CHAPTER 1

The Nation’s Bodies: Justice and Belonging in the Aftermath of the AMIA Bombing

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I An Unsettling Blast

When the car bomb exploded outside the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Society (AMIA) building on July 18, 1994, a trail of destruction and deceit was left to haunt the survivors and relatives of victims of the blast, the Argentine Jewish community, and society at large. This violent incident fit the profile of attacks on Jewish targets worldwide, though publicly no organization—local or international—claimed responsibility for it. In 2006, after years of failed investigations, Argentine prosecutors formally accused the government of Iran of being the mastermind behind the explosion and members of Hezbollah as the material executioners. Two years before the AMIA event, the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires suffered a similar fate when a bomb exploded outside its building, killing twenty-two people. Failure on the part of Argentine authorities to seriously investigate the blast at the embassy fueled anxiety among members of the Jewish community. The reluctance to scrutinize the bombing of the embassy and to offer some logical explanation or guarantee of security was coupled with the extended and complicated history of anti-Semitism in Argentina, which also cast a suspicious shadow on the AMIA tragedy.

Initial reactions of broad-based social consternation, solidarity, and support were tarnished within days of the blast. While recovery operations were still underway, some media reports differentiated between the “innocent” victims of the bombing (i.e., pedestrians, neighbors, or other non-AMIA–related, presumably non-Jewish public) and the “guilty” by default, assumed Jewish, intended targets. President Menem’s first condolences after the AMIA bombing were inexplicably directed to the Israeli government—though clearly the AMIA is an Argentine civilian institution, none of the victims were Israeli, and the blast occurred in the heart of Buenos Aires on Argentine soil. The interpretation of the incident within the parameters of global geopolitics, rather

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1 Testimonios de una Semana de Horror (Buenos Aires: Ediciones JAI, 1995).
2 Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), Informe anual sobre la situación de los Derechos Humanos en la Argentina (Buenos Aires: CELS, 1998), 47.
than as a national issue, was further reinforced when three days later, at a massive public gathering in the Plaza de los Dos Congresos, the leaders of the Jewish community who organized the rally began by singing the national anthems of Argentina and Israel, did not include any Argentine government representatives as speakers but read messages from the Israeli Prime Minister and Secretary of State, and ended the gathering with a speech from the Israeli ambassador in Argentina. This early and revealing confluence of events produced a narrative around this incident that placed the victims, the event itself, and those possibly responsible outside the boundaries of the nation. This interpretation carried important implications regarding the place of human rights issues in the Argentine landscape of the 1990s.

My discussion here does not seek to explain the details of this event, nor do I want to suggest that this incident can be equated with the brutal, systematic, and broad practices of state repression exercised during the years of the military regime. Yet this case resonates with these past violations of rights as well as with contemporary dominant and contestatory practices encompassing a history of human rights. My argument is that the case of the AMIA and the subsequent struggles surrounding its meanings cannot be understood as disconnected from the country’s history of violence and resistance. And, in turn, this case and a closer examination of some of the key practices and statements of Memoria Activa (Active Memory)—the vocal organization formed after the bombing by survivors, supporters, and relatives of the victims—offer a distinctive opportunity to discuss broad themes regarding human rights and the construction of a national project, especially situated during the particularities experienced throughout the 1990s in Argentina. Through this case, I analyze how categories of belonging were established, how particular narratives shaped identities, how activist practices challenged taken-for-granted meanings and offered alternatives, and how these discourses and practices played out in the spaces of the nation.

This analysis centers on the relationship between democratization processes (in particular during periods of neoliberal reforms) and the role of civil society (in particular social movements) in influencing, creating, and defining the spaces of the nation. These processes are traversed by multiple aspects that reflect an enduring battle focused on what “the nation” means after dramatic civil strife or traumatic events and during periods of intense social and political reconfigurations as were the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in Argentina. The case around the AMIA bombing and Memoria Activa’s activism form part of a broader research project I carried out from 1996 to 2000 in Buenos Aires. During this time, mainly through participant observation, I focused on the activities of several human rights and civil rights organizations in Argentina;