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Former Iran envoy's arrest sparks international row

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BUENOS AIRES — For more than nine years, Laura Ginsberg has been seeking justice. Her husband, José, was one of 85 people killed when a bomb rocked a Jewish community center here on July 18, 1994. The attack was one of the worst anti-Semitic acts committed since World War II and the deadliest in Argentine history.

While Ms. Ginsberg and her two children continue to cope with their loss, the crime remains unsolved.

"It's even harder these days, nine years later, because this impunity is going on," says Ginsberg. "We have no one responsible for this crime."

While no one has been convicted for the attack, the investigation has gathered speed in recent weeks, since British authorities detained a former Iranian ambassador to Argentina, Hadi Soleimanpour, in connection with the bombing.

The arrest has set off an intense diplomatic dispute between Tehran, London, and Buenos Aires, straining already tense relations between Argentina and Iran and threatening to sever the delicate ties that Britain and Iran have forged in recent years. Earlier this week, the Iranian ambassador to London was recalled to Tehran, and on Wednesday the British Embassy in the Iranian capital was attacked by gunfire, forcing its temporary closure. Both London and Tehran insist that relations have not been downgraded.

But the row could have wide-ranging effects. Next week, at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, the United States is expected to say that Iran should be found in noncompliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. With Britain often serving as a bridge between the Islamic republic and the English-speaking world, analysts say that sustaining strong London-Tehran ties is crucial.

"We [Britain] try very much to play the role of honest broker between the American view and other people's views, and the obvious example of that is Tehran, where the Americans won't have anything to do with the Iranians and vice versa," says one British diplomat who asked not to be named.

Investigation rekindled

Argentine Judge Juan José Galeano's nine-year investigation into the bombing of the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) has rekindled in the past year, thanks in part to a July 2002 report in The New York Times which alleged that Iran paid then-President Carlos Menem \$10 million to help cover up Iran's involvement in the AMIA attack. Mr. Menem has denied the charges. Since then, Judge Galeano has issued warrants for a dozen Iranians, including Mr. Soleimanpour. Soleimanpour was arrested on Aug. 21 in Durham, England, where he was working at a university on a student visa.

Miguel Bronfman, a lawyer for the AMIA, has been working closely with Galeano on the case. He says that while they are not condemning Soleimanpour, they do possess sufficient evidence to have him extradited here for questioning.

"We are accusing him of being the head of the intelligence net that Iran had in Argentina in 1992 and 1994, an intelligence net that provided the elements for the terrorists to achieve the result they achieved," says Bronfman. In 1992, a bomb exploded at the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29. That attack also remains unsolved. Iran has denied involvement in both attacks.

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami has promised "strong action" against Britain if Soleimanpour is not released. Iran has also threatened to expel British diplomats from Tehran, despite Britain's contention that the issue is a matter for the courts.

The Foreign Ministry has made it clear to Iran that this is a judicial matter in which the government cannot intervene. Last Friday, a judge in London denied bail to Soleimanpour despite a \$1.1 million guarantee from Iran that he would not flee the country. He will appear in court again on Sept. 19.

Iran has already cut cultural and commercial ties with Buenos Aires, a move that will cost the cash-strapped South American country millions of dollars in trade revenue.

US and Israeli accusations

The US and Israel have long suspected Iranian-backed militant groups of carrying out the AMIA attack. Argentina is home to South America's largest Jewish population, numbering 300,000. With the country's porous borders and lax law enforcement, observers say it was a prime location for terrorists to operate.

Despite President Bush labeling Iran a member of the "axis of evil," British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has traveled to Iran several times in recent years to shore up relations. Britain restored ties four years ago, sending an ambassador back to Tehran for the first time since the Islamic revolution in 1979.

Bronfman concedes that pressure from Tehran may influence London's decision on granting the extradition. "This is not just a judicial case; it is a political case," he says. "Iran is a strong state in the international scene.... Great Britain will pay attention to Iran's requests."

American journalist Joe Goldman agrees. He has written extensively on the AMIA investigation and says that allegations against Galeano during his lengthy investigation may sway British authorities against going out on a limb for Argentina.

"Another court in Argentina is investigating Judge Galeano over [charges] that he burned important witness testimony tapes," says Mr. Goldman.

Galeano denied repeated requests for an interview.

While politicians proceed with the legal and diplomatic wrangling, Laura Ginsberg hopes that those who murdered her husband will be brought to justice.

But she doesn't think that recent events will help bring the painful chapter in her life to a close.

"This is part of a political maneuver," she says, "where the need to have international responsibility for the crime is the first priority here in Argentina."

- *Mark Rice-Oxley contributed to this report from London.*