September 11, Argentina in fact suffered two deadly terrorist attacks. The second of these, the bombing of La Asociación Mutual Israeli-Argentina (AMIA) on July 18, 1994, was the single largest attack targeting Jews since WWII and the largest terrorist attack in Latin American history. While the group “Islamic Jihad [Organization]” described by the FBI as “a covername” used by Hizbollah, claimed responsibility for the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992, explanations for the AMIA bombing, in which 85 people were killed and hundreds wounded, have been wrought by contention (United States, *Terrorism* 5).



AMIA, July 18, 2009: The fifteenth anniversary. NG

In this essay I examine two of the principal theories surrounding the AMIA case. The first, commonly referred to as “*la historia oficial*,” or “the

official story,”¹ posits that an Iranian-backed Hizbollah cell operating out of La Triple Frontera, the tri-border region between Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, carried out the attack with help from corrupt local officials and police officers. The theory was initially put forth by US and Israeli sources and has been the focus of most US media since the attack occurred. The second major theory known as “*la pista siria*” or “the Syrian lead” has focused on the role of local officials and criminal organizations in Buenos Aires acting in conjunction with the Syrian government and a notorious international crime syndicate from President Carlos Menem’s ancestral home in the Yabrud region of Syria. The indictment in October 2009, of former chief prosecutor on the AMIA case, Judge Juan José Galeano; a former Buenos Aires chief of police, Jorge “Fino” Palacios; a former head of Argentine intelligence; the Ambassador to Syria, Munir Menem; and the former President of Argentina, Carlos Menem, for their role in generating and covering up “irregularities” surrounding early inquiries into *la pista siria*, challenged many of the presuppositions of *la historia oficial* and has once again raised new questions about who was responsible for the attack (“Carlos”).

In the first section of this I trace the development of the AMIA case in Argentine media, concentrating on the most influential works to have appeared on the subject in the last fifteen years. Among the books reviewed in this section are Jorge Lanata and Joe Goldman’s *Cortinas de humo* (1994); Gabriel Levinas’s *La ley bajo los escombros* (1998); Roberto Caballero and Gustavo Cirelli’s *AMIA, la verdad imposible* (2005); and Christian Sanz and Fernando Paoletta’s *AMIA: la gran mentira oficial* (2007). There have appeared as of yet no book-length studies in English on the AMIA case.

As a number of commentators have pointed out *la historia oficial* and *la pista siria* are not mutually exclusive (Urien 2003). However, as I suggest in this essay, the differences between the two are significant enough that it is impossible to judge the merit of either one without addressing the cultural disposition of the Argentine and American sources. Stephen

¹ The phrase “*la historia oficial*,” first used in this context by editors at *Página 12* by my estimation, clearly alludes to Luis Puenzo’s film *La historia oficial* (1985) about crimes of child abduction committed by members of the military junta.

Holmes pursues a similar line of inquiry in *The Matador's Cape: America's Reckless Response to Terror* (2007). Writing largely in response to the slue of "terrorism texts" to emerge after September 11, Holmes asks the question whether America's predisposition to religious discourse has skewed our perception of the complex phenomenon that is "Islamic terrorism." This theoretical question hinges on a particularly Marxist variant of sociological hermeneutics captured most eloquently, in my opinion, by the Frankfurt School philosophers Hans Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas. In the final section of this article I expand on the problem of hermeneutics in the study of contemporary terrorism and post-Cold War "asymmetrical conflict."² At stake in this theoretical dynamic of "knowledge and human interest," to borrow from the title of Habermas's study of hermeneutics, is "how universal relation can be known, given a finite number of established singular facts" and how the meaning of "an individuated life structure [can] be grasped and represented in inevitably general categories" (Habermas 160). The work of drawing universal conclusions from isolated truths greatly burdens contemporary terrorism studies and underpins as well what Habermas understood as the basic Kantianism of Marx's early work, that is, a vision of "objective activity as a transcendental accomplishment" (Habermas 27).

In the case of AMIA, I begin with the understanding that the chroniclers of *la pista siria* convey a distinct cultural temperament, an understanding of terrorism that is itself an "historically effected event" (Gadamer 299). Hardened by years of corruption, extreme political violence and civil strife, the writers I examine in this paper have tried to frame the AMIA attack as less an ideological struggle motivated by religious fanaticism and more as the result of the ongoing violence between political and criminal syndicates motivated by a desire for reprisal, intimidation and profit. Their methodology, I will argue, draws heavily on the powerful literary tradition of *la crónica*. In the second part of this essay I will examine the literary precedents for these authors, emphasizing again the

² Although this term is now somewhat commonplace I am drawing my understanding of it from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Multitude* (2004).

influence of discursive continuity in the understanding of any socio-historic event.

The most striking motif of “*la historia oficial*”—which emphasizes the anti-Semitic nature of the attack but is pre Al-Qaeda insofar as it does not posit the attack as part of a global jihad against western imperialism—is the preoccupation of especially American journalists who have looked at the AMIA case with the “lawless zone” of La Triple Frontera (“The Triple Frontier”), or Tri-Border Area (TBA). As I discuss in the third part of this essay, The Triple Frontier has become a key conceptual marker in a still nascent, particularly American understanding of the “geography of poverty and subordination” so integral to the transnational design of “asymmetrical conflict” and terrorism (Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 159). In the late nineties and early two-thousands, La Ciudad del Este, A.K.A. “El fin del mundo” / “La ciudad jardín” became one of the many marginal epicenters to appear in western media as a potential “safe haven,” “breeding ground,” “hideout,” or in this case “financial center” for terrorist activities. In the third part of this essay, I examine several American journalistic accounts of the TBA and ask the question: why did this area become so important to American journalists and other advocates of the “the official story” when it has been relatively ignored by journalists in the *pista siria* camp?

I. One History, Two Theories

La historia oficial was the first major theory to emerge surrounding the AMIA attack. Focusing on the role of Hezbollah and the presence of Islamic extremists in the TBA, *la historia oficial*—which became a 500 page report submitted by Argentine intelligence (SIDE) to President Eduardo Duhalde in late 2003—was first established, as I mentioned, by American sources (Kollman 2003).³ Although Hezbollah officials in Lebanon later denied it, the early claim of responsibility by the group “Islamic Command,” a little known faction of Hezbollah, further advanced the belief on the part of the U.S. government that the Lebanese organization, most

³ The FBI and the U.S. government were at the bomb scene “less than 48 hours after blast... deploying 13 experts in explosives investigations from the International Response Team” (United States, *Terrorism* 4). By July 22, Steven Emerson of the Wall Street Journal had written that State Department and CIA analysts had already attributed the attack to Islamic extremist in the tri-border area (Emerson “Diplomacy”).

likely with approval and backing from Iran, had been behind the attack (United States *Terrorism*, 5).

In late May of 2009, “the official story” gained renewed momentum when the special prosecutor to the case, Alberto Nisman, ordered the extradition from Lebanon of Samuel Salman El Reda.

According to Nisman, El Reda, a Colombian convert to Islam, made a series of calls to a cell phone registered under the name André Marques in Foz do Iguacu, the Brazilian town in the Tri-Border Area. The first call came from the Ezeiza airport in Buenos Aires on July 1, 1994 and the last call from the Aeroparque airport in Buenos Aires on July 18 just hours before the attack. In between, the cell phone in Foz received calls from a *locutorio* (call-center) near the AMIA building in the Once neighborhood of Buenos Aires where calls from the same *locutorio* were also made to El Reda’s wife, Silvina Saín, in Lebanon. On July 15, Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian cultural attaché who had been previously implicated in the case, called from his cell phone, also in the Once neighborhood, to a mosque in Foz. Quickly afterwards another call was made to the Marques cell phone from a *locutorio* near that mosque and then from the same *locutorio* to Khodor Barakat, the main financier for Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area. According to Nisman, it was El Reda who answered the call from Rabbani at the mosque in Foz and then presumably called Barakat, setting in motion the final stages of the attack. El Reda then presumably returned to Buenos Aires, made the final call on July 18 from Aeroparque and then returned to the Tri-Border Area on a flight that left Buenos Aires just hours before the attack. To the frustration of many following the Reda lead, the list of passengers on the flight from Aeroparque— there was only one on July 18— was not saved by the airline company, Austral (Kollman, “La pieza;” Barrionuevo, “Inquiry;” “Argentina Seeks”).

There remain serious gaps in the Reda story. Alexei Barrionuevo of the *New York Times* reported that the FBI did not consider the Iranian dissident who originally implicated the cultural attaché Rabbani to be a credible source. According to Barrionuevo’s source in the FBI, the American agency was “‘convinced’ of Hezbollah’s involvement,” but remained “skeptical” about the Iranian connection (Barrionuevo).

Barrionuevo's publication on the fifteenth anniversary of the attack, suggests that while Argentine officials are pursuing an Iranian connection that had long been held at bay, American authorities are moving away from a presumption that they themselves introduced.⁴

In 2005 President Néstor Kirchner appointed special prosecutor Nisman (then working with Marcelo Martínez Burgos) to head the investigation (Barrionuevo). Soon afterward there emerged what appeared to be a major break. On October 25, 2006, Nisman and Martínez officially accused the Iranian government of involvement in the AMIA bombing after five Iranian dissidents told Argentine officials that the AMIA attack had been hatched during a meeting of Iranian governmental officials on August 14, 1993 (Kollman 1; Klich 5).⁵ As Raúl Kollman wrote in *Página 12*, for many, the Iranians' account was tantamount to claims by "Cuban dissidents in Miami" that Fidel and Raúl were planning an attack against the United States. Kollman, who has written on the case for *Página 12* extensively since the mid-nineties and Ignacio Klich, the leading scholar of Argentine Semitic culture (Jewish and Arab) in France who wrote an extensive piece on the case in *Le Monde Diplomatique* following the Nisman-Martínez report, both commented on the insubstantiality of the accusations made by the Iranian dissidents—most of whom served under the Shah—which implicate people like the former cultural attaché to Argentina, Mohsen

⁴ In Argentina, focus on Iranian involvement initially centered on the deposition of a Brazilian man, Wilson Dos Santos who reportedly appeared at the Argentine consulate in Milan one week before the AMIA bombing claiming he had knowledge of an imminent attack in Buenos Aires on a building under renovation (as was the case with the AMIA building). The Argentine consulate sent him to the Israelis, but still nothing was done. After the attack, Dos Santos told Argentine prosecutors that his girlfriend, Nasrim Mokhtari, an Iranian with ties to the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires, had told him she was helping to carry out a "job." Judge Galeano charged him with perjury and he retracted his statement. According to journalists who have spoken with him since, including Sebastian Rotella of the *LA Times*, Dos Santos maintains that he made up his story (Rotella, "Deadly blasts" 2-7; Berri; Levinas 72).

⁵ Interestingly the Iranians' accusations appeared first in *The New York Times*. On July 27 2002, Larry Rohter wrote a: "100-page transcript of a secret deposition provided to *The New York Times* by Argentine officials frustrated that the case remains unsolved, supports long-held suspicions of Iranian involvement and adds to the questions surrounding the conduct of an inquiry that has been rife with irregularities from the start." Included in the report was "testimony by a witness in the case" who said: "The Iranian government organized and carried out the bombing of a Jewish community center here eight years ago that killed 85 people and then paid Argentina's president at the time, Carlos Menem, \$10 million to cover it up" (Rohter "Iran").

Rabbani, despite the fact, they say, that he was on appointment in Argentina at the time of the alleged meeting (Kollman, “Misterios” 1).⁶ The prosecutors nonetheless requested a federal judge to issue an arrest warrant for five Iranian dignitaries and one Lebanese man. Among the Iranians Nisman and Martínez named were Ahmad Vihidi who was recently appointed by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to become Iran’s new defense minister, and the former President of Iran, Ali Akbar Hachémi Rafsandjani. INTERPOL, who the Argentine government requested carry out the arrest warrants, said for lack of evidence it would not help in the arrest of Rafsandjani. INTERPOL characterized its warrant for Vihidi as a “red notice” indicating that the arrest warrant was a national and judicial warrant and not an international arrest warrant (“Interpol;” “Argentina” 1; Klich 6).

Significantly, the Nisman-Martínez report drew on several major aspects of the previously dismissed *pista siria* including the claim the AMIA bombing had been an act of reprisal for former President Carlos Menem’s revocation of a pre-election agreement to provide the Iranian government with technological assistance for its nuclear program (Klich 3). The “Syrian lead” also focused on the motive of reprisal, not for the failure of the Argentine government to provide technological assistance to Iran, but for Argentina’s sudden decision to dismantle the nuclear reactor it started to construct in Syria after Menem became President. According to Menem’s former diplomatic advisor who accompanied him on a 1988 trip to Syria, the President promised the Assad government that Argentina would help Syria build a nuclear reactor in exchange for campaign contributions (Berri 1). After Syria and Iran signed a nuclear cooperation treaty in 1991, Menem halted construction of the nuclear reactor under intense pressure from the U.S. and Israel. Menem also apparently failed to follow through on promises to provide Condor II missiles to Syria and

⁶ Klich also notes that in response to a claim made to the Argentine prosecutors by former director of Iranian intelligence, Abolhassan Mezbahi, that Menem received \$10 million in a Swiss bank account as part of a promise on the latter’s part to cover the tracks to Tehran, Swiss authorities wrote that the bank account in question had been closed by the time of the inquiry (Klich 5). Surprisingly, in 2006, Menem confirmed during a CNN interview, apparently by mistake, that he had had at one time a Swiss bank account (Rohter “Ex-President”).

Libya, the latter of whom had also contributed a large portion of \$40 million that was given to Menem's campaign by Arab countries (Lanata 187; Kollmann, "Una pista" 1; Sanz 88).

Broken promises and the betrayal of kindred alliances are just part of the *pista siria*. Although the U.S. and SIDE rejected the theory, a point duly noted by Lanata and others (Lanata 100; Kollmann, "Historia" 1), the *pista siria* gained traction after news broke that the former chief prosecutor in the case, Judge Juan José Galeano, paid \$400,000 to Carlos Telleldín, a convicted car thief suspected of helping obtain the vehicle that was used in the bombing, to implicate members of the Buenos Aires police force (Barrionuevo 2).⁷ Attention first fell on Telleldín when a Syrian from Yabrud who had been detained in connection to the bombing was unable to account for phone calls he had made to Telleldín eight days before the attack. According to the former assistant prosecutor in the case, then headed by Galeano, Alberto Kanoore Edul, the Yabrudí, was released from custody by the request of Munir Menem, the President's aforementioned brother and ambassador to Syria (Berri; Levinas 67). Edul's trail led to Monzer al-Kassar, another Yabrudí and one of the largest arms and drug traffickers in the world.

Information that Monzer Al-Kassar, "the prince of Marbella," was in Argentina during the AMIA attack generated significant interest in Argentine media, but received almost no attention in the U.S. By 1984 the DEA had identified Al-Kassar as among the world's "most important international narco-traffickers" (Morstein 77). In 2006, the Iraqi government accused Al-Kassar of being the primary supplier of arms to the Iraqi insurgency, a charge normally associated in western media with the government of Iran (Roston 1). In 2008, after having been arrested by DEA agents who posed as middlemen buying arms for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), he was convicted by a federal jury in Manhattan on similar charges (Weisser 1). Al-Kassar's resume is lengthy. Between organizing a suitcase bomb attack targeting Jews in Paris in the

⁷ It was Claudio Lifschitz, the former assistant prosecutor to Galeano, who first accused the chief prosecutor of paying off Telleldín \$400,000 ("Un infiltrado;" Barrionuevo 2). Lifschitz has since been kidnapped, had the word "AMIA" carved onto his back and survived an assassination attempt.

mid-eighties, handling the “bulk of financing for the PLO,” and selling Argentine weapons to Iran, Ghana and Nicaraguan *contras* in Honduras during the Iran-Contra affair (Loftus 384; Lanata 177), he reportedly became the major supplier of arms to Argentina for the disastrous Falklands War against the United Kingdom in 1982 (Lanata 176; Sanz 71). At that time INTERPOL and the U.S. embassy in Syria reported that he was carrying diplomatic passports from the People’s Republic of Yemen and Syria (Morstein 76; Sanz 71). The United Kingdom, where Al-Kassar was once on the M16 payroll, officially banned him from their shores in February of 1984 (Morstein 75; Sanz 71; Loftus 444). In Argentina on the other hand, just a year after Menem had taken office, and two years after Al-Kassar had met with him during his official campaign visit to Syria, Al-Kassar and his brother Ghassam were both granted Argentine passports (Lanata 183).⁸

The resonance of the Kassar connection among Argentine journalists speaks directly to the “dollars for terror” hypothesis that most distinctly characterizes the “Syrian lead.” From the failed arms agreement to the Telleldín bribe, the major tropes in the *pista siria* all hinge on the question of money, not religion. For some, like Sanz and Paoella, the bombing of the Israeli embassy, the AMIA bombing, and thirdly the fatal helicopter crash of Carlos Menem Jr. on February 16, 1995—what President Menem said finally in 1999 was “murder” and was “being investigated on not just the local but international level”—signaled the conclusive indicator of the Yabrud connection (Sanz 149). As interpreted by Sanz and Paoella and a number of analysts in the *pista siria* camp, the three strikes were part of a tripartite reprisal— a signature of Syrian, specifically Yabrud mafia—for Menem’s failure to repay his debts.

For those in the *pista siria* camp, Al-Kassar, a megatrafficker in arms and drugs who profited immensely from the proliferation of non-

⁸ Al-Kassar’s ties to the Syrian government were explicit. In the seventies and eighties the Kassar family controlled the opium trade out of Lebanon’s Bekaa valley, which supplied nearly twenty-percent of all U.S. heroin (Loftus 382). As the single largest export in Syria, Al-Kassar’s control of the opium trade only elevated his status in the Assad government, where, according to Christian Sanz and Fernando Paoella, his “best friend,” Rifaat Al-Assad, was already head of Syrian secret service (Sanz 75).

state, terrorist organizations following the collapse of the Soviet Union, was to the AMIA bombing what bin Laden is to the September 11 attacks in the U.S. Sanz and Paoella's book is perhaps the most egregious example of a willingness on the part of journalists in the *pista siria* camp to downplay or dismiss the anti-Semitic nature of the AMIA bombing. Yet the insistence on viewing the event as criminal conspiracy, rather than a product of the history of violence between Israel and its neighbors may be less ideologically motivated than it seems. Levinas, who has been equally vociferous in his dismissal of the *la historia oficial*, lost a relative in the AMIA bombing and was commissioned by the Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (DAIA) to conduct his research. Cynicism towards the designation of Iran as the final culprit, the car bomb and the demonizing of the TBA are not only evidence of a deep distrust in Argentine society towards government, but are also expressive of a long literary preoccupation with what Beatriz Sarlo has described as the "initiator society" ("*la sociedad iniciática*") of Argentine society: "the presence of the secretive in the public world of the modern city" (Sarlo 216).

II. Literary Precedents

As I mentioned in the introduction, the journalistic narratives that have appeared in response to the AMIA bombing can be seen as part of a well-defined genre in Argentine literature, namely, *la crónica*. While American authors following 9/11 tended towards geopolitical theory (Chomsky), histories of Islamic fundamentalism (Rashid), or foreign war correspondence (Filkins),⁹ the AMIA chronicles all draw on explicitly subjective modes of inquiry. The authors routinely detail their own experience of researching the material and their narratives possess a distinctly eye-level quality. Details of 600 Pasteur (the AMIA building) are abundant and the psychological drama of the prosecutors and suspects in particular assumes a major role.

Perhaps still the most significant work of this genre is Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación masacre* (1972). Written on the eve of Argentina's Dirty

⁹ Dina Temple-Raston's *The Jihad Next Door: the Lackawanna Six and Rough Justice in an Age of Terror* (2007) and Mark Hamm's *Terrorism as Crime* (2007) are two clear exceptions to these trends.

War, Walsh reconstructs in painstaking detail the “long night of June 9” 1956 and the bloody response by Argentina’s then de facto government to an uprising led by loyalists to Perón who had been exiled the previous September.

Walsh’s account, which eventually hones in on an hour-by-hour recap of the violent urban battle that reached its apogee at midnight while the Radio del Estado skipped their news updates to broadcast an extended hour of “music by Stravinsky” (69), is an excellent example of what author Francisco Goldman has described in reference to an essay by Roberto Calasso as “*un libro único*,” a narrative account that is at once historical and actively subjective. For Goldman, a novelist who has written about the asymmetrical conflict zone of post-Cold War Guatemala and the interface of criminal and political violence in his book *The Art of Political Murder* (2007), the author’s “depositing of subjective experience into book form,” his intentional embrace of the humanistic avenue of inquiry, epitomizes what he has described as the last and perhaps greatest wave of twentieth-century Latin American literature which found its seminal form of expression in the fictional work of Roberto Bolaño (Goldman “interview”).

The more immediate predecessor to the AMIA chroniclers and an important point of reference to many of the writers who have published on the case is Jacobo Timerman’s 1980 *Preso sin nombre, celda sin numero* (*Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*). The triumph of Timerman’s work was that through his personal account of imprisonment and torture the internationally respected journalist brought to the world’s attention that anti-Semitic violence in Argentina had become a systemic condition under the military junta.¹⁰

But few works of this genre parallel in scope and impact Horacio Verbitsky’s *El vuelo* or *Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior* (1995). In 1994, President Menem attempted to promote to the rank of captain two

¹⁰ In 1984, the “Nunca Más” (“Never Again”) report conducted by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), confirmed the terminal disappearance of 9,860 people between 1974 and 1983 (CONADEP). A study conducted by the Center for Social Studies (CES) and the Argentine Jewish Associations Delegation (DAIA) in 2000, suggested the Jewish population, then just 1% of the Argentine population, accounted for approximately 1,300 people, nearly 12% of the total number of the “desaparecidos” (Lvovich 17; Senkman 261).

former officers who were deeply implicated in some of the most atrocious crimes of the Dirty War. After publishing an article detailing the two men's background, Verbitsky was approached by a previously unknown witness, a former lieutenant, Adolfo Scilingo, who worked at the infamous Navy School of Mechanics. Based on the witness's testimony of two "aerial transports" where prisoners were "stripped naked and thrown into the waters of the South Atlantic" (8), Verbitsky's *El vuelo* gave impetus to *los juicios por la verdad* or "truth trials" devoted to investigating crimes committed under the junta. As Judge Gabriel R. Cavallo wrote in the English preface to the 2005 edition of Verbitsky's book, the "truth trials were of vital importance in breaching the wall of impunity erected by the 1986 'Full Stop' and 1987 'Due Obedience' laws and the presidential pardons of 1989 and 1990, issued by former Presidents Raúl Alfonsín and Carlos Menem" (XII). The political violence under the Dirty War and the AMIA attack find a chilling point of interface in Verbitsky's book as well. In his afterword to the 2005 edition, he writes that Menem and the Argentine navy acted quickly to punish Scilingo for speaking out. "In addition to discharging him from the navy, the government found a corrupt judge and police captain who were willing to jail him for two years on unproven charges of fraud." The police captain was none other than Jorge "Fino" Palacios who was finally charged along with Menem in October of 2009, for his role in "obstructing the investigation" of *la pista siria* (178).

Similar to American journalists after 9/11, Argentine writers were somewhat at a loss to explain the emergence of foreign-born terrorism. As with the first World Trade Center bombing, discussions in the media of the earlier attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires had largely subsided by 1994. Not surprisingly, most journalistic accounts of the AMIA bombing initially avoided the subject of international, Islamic terrorism. A far more common theme was the familiar story of internal corruption and political violence.

La ley bajo los escombros (1998) by Gabriel Levinas, a major public intellectual who led the investigative team for DAIA in the late nineties, exemplifies the kind of language most journalists resorted to in explaining the origins of the attack.

En la Argentina no existen las mafias de la manera en que se las conoce en los Estados Unidos o en otros lugares del mundo y las pocas organizaciones que apenas podrían sindicarse como mafiosas se manejan más en el negocio de la carne o en el reparto de diarios y revistas. A ello se han agregado últimamente el correo privado y los aeropuertos. Pero la prostitución, las drogas, el juego, etcétera, son administrados o regulados por algunos grupos pertenecientes a la Policía Federal. Estos grupos, independientes entre sí pero al mismo tiempo ligados por el organigrama de la institución, se reparten claramente sus respectivos ámbitos de influencia. (Gabriel Levinas, *La ley bajo los escombros* 87)

(Mafias do not exist in Argentina as they do in the United States or other places in the world. The few groups that could organize themselves as a mafia are geared more towards handling the meat industry or the distribution of newspapers and magazines. To this we might add the recent additions of private mail and the airports. But prostitution, drugs, gambling, etc, these are administered or regulated by groups belonging to the Federal Police. These groups, independent in and of themselves but at the same time connected to the flowchart of the institution, clearly share respective fields of influence).

However distant from American discourse on jihad and fanaticism, Levinas's critique retains a subtle paradox that is still resonant among journalists in Argentina today. As a kind of social force at once independent and deeply intertwined in the "organigrama" or "flowchart" of civil society, the pseudo official mafias of Argentine society—"estos grupos" in Levinas's description—sustain themselves by the very thing they destroy. For Levinas the relevancy of this paradox to the AMIA case is as illuminating as it is tragic. Throughout the course of his book, perhaps still the best in the field, the AMIA bombing emerges as an event inseparable from the decadence of the nineties. The widespread belief among advocates of the *pista siria* that the destruction of the building was not the result of a "traffic," or car bomb, but of an internal explosion from within the building at 600 Calle Pasteur, is a sad but poignant analogy for a literati that seems at times to be engulfed by the fear, however real it may be, of a shadow society that is destroying the larger society from the inside out.

Tomás Eloy Martínez's *Santa Evita* (1995) is one novel that captures this tradition of paranoia. Written in the wake of the AMIA bombing, the narrator of *Santa Evita* has become obsessed with the secret history of Evita's corpse. His curiosity is piqued after reading an essay—

“Esa mujer”—by none other than Rodolfo Walsh. Describing the strange afterlife of the first lady—the embalming and secretive storing of her body in the offices of the Ministry of Defense—Walsh’s essay reveals for the narrator how susceptible even the most precious symbols of the nation are to the will of a few corrupt individuals. When the narrator finally meets Walsh and the latter shows him a photograph of Evita given to him by the Colonel responsible for the grotesque charade, the narrator’s faith in the power of objective truth is shattered. The story of the body becomes enmeshed in a full-scale conspiracy implicating not just the embalmers, but everyone who wanted to know the truth behind the mystery, including, inevitably, the narrator himself (306).

Of the AMIA chronicles, Roberto Caballero’s *AMIA: la verdad imposible*, stands out as a work driven almost solely by the kind of paranoid self-insertion into the drama of the case—and the collective experience of AMIA as a post-dictatorial moment of reckoning—that has enriched but haunted Argentine literature throughout the twentieth century.

Este libro no iba a existir. Había sellado su suerte un sobre de papel Madera, depositado en el buzón de mi casa una mañana de junio d 2003 que recuerdo húmeda, pero sobre todo amargo... Después de trabajar durante tres años para escribir la biografía del policía de mayor rango detenido por la voladura de la AMIA, ya sentía náuseas: era una historia donde nada era lo que parecía ser. (9)

(This book should never have existed. Its fate was sealed by a large envelope, deposited in the mailbox of my house on a June morning that I remember as humid, but bitter beyond all else... After working for three years on writing the biography of the highest ranking police officer to be detained for the bombing of AMIA, I still felt nauseous: it was a story in which nothing was what it seemed).

Caballero’s peripatetic biography of Juan José Ribellí, one of the first *bonarense* police officers detained in suspicion of collaborating on the attack, could well fit Borges critique in “On the Origins of the Detective Story” where he writes of Roger Callois: “[He] is too willing to believe in the probity of individuals of the Crime Club ... which amounts to judging the premiere of a film by the hyperboles of the program, toothpaste by the statements on the tube, or the Argentine government by the Argentine constitution” (147). Caballero, like many in the *pista siria* camp, indulges in

the delights of detail often evading reflection for the dramatic appeal of the disconcerting p of observation regardless of its implications, e.g. that the head of security at AMIA “since the month of May, 1994” was an “ex official of the Israeli army” (Lanata 116), or that Ribelli “had a wife and an official lover” (Caballero 38). Still, like Timerman’s memoir of torture during the Dirty War or Walsh’s account of military violence, the AMIA chroniclers have been involved in a game where the scales have been tilted against them, where the metanarratives were set from day one and the official archives remain sealed. In such cases, attention to detail may well indeed serve as an invaluable rhetorical device of last defense (Walsh 220).

The first great literary point of reference to this imaginary history of a shadow society is the work of Roberto Arlt. The resurgence of interest in Arlt’s work in the late nineties presents an interesting parallel to the appeal of *la pista siria*. Arlt’s novels from the 1920s document the organic process of criminality. In his first novel, *El juguete rabioso* or *Mad Toy* (1926), the young protagonist Silvio Astier develops a taste for thievery living in the densely packed markets of 1920s Buenos Aires. It is no small irony that from his disdain for the Jewish butchers and money lenders that dominate the marketplace, Arlt devises in his second novel, *Los siete locos* (*The Seven Madmen*, 1929), a terrorist cell modeled on a “ninth-century Persian sect” that conspires to carry out a chemical attack with money raised through prostitution. The terrorist boss, “the Astrologer,” and the sect he develops represent an alternative source of reason operating beneath the skin of society: he is “someone to worship, making a pathway through this forest of stupidity” (94). “The gods exist,” the narrator tells us. “They live hidden beneath the outer shell of those men who remember life on the planet when the earth was still young... What would the presiding judge say if he replied: ‘I sin because I bear a god within’” (96)? Beyond the obvious, the violence of this ultra Nietzschean rationale is that in its analogical doubling of society, its creation of a utopia that defines itself by its very distance from society, the Astrologer (who also likens his group to the KKK) can only be satisfied with total destruction. For Arlt, the utopian drive—the desire not just to rise within the existing framework of society but to completely

overhaul it—is what distinguishes terrorism from crime and, in many respects, it is still this fine line that draws the distinction today.

Political deception, psychoanalysis, literary labyrinths—Argentine culture overflows with masterful inquiries into the subjective plight of the individual ensconced in an uncertain and often corrupt project of modernity. As Josefina Ludmer (1999) and Juan Pablo Dabove (2007) have both pointed out in their excellent studies on the subject, the metaphysical import of criminality and conspiracy as an organizational aesthetic have emerged—*res ipsa loquitur*—as vital motifs in the basic cultural struggle with and for democracy. Representations of criminal organizations and criminal transgression, like the imaginary landscapes of an alternate world (Borges), or the Parisian circle (Cortázar) express a profound anxiety towards what literary critics from Noé Jitrik, to Beatriz Sarlo or Jean Franco describe, in the most basic terms, as the dislocating experience of modernity and democratization. Yet these alternative and often conflicting spheres of social action are also indicative of what Jürgen Habermas describes as the “the normative content of modernity.” For Habermas, “autonomous public spheres of modernity” sustain but also paradoxically threaten the stability of the very seed that enables their existence, namely, political democracy (*Philosophical* 362). In the case of Argentina, the process of normalization hardly functions through peaceful “intersubjective” dialogue as Habermas would have it. Rather, “in a society in which a ‘milico’ (militiaman) can keep order,” as Jean Franco writes, the normative content of modernity and the proliferation of autonomous public spheres appear tantamount to a kind of cold-war “muscle down” theory (Franco, *Critical* 319).

III. La Ciudad del Este and La Historia Oficial

The concrete and steel high-rises of La Ciudad del Este on the Paraguayan side of the Triple Frontier are perhaps the most striking physical anomaly to this remote and impoverished jungle region of South America. Most of the towers are little more than vacant shells, unfinished construction projects that may or may not have been intended to house people. The street level, on the other hand, reveals a dense and chaotic

world driven by seemingly unchecked economic activity. Ramón Fogel of the *Centro de Estudios Rurales Interdisciplinarios* (CERI-UNA, Paraguay) describes the city as an “appropriated space, occupied and dominated by determined actors to satisfy their material and symbolic needs” (273).



Point of entry, La Ciudad del Este, Paraguay. NG

The kineticism of the La Triple Frontera, the Islamic banking practices of the large Muslim community in La Ciudad del Este (CDE) and Foz¹¹ and the association of criminal organizations and violence¹² with the intense, unregulated economic activity of La Ciudad del Este (CDE) all contribute to an image in western media of the border area as an ideal location for what Hardt and Negri describe as the “asymmetrical conflict

¹¹ The estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people of Arab descent began arriving in La triple frontera in the late seventies following the Lebanese civil war. Most are shi'a and of Lebanese or Syrian origin (Machain 1; Hudson 9).

¹² In a report prepared by the federal research division of the Library of Congress (LC), author Rex Hudson notes that in Foz do Iguacu 275 homicides were reported in 2002, nearly as many as occurred in Washington D.C. which has two and a half times the population (11). Quoting an American official from the Spanish newspaper *El País*, Guillermina Seri notes that among the many notorious rackets in the city is the fake I.D. and passport industry. Seri's source says “570 illegal immigrants obtain fake I.D.s in Paraguay every year” (Seri 91). Sebastian Rotella of the *LA Times* reported that corporate watchdog groups estimated that in 1997, U.S. industries “lost an estimated \$150 million” due to the “assembly and sale of pirated CDs, videos and software in the area.” Rotella also reported that Brazil “confiscated \$1.5 billion in contraband arriving from Paraguay and Argentine intelligence detected “100 clandestine airstrips” in the area around CDE in Paraguay (Rotella, “Jungle” 2).

zone” of the post-Cold-War era, a conceptual and social phenomenon that “tends to transform every boundary into a threshold” (55). And it is precisely the “asymmetrical,” extra-nationality of the place that has so fascinated American journalists who in turn have constructed for their reading public a virtual Hobbesian realm of transcendent infamy in La Ciudad del Este. From *The LA Times* to *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, correspondents from La Ciudad del Este have waxed poetic on the “Lebanese terrorists,” the “Colombian drug smugglers,” “Tai Chen,” the “yazuka hoodlums from Japan,” the “Nigerian con artists,” the “bearded and turbaned imans” who turned “this riverfront outpost of frontier capitalism in the jungle” into “South America’s busiest contraband and smuggling center,” a “Casablanca,” a “Casbah,” “a Tijuana without beaches or factories,” the “Hilton of Islamic extremism” (Rottella, “Jungle” 1; Rohter, “South” 1; De Cordoba 1; Junger 5). La Ciudad del Este and the Triple Frontier became in the late nineties and early two-thousands emblematic in American media of what a recent in *Economist* described as a veritable obsession among US doves and hawks alike. In quoting Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the editors wrote: the “ungoverned, undergoverned, misgoverned and contested areas’ offer fertile grounds for terrorists and other nefarious groups” (“Fixing” 1). The statement by the Secretary of Defense could well have come from *LA Times* journalist Sebastian Rotella who wrote of the “polyglot mix of thugs” in the La Ciudad del Este: it “epitomizes a foremost menace of the post-Cold War world: the globalization of organized crime” (“Jungle” 1).¹³

¹³ Once little more than a small Guaraní hamlet, La Ciudad del Este (CDE), originally named Puerto Stroessner after the dictator of Paraguay, grew quickly from its founding in 1957 as a port for smuggling cheap cigarettes and whiskey into Brazil and Argentina, to become a global financial epicenter (Fogel 276). According to the LC report, by the mid nineties, La Ciudad del Este ranked third world-wide after Hong Kong and Miami for the volume of cash transactions made annually, over \$12 billion a year (Hudson 3). Behind this figure comes the city’s more notorious distinction as the “Latin-American capital for counterfeiting and for the smuggling of weapons and explosives” (Labévière 334). According to Richard Labévière, the author of *Dollars for Terror*, some western intelligence agencies believe 80% of all Colombian cocaine to be laundered in the “Islamic-Latin-American triangle” (334). Ambassador Phillip Wilcox, the former coordinator for counterterrorism for the Department of State testified before Congress in 1995 that Hezbollah was thought to be significantly involved in the narcotics trade and maintained close ties with the FARC (United States, *Terrorism* 5). In 2003, U.S. and European media began reporting on the Tri-Border Area extensively after there appeared reports in a Brazilian newspaper and later in the *Washington Post* that Osama bin Laden

In La Ciudad del Este, one municipal government official, Mauro Céspedes, director of culture and media relations, described the influx of western media and intelligence agencies in La Ciudad del Este as part of a booming new business: “terror tourism” (Céspedes “Interview”). Everyone from BBC, to MSNBC, Al-Jazeera, or Current TV has reported on the terrorists of La Triple Frontera. Their cameras travel across the Puente de Amistad, cutting from shots of the mosques in Foz to the ramshackle markets of La Ciudad del Este. Director Michael Mann shot his 2005 film *Miami Vice* in La Triple Frontera, and Kathryn Bigalowe, director of the *Hurt Locker*, announced in August 2009 that her next film would be about terrorism in La Triple Frontera (McNary).

Speaking in a small, barren office space inside the municipal government compound in the La Ciudad del Este, Céspedes boasted about the city’s multi-ethnic, interracial identity. In a city with little to no governmental oversight of commercial activity, fledgling infrastructure, and an increasingly infamous international reputation, Céspedes like other members of the community I spoke with emphasized the equalizing power of money and its role in harmonizing such a culturally disparate community. Nobody imposes his/her views, he said. The schools provide multicultural festivals for the children; Arabs and Paraguayans intermarry. Here, he said, money is God (Céspedes, “Interview”).

An estimated 30 to 40,000 people cross the Puente de Amistad between La Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil) each day. The majority of the commuters are “*sacoleiros*,” or runners, shuttling goods between the two cities (Hudson 15; Perasso 1). In 2002, Brazil set up an “integrated customs system” that reportedly decreased by ninety percent the overall movement of commerce across the bridge. But in 2009, it significantly increased its presence on the border with the deployment of

and Khalid Sheik Mohammad had traveled to the region in the late-nineties (Hudson 19). Although the U.S. State department now says there is no conclusive proof of this claim, La Triple Frontera has nonetheless become home to the “single largest concentration of intelligence and counter-intelligence agencies in the western hemisphere” according to a U.S. embassy official in Argentina (“Interview”). In 2002, Larry Rohter reported “that nearly as plentiful as Islamic extremists since Sept. 11 are the spies and intelligence agents of a half dozen countries—from China to the Middle East to the United States.” One Argentine official he quoted said “there are so many of us now that we are bumping into each other” (Rohter, “South” 1).

two thousand troops to the border area to protect against what Brasilia described as part of its ongoing struggle against “*crímenes de frontera*” (Perasso 1).

The international task force ‘3+1’ (the TBA countries and the USA), established through a MERCOSUR initiative, currently maintains a formidable presence in the area. In 2002, the U.S. State Department allocated \$1 million to improve intelligence operations in the area and to strengthen borders (Dao). But two years later at a meeting between delegations from the 3+1 group, the State department “ratified” the assessment that there existed “no operational activities” of terrorism in the region (United States, *Communique*). At this same meeting Paraguay “recalled” a “tri-lateral draft operational agreement” that authorized joint (3+1) patrols of the Lake Itaipu area. A contentious issue in Paraguayan politics, the recall came in response to the establishment of a U.S. military presence north of Ciudad del Este in the vicinity of the Guaraní hydroelectric dam. The “Sistema Acuífero Guaraní” (SAG) sits above the largest subterranean fresh water reserve in the world (Fogel 280). As with Brazil’s “*crímenes de frontera*” campaign, there exists in Paraguay and Argentina wide spread suspicion that the United States has used purported Islamic terrorism to establish a military presence in the SAG vicinity (Sanz 139; Montenegro 116).¹⁴

¹⁴ The repercussions of the “terrorism as pretext” scenario are not inconsequential to the AMIA case. In 2006, Luis D’Elía, also known as “Piquetero K” in reference to his pseudo-official role as President Néstor Kirchner’s personal political attaché (officially he is the “Undersecretary for Social Habitat”), wrote in a communiqué to the news site INFOBAE.COM that the Bush family had purchased land in the Lake Itaipu area just outside the CDE. Although largely unfounded, D’Elía’s claim demonstrates in part the philosophical impetus behind the rejection of *la historia oficial* among many from the far left in Argentina. Sympathy towards Iran has also bolstered this position. In 2007, just months after Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sponsored his first “International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust,” D’Elía led a “delegate” of Argentine sympathizers to Iran to express their solidarity with the regime (Bruschtein). At the top of the list of signatures on the letter was Fernando Solanas, the famed Argentine filmmaker who was recently elected to Congress. Solanas, who has repeatedly denied that he is an anti-Semite, is the head of a new independent party in Argentina, Proyecto Sur. On the eve of the fifteenth anniversary of the AMIA bombing, Proyecto Sur helped coordinate a major rally where spokespeople from groups like the Partido Obrero, the Federación Universitaria de Buenos Aires and Frente de Acción Revolucionaria reiterated accusations put forth by D’Elía and others that the AMIA bombing had been carried out by Jews themselves—in collusion with the CIA and Mosad—as part of a way to legitimize an escalation of rhetoric towards Iran and the Palestinians. As a number of authors have

Guillermina Seri concentrates on just such “zoning politics” in her essay “On the ‘Triple Frontera’ and the ‘Borderization’ of Argentina.” In addition to Rex Hudson’s Library of Congress report, Seri’s is the best compendium of information on the region available in English. Focusing heavily on border theorization, her essay draws on the work of Hardt and Negri, Mike Davis and Giorgio Agamben to conceptualize the TBA as a space that was once integral to the “decentering and deterritorializing” work of “Empire,” but has transformed since 9/11 into a place where competing forces now bid for zoning authority (Seri 80; Hardt, *Empire*, xii). According to Seri, the hyper-economic activity of La Triple Frontera once exemplified the kind of extra-judicial space tolerated and even promoted by “Empire.” Decentered and unregulated, the area accumulated a certain “aura of unreality,” which, like a void—or “the Aleph” of Borges’ short story—became a sort of depository of “meanings that are different, contradictory and seemingly impossible as coexistents” (91).

Less reflective but more reader-friendly accounts of the TBA are the richly detailed exposés by American journalists Sebastian Rotella (*The Los Angeles Times*) and Sebastian Junger (*Vanity Fair Magazine*). Junger’s “Terrorism’s New Geography” (2002) demonstrates the great challenge of writing about a place like Ciudad del Este for a broad reading public. While incorporating into his piece key aspects of the known history of the AMIA case, Junger also includes the myriad “crossover” tales of Sunni and Shi’i extremists, US Aryan Nation members, members of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, Michigan Militiamen convertees to Islam, FARC revolutionaries, the Basque ETA, and members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) all thought to be conspiring together in the TBA.

Alejandro met me in the back room of a small hotel in the center of Foz do Iguaçu, on the Brazilian side of the border. He was slight but carried himself well. He had dark eyes, jet-black hair, and small cheekbones that narrowed to a small mouth. His eyes swept the ground without any movement of his head... He had been transported to the terrorist world, he said, in a white Mercedes that

discussed, this accusation of self-infliction for the sake of pretext became a virtual commonplace in many parts of Argentina. In *Books and Bombs in Buenos Aires* (2002), Edna Aizenberg notes how several notorious soccer stadiums became home to a familiar chant that greeted teams with Jewish players: “They blew up their embassy / they blew up their club AMIA / Now they’ve only got the field / we’re going to burn it down” (9).

stopped in front of a bar in Ciudad del Este where he had been told to wait. He was given a pair of blacked-out glasses and driven around for a few hours, asked some questions—including whether he wanted to be paid, to which he said yes— and then dropped off again. A few days later he went through the same routine, except this time it was in a four-by-four, and they drove him out to a training camp...

The camp was a clearing in the jungle with a temporary wooden barracks where the men slept on benches and cots. There were 25 or 30 recruits, mostly from other countries in South America. They were trained to break into houses, blow up buildings, disassemble cars for placement of car bombs. They practiced shooting every kind of weapon—Uzis, AK-47s, grenade launchers—and were also taught to kill with a knife. Their training was with live ammunition and Alejandro was shot twice. He survived though, he said, another man at the camp died of his wounds... The instructors were aloof and unfriendly and did not bother to talk politics or ideology; they just taught how to kill (Junger 11).

Like most other journalists who have written about the city, Junger's main line of inquiry is the basic ontological phenomenon of violence. Comparable in certain respects to journalistic accounts of other asymmetrical conflict zones like Waziristan, Pakistan or Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Junger's Triple Frontier can be characterized by what Neil L. Whitehead describes as the familiar "poetics of violence," a sort of creative compensation or counterbalance to the "scientific hunt for causation." Whitehead characterizes these divergent modes of inquiry surrounding the question of violence in two ways: "humanistic" and "social scientific." On a disciplinary level he notes that this "disjuncture" is apparent as well among "theorists of war" and those "theorizing violence." "In the latter case," he writes, "psychology and sociology have produced a large literature. In the former, political scientists and economists are notably active" (Whitehead 56).

Junger's exposé—part psychological and part sociological—is comparable in many respects to the work of the AMIA chroniclers. Both his practical point of access and method of inquiry are "humanistic." He relays the tales of his informant, paying careful attention to his basic humanity: from his physical appearance to the way he speaks. His discussion of violence can be characterized by its relatively concrete interests: from the kinds of weapons that are used, to the "wooden" barracks of the training

camp. It is an “anthropological” mode of inquiry, to again quote Whitehead, that manages to avoid the “intractable nature of the definitions and concepts” inherent to social scientific discourse because it is primarily grounded in phenomenological interest (56).

The irony of this humanistic mode of inquiry, as Jürgen Habermas articulates, is that if phenomenology “first produces the standpoint of absolute knowledge and this standpoint coincides with the position of authentic scientific knowledge, then the construction of knowledge in its manifestations cannot itself claim the status of scientific knowledge” (21). In other words, the importance of concrete or “phenomenal” knowledge to the humanistic mode of inquiry—the mode of inquiry that would appear to thrive on its living, moving subject matter—precludes the effectiveness of the humanistic narrative in carrying out the work it purports to do: in this case, piecing together the “truth” about a violent and distant region of the world.

Is there a way to strike a balance between the social scientific and humanistic modes of inquiry? Clearly in the case of AMIA this basic methodological disparity—between *la historia oficial* and *la pista siria*, between claims of Iranian mobilization and nearsighted motives of the “Crime Club”—remains a sticking point in the discourse on terrorism in Argentina. The urgency to this question in the U.S. became evermore apparent after 9/11. Narratives like Junger’s could be said to characterize what the authors of the *9/11 Commission Report* described as the “newsroom” culture of US intelligence agencies, who by the 1990s “no longer felt they could afford such a patient, strategic approach to long-term accumulation of intellectual capital.” The social-scientific or “university culture” of old was part of a bygone era by the time the September 11 attacks occurred (91).

The phenomenological exposé lends itself to inductive reasoning, one that seeks causal relationships between otherwise disparate points of reference. Stephen Holmes writes of Paul Wolfowitz that he had come to see himself as “some sort of amateur sleuth or clairvoyant connector of dots” (308). If one thinks of the asymmetrical conflict zone, as Hardt and Negri suggest, as the kind of anti-geography of Empire, a zoneless or

undergoverned space where independent actors act freely and in response to a multitude of other independents, the estimation of a causal relationship between “dots” is not the immediate fallacy. Rather, it is the designation of “dots” to be connected that presents the seed of confusion. Is the “clash of civilization” type of deductivism that surfaced in response to 9/11 the only kind of corrective to this problem?

Habermas has argued convincingly that a rational response to the entrenched and dualistic modes of inductive and deductive inquiry is not a full commitment in either direction, but self-recognition of our own subjectivity. The substitution of positivistic knowledge for discursive speculation by way of intersubjective dialogue, the sort of interdisciplinarity that Néstor García Canclini argues for in his study of hybrid culture, would seem to offer the kind of versatility the “asymmetricality” of “terrorism’s new geography” demands. However, as Habermas and Canclini both recognized, in the absence of structural knowledge the burden of proof shifts to the question of consensus. But consensus takes time, patience and faith in the democratic system. In the case of AMIA, in a country with a history of violent anti-Semitism, state-led terrorism and political oppression, consensus surrounding this transnational crime of historic proportions is by no means self-evident.

Conclusions

Founded in 1894, La Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina served for many years as both the primary cultural and political hub of Argentina’s diverse Jewish population—the fifth largest in the world—and a vibrant urban institution. Before its destruction in 1994, the job placement services at AMIA, according to journalist Jorge Lanata, had become the most important one of its kind in Latin America (111). As Argentine economic prosperity approached its apex during the first “Golden Age” of globalization (1880-1914) and “the Jockey Club” emerged as the quintessential cultural institution of the country’s ruling elite (Beattie 5-42), AMIA and the kibbutz culture of the Argentine Jews (famously illustrated in Alberto Gerchunoff’s *Los gauchos judíos*, 1910) stood for a new form of social cooperation. “The identification of the Jew with the

progressive is not a casual one,” writes Lanata, “it was precisely those immigrants who established in Entre Ríos, Santa Fe and Buenos Aires the fundamental foundation for the cooperative movement” (109).

Soon after the 1994 bombing, Moishe Cohen, the cultural director of AMIA, gathered several dozen leading sculptors and architects at the site of colonial ruins south of Buenos Aires. Cohen and others had witnessed the hemorrhaging of the Jewish community since the attack. Jews had stopped attending synagogue or even sending their children to school. He asked the group of artists to study the ruins and to imagine a new space that would welcome people back. The objective was not to alleviate fears among Jews, but to show to the greater public “*que estamos presentes*” he said, “that we are here” (Cohen “Interview”). But the design of the rebuilt AMIA building reveals a new relationship with the city. Separated from the street by a fortified security entrance that acts as a blast wall, the new building looms over the original site, which appears vacant, presenting itself as a kind of fortress. The passersby are not allowed into the building without a scheduled appointment and proof of identity. Taxis cannot stop in front of the building and photos are not allowed. The question invariably is whether the Jewish community in Argentina will ever recover the sense of security and purpose it once felt.

For the Muslims of the TBA, like many other parts of Europe and the Americas, the international scrutiny following the AMIA bombing and 9/11 especially has had a similar impact. While a number of businesses still operate in Ciudad del Este and Foz remains an important cultural center, many families have moved to more remote areas.

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of media coverage of the TBA is that it has had very little to do with the AMIA bombing itself. Occurring prior to 9/11 and still unsolved, the AMIA attack should be a reminder that the war on terror began (and to some extent still is) as a war in response to “the secret war against Jews” to cite from the title of John Loftus and Mark Aaron’s massive study on the subject. The violence in the Middle East, the persistent abuse of human rights on the part of the Israelis, and the Mafioso network of drug lords, arms dealers and corrupt politicians who

profit from Arab revenge, are at the heart of this long war, the reality of which simply overwhelms any single way of talking about it.

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