



EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

The Two Trials of Adlène Hicheur, Scientist, Muslim, Forever Suspect

BY [SHOBHAN SAXENA AND FLORENCIA COSTA](#) ON 20/01/2016

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A brilliant scientist from CERN, accused of association with a terrorist group in 2009 and jailed in France before being freed, tells his story as he is hounded out of Brazil where he has lived since May 2013



An old photograph of his CERN days from Adlène Hicheur's personal album

Rio de Janeiro: Adlène Hicheur can still manage a smile behind his short beard that covers his sunken cheeks. With a bag in his left hand, he walks into the room and parks himself on a sofa. Then he begins to talk. In the middle of a sentence on Islamophobia, he slips his hand into the bag and takes out two books. "People should know their history. I read this book when I was in prison. I am reading it again," says the physicist, holding up a copy of *Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo Galeano. It's not a new copy; the cover has a yellow tinge to it and an old bill is placed like a bookmark between two pages. "We need to know the alternatives," he says, picking the other book, *The Other Globalization* by Brazilian theorist Milton Santos. "Not many people outside Latin America are aware of this work. I love Santos's ideas for a new interpretation of the contemporary world," he says, putting his hand in the bag again and producing two books on ecology and

sustainable development. “I love reading about environmental issues,” Hicheur declares, sipping tea from a cup. “I like tea. I don’t need coffee. I am already quite agitated.” His eyes crinkle with warm humour.

Hicheur, 39, doesn’t need a trigger to start a conversation. It seems a dozen ideas are buzzing in his mind. He traverses from particle physics – his area of specialisation – to politics, Arabian history, algebra, Batman and Mumbai in a matter of minutes as sentences roll down his tongue in perfect English, French and Portuguese, with a sprinkling of Arabic. He takes a break only to wipe off the beads of sweat on his forehead or to adjust the spectacles on his nose as he turns new sentences in his head.

Then, as the conversation turns to his current status, he sinks deeper and deeper into the sofa; his shoulders droop and he falls silent – for a few seconds. “There is a churning in my stomach – a feeling of emptiness. I feel as if I am being hollowed out from inside,” says Hicheur, furrowing his bushy eyebrows. “I have decided to leave Brazil. I don’t know where I am going next and when but I am leaving.”

Adlène Hicheur is not leaving Brazil of his own will. The scientist, and his colleagues and supporters, believe he is being hounded out. His current and former bosses believe the scientist is being held guilty a second time around for something that ought to have been a closed chapter.

Though Hicheur protects his privacy fiercely, his life –

and past – is not a secret. In 2009, while working at the world famous European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN), he was arrested by the French police and charged with “criminal association with a terrorist group” (Al Qaeda in Maghreb). He spent 30 months in jail. It’s also public knowledge that he was tried for “associating” with an Al Qaeda man in Algeria through emails and web chats for “attacks in France”. Hicheur’s response is well known too: his participation in chats covered many international issues and he never planned any terrorist attack.

It’s also not a secret that in May 2012, after 949 days in prison, Hicheur was released. He left France a year later. Since then, based in Rio, he has been putting his life – as a teacher and researcher – back on track, making a break with the “terrorist” tag that haunted him for three years. “I have been able to teach physics at the Federal University of Rio (UFRJ), do research and write papers for CERN. It was all going very well. This is what I like to do and here I got the space to do it,” says Hicheur.

He believes he was at the right place. But, probably, at the wrong time.

Recycling the past

On January 11, in the middle of bickering between political parties in Brazil over a proposed anti-terror law, the magazine *Epoca* put Hicheur on its cover, with its headline leaving little to imagination. Titled “A terrorist in Brazil”, the report claimed

(<http://epoca.globo.com/tempo/noticia/2016/01/exclusivo-um-terrorista-no-brasil.html>) that there was a “secret” in the CV of the scientist who has “received a scholarship from the government and teaches in a public university”. The report, besides rehashing details of the 2009 case – widely reported in the western media seven years ago – claimed that the French-Algerian scientist was being investigated by the Brazilian Federal Police (PF). His full-page photo was stamped with the headline in red. The magazine conveyed a clear message: Brazil has a terror threat.

“There is no secret in my CV. I came here on a valid visa, invited by the university. My case is well known and it’s over. I am a scientist but they branded me a terrorist by recycling an old story,” Hicheur tells *The Wire*, with a mix of sadness and anger. “I told them to leave me alone, but they didn’t.”

But it was only the beginning of a nightmare. Like a recurring bad dream, an old episode of his life is back to haunt him.

In the past 10 days, the Brazilian mainstream media have hunted Hicheur in packs, paying little attention to the glaring errors in the story. Hicheur’s photo, downloaded from his academic CV on the site of the Ministry of Science and Technology has been splashed across pages and web reports; right-wing bloggers and opinion writers have gone hysterical over the threat to Brazil from the “Al Qaeda professor”. In a country with no history of terrorism, the scientist – who still works as a long-distance partner with CERN – has

been paraded as a clear and present danger to the horror of those who know his case well. “It’s a story with little relevance. His trial and conviction were highly questionable. The judges knew it, otherwise he would not be out after three years,” Patrick Baudouin, his lawyer, told *20 Minutes* (<http://www.20minutes.fr/monde/1766251-20160114-impossible-reinsertion-adlene-hicheur-terroriste-franco-algerien-bresil>) on Thursday. “In any case, he has served his sentence,” he added. Baudouin is also head of the International Federation of Human Rights.

But the media reports have not let such crucial facts come in the way of a sensational story that may just give a boost to the anti-terror bill, which had been lying in cold storage. Nor have they bothered to mention that out of his 949 days in prison, Hicheur spent 939 days in remand and he was set freed just 10 days after his conviction.

Adlène Hicheur is deeply upset about this. After having spent almost three years in jail, he believes he is being tried again for a crime he never committed. “Even the French media didn’t show this kind of extreme hostility to me,” says the physicist who has refused to talk to the reporters who have invaded his university and knocked at the door of his flat throughout the past week. Though Hicheur issued a statement after the *Epoca* story, he has declined all requests for interviews. But five days after he became a controversial headline in this country, he agreed to sit with *The Wire* at a friend’s place to tell his side of the story. “No hidden recording and no photos” is his only condition. “You can ask anything you want.”



The French-Algerian scientist in the study of a friend. A voracious reader, Hicheur kept his sanity in prison by poring over books on science, politics, poetry and spirituality. Photo: Shobhan Saxena

Dressed in a deep-blue, half-sleeved kurta, black trousers, grey socks, brown leather sandals, and a baseball cap firmly fixed on his head, Adlène Hicheur enters his friend's living room, offers a polite handshake and begins to talk. The conversation just flows, jumping from one topic to another: the Arabic words in Hindi, the craze for Indian films in Algeria, his memories of eating *jalebis* in Mumbai in 2006. "Indian sweets are very similar to sweets in the Arab countries," says Hicheur, sketching a map of cultural fusion across North Africa to Arabia to Iran and India.

Hicheur talks with the urgency of a man who has too much to say in too little time. But there is a serene quality to his diction as he connects the dots between what happened to him and the larger political issues. Like a true particle physicist, he explains his story,

travelling back and forth between continents, like an equation where science, politics, religion and culture collide with each other.

He takes pleasure in details.

The first trial

Hicheur was born in Setif, a city with tree-lined streets in northern Algeria in 1976. When he was just one, his family moved to Isère, France. Growing up with two brothers and three sisters in a working-class block, he topped his master's degree class in theoretical physics from the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure, before landing at the laboratory of Annecy-le-Vieux Particle Physics (Lapp), where he got a PhD in 2003 after a stint at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center in California. After defending his thesis on the "Production of high energy Eta prime mesons in the decays of B mesons", Hicheur moved to the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory near Oxford for his post-doc. He then joined the high energy physics department of École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and also worked on the LHCb experiment at CERN (<http://lhcb-public.web.cern.ch/lhcb-public/>) near Geneva.

A rising star of EPFL, Hicheur had everything going for him when suddenly his life fell apart. In 2009, diagnosed with a herniated disc that sent strong waves of pain up and down his spine and right leg, he was mostly confined to bed at his parents' home in France. At times, the pain was so sharp that he had to take morphine injections. He walked with crutches.

But the worst was yet to come.

Just before sunrise on October 8, 2009, the Hicheur home was stormed by hooded men carrying automatic rifles. These were officers of the French police and intelligence services. Hicheur and his younger brother, Zitouni, a mechanical engineer, were taken into custody and their computers seized by the police. “We didn’t know what was happening. My mother, who is a diabetic, collapsed and the police didn’t let her get up from the floor. Our neighbours saw me being dragged to the police car even though I was in pain,” recalls Hicheur. “They accused us of terrorism and locked me and my brother in separate cells.”

Zitouni was released after four days of police custody, but Hicheur was accused of “association with a terrorist group” and sent to Fresnes. His arrest became a big headline in France and beyond.

‘Big bang terrorist’

In 2009, CERN was in the news for its experiments on the world’s most powerful particle accelerator. It’s work to find the origin of the universe inspired books, Hollywood fantasies – and conspiracy theories. In October that year, Hicheur’s arrest caused a global sensation. “Big Bang scientist charged with terror ties,” said a headline in an Australian newspaper. Others were equally sensational. Hicheur, who has consistently denied any links with terrorists, says he paid a price for being a highly-educated Muslim in France. “People here do not understand what it means to be a Muslim or a

migrant in France these days. If you are an educated Muslim and doing well, they will bring you down. I was paraded as an example of a well-educated, self-radicalized and net-savvy terrorist. They wanted to punish me for my political opinions,” says Hicheur. “They just wanted to destroy my reputation.”

Several of Hicheur’s seniors, too, saw a motive behind his arrest. Jean-Pierre Lees, a Lapp physicist who worked with Hicheur when he was a student and campaigned for his freedom when he was in jail said in 2011 that the prosecutors “know very well that he has done nothing serious”. Quoted in a *Nature* article (<http://www.nature.com/news/2011/111007/full/news.2011.584.html>), Lees said Hicheur was singled out because he was a well-educated Muslim working in nuclear physics: “This case is used to demonstrate that even the best-integrated Islamic people are never integrated,” he told the prestigious journal.

What happened next, in the words of Hicheur, was straight out of a Kafka novel. Four days after his arrest, a judge placed him under investigation and charged him with “criminal association with a terrorist enterprise”.

The case against Hicheur centred on about 35 emails and web forum chats between him and an alleged contact in AQIM, but there was no concrete charge of any terror act against Hicheur.

For the next two years, as Hicheur remained in “provisional detention” with limited access to the

outside world, a support group comprising scientists issued a statement (http://soutien.hicheur.pagesperso-orange.fr/index_EN.html) condemning his “Guantanamo-style” incarceration. “French anti-terrorism magistrates abuse their powers and take advantage of the presumption that they conduct their investigations in an evenhanded, truth-seeking manner – when in fact they behave more like a prosecutor in an adversarial legal system,” the Adlène Hicheur International Support Committee said in a statement. Hicheur’s long detention was condemned (http://soutien.hicheur.pagesperso-orange.fr/index_EN.html) by more than 600 scientists, including the Nobel Prize winner physicist Jack Steinberger, and human rights groups in Europe.



Adlene Hicheur supporters at a rally in Lyon in 2011, demanding his release from detention. Source: Adlene Hicheur Support Committee

But it had little effect on the judicial process. The police in Switzerland, where he lived and worked had found

nothing objectionable (http://www.adlenehicheur.fr/press/oc09m11/2011-01_13_LeMatin_CH.pdf) about him, but this was ignored by the French police and media. Now, *Epoca* too has ignored these facts. The magazine even suggested that the European scientists who supported Hicheur during his incarceration no longer back him. Far from it, a number of renowned scientists reject the charge that Hicheur is guilty. Aurelio Bay, a Swiss scientist who was Hicheur's chief at the EPFL in Lausanne, sent an email to *The Wire*, emphasising that he believes he is innocent. "The Swiss Federal Police investigated his life in Lausanne. They found nothing. At his home, they found only papers, old bills, some dirty glasses and a hard drive that had nothing criminal," says Bay. "Adlène should write a book. Attack is the best form of defence," says the Swiss physicist in his strongly-worded mail.

Politics of terrorism

Sitting in a Rio apartment on a rainy day, sipping tea and talking about his life, Adlène Hicheur has his mother, 68, on his mind. "Can you believe what my mother went through when I was in jail and what she is feeling now as I am being persecuted again for something I have not done," he says, letting his words hang in the moist air.

He is sad and angry but is not wallowing in sentimentality. The picture of what happened to him in 2009 and what's happening now is clear in his deeply political mind. In his worldview, France looks like a robust democracy from the outside, but if you grew up

in the impoverished clusters of migrant populations, you see the ugly side of the state. In these parts, rights are violated every day and, Hicheur says, he was targeted by the right-wing government of Nicolas Sarkozy for being an Algerian-origin Muslim. "As soon as I was taken to the police station, the French interior minister Brice Hortefeux made an appearance there and claimed that it was a big 'breakthrough'. I saw him at the police station. A minister was in such a hurry to bury me even before I was formally charged," says Hicheur, recalling the September 2009 incident when Hortefeux, a close friend of Sarkozy, made racist jibes against an Arab at a rally. In April 2010, the minister was fined (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/04/france-minister-racist-comments>) €750 by a court for his comments.

It is no coincidence that in 2005, as the interior minister, Sarkozy himself had introduced a series of new anti-terrorism measures including increased use of video-surveillance and improved police access to internet and mobile phone records in France. But by 2012, as the president of France, Sarkozy's popularity was plummeting despite his "tough guy" image and much-publicized marriage to Carla Bruni. So it was no coincidence, says Hicheur, that his trial happened on March 29-30, just three weeks before the first round of the presidential election in which Sarkozy was challenged by François Hollande. "My trial got over in just two afternoons. After keeping me in jail for 30 months, they got it over with in just a few hours and pronounced me guilty. This was Sarkozy's way of showing that he got a big terrorist," says Hicheur, who was sentenced to five years on May 5, 2012 – on the eve of the final round of the presidential election. "They put

me on trial before the first round and sentenced me before the second round,” says Hicheur, pointing out the “political motive” behind his case. After the verdict, his lawyer, Patrick Baudouin, called the judgment “scandalous” (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17956202>).

But these scandalous details about his first trial, Hicheur says, have been ignored in his “new trial” by media. In its eagerness to attack him, Hicheur says, the Brazilian media have distorted facts and overlooked details that proved his innocence. In 2009, before he was arrested by the police for visiting “subversive Islamic chatrooms”, Hicheur was seriously ill and on medication. “I spent about six months between hospitals, doctors, physiologists, rheumatologists and, finally, at my parents’ home to recover from my spine and sciatic nerve problems,” says Hicheur.

The bigger mistake, he says, was to splash parts of the 35 emails and chat forum exchanges between him and an alleged AQIM man as the evidence of his guilt. In his trial, the prosecution claimed these to be the strongest evidence of Hicheur’s guilt; he says that was the weakest link in the case. In a chatroom crowded with pseudonyms, Hicheur freely expressed his political views about events happening in the Islamic world. He has never denied that. After the chatroom got hacked, he exchanged emails with someone called “Phoenix Shadow”, with neither one being aware of the other’s real identity.

His electronic exchanges with “Phoenix Shadow” over eight months formed the basis of the case against him.

During his two-day trial, the prosecution claimed that “Phoenix Shadow” was Mustapha Debchi, a member of AQIM. But the link between the pseudonym, his IP address and Debchi was never established. “The name Mustapha Debchi had been mentioned since I was arrested, without any proof of my links with him. Then in September 2011 they announced that he had been caught in February 2011 in Algeria and was interrogated and the information came in an intelligence file that it was indeed him. He was not produced in the court. He was not even indicted while being the centre of his alleged association with me. My guilt was never established,” says Hicheur. “He was caught in February, why did they keep this information secret till September?” asks Hicheur. Then he offers the answer: “Because in October 2011, I would have completed two years and they would not be able to keep me in detention.”

Hicheur’s claim about Debchi rings true. He is such an elusive figure that the internet yields little. Most results thrown by search engines are about Hicheur’s trial. “My correspondence with “Phoenix Shadow” was all in Arabic, but what they produced in the court were bits from here and there and all badly translated into French. They were desperate to take me to trial and prove that I was guilty.”

But despite being sentenced to five years, Hicheur was soon free. With Sarkozy out of office, he was released from prison on May 15 after he decided not to appeal the verdict. “Challenging the verdict would have meant staying in jail for one more year. There was no chance of getting justice. I would have rotted there for a long

time. I wanted to get back to teaching. So, when they told me I could go home, I felt I was having a new birth. Prison is a *kabr* (grave) of the living. I survived there because of my education and maturity.”

The breaking point

No prison is pleasant, but only a few jails in the world are as notorious – historically – as Fresnes in Paris, where he was held. Today, a guillotine, which was used in France till 1977, sits in the store at Fresnes, which was run by the Gestapo during the French occupation in World War II. And this dreaded place was the home of several Algerian National Liberation Front activists in the 1950s and '60s, when they were fighting for independence from France. It was in a ground-floor corner of this prison that Hicheur spent 30 months, without ever seeing the sky. “There was a courtyard where we were allowed to walk for some time every day, but it was covered with a thick net. It was very depressing,” Hicheur recalls.



Fresnes prison, Paris. Credit: Wikimedia

But the lack of sun was not his biggest problem. In prison, the police tried to break him mentally. “They would tell me that I won’t be able to teach science again. They would tell me that I will have to sell things on the street. In their random checks, they would enter my cell and turn everything upside down and make me strip myself naked. This was their way of making me a non-person,” says Hicheur. “But I was determined to resist this dehumanisation.”

His source of resistance was books, which he read to keep his sanity. He also encouraged other prisoners to read as he created a Café Philosophico in the jail library, where prisoners could read and discuss books. Hicheur inherited the love of books from his father, a construction worker who did back-breaking work to raise his family. At a very young age, the father told the children that education was their salvation. “My father was a politically conscious man. He was a worker, but he always talked about books, culture and politics. We

grew up reading. Thanks to my education, I survived prison,” says Hicheur.

So it was that Hicheur took refuge in books – on physics, culture spirituality and Arabic poetry. “I read and wrote poetry in Arabic to keep myself going,” says Hicheur, recalling that it was not easy to get books in prison. But even in the madness of the jail, where he saw young lads fighting over a cigarette, he kept his links with the academic world. “One of my PhD students sent her research document to me for correction. I was very happy to make the corrections. I could keep in touch with physics, which I always wanted to do.”

Despite the depressing conditions at Fresnes, Hicheur made a bond with other inmates. They called him “Google” as he was able to answer all their questions – from neutrinos to religion. “They wanted to see me free,” says Hicheur, comparing his condition to that of Batman in *The Dark Knight Rises*, where Bruce Wayne, down with a back problem, is locked in a pit but escapes to freedom with the help other prisoners. “I was in a similar condition – in jail with a spine problem, and the other prisoners wanted to see me free,” says Hicheur, talking animatedly.

Bruce Wayne escaped the pit because of his strong muscles, but what gave Hicheur strength was his faith. A practicing Muslim, Hicheur enjoys talking about Islamic scholarship in mathematics and science during the medieval times. His quest for knowledge comes from this tradition. In jail, as he taught politics to other prisoners, he also learned from them. “You have to

benefit from wisdom where it is,” he says, quoting Prophet Mohammad.

It’s been raining the whole afternoon and Hicheur has been talking without a break, answering question after question. But as dusk falls, he gets up. “I need to pray,” he says, taking out a prayer mat from his bag and heading to the study in the house.

During his incarceration, he prayed five times every day and kept all his fasts.

A new beginning

As soon as he came out of jail in May 2012, Hicheur bought a computer and started to work. He was anxious to get back to science. Soon he was back at his labs in EPLF and CERN. He also made a trip to Brazil for a short-term stay at the Brazilian Centre for Research in Physics (CBPF). But in May 2013, he was suddenly banned by the police from entering Switzerland under an administrative order. Hicheur suggests that the decision was taken under pressure from France. “They do not want to see me working as a scientist again. They told me so in the jail,” says Hicheur.



In the middle of the interview, Hicheur produced 'For Other Globalisation' by Milton Santos to talk about the "wicked characters" of globalisation. Photo: Shobhan Saxena

The Swiss order was received with disappointment by top CERN scientists who have now reacted with anger at Hicheur's media trial in Brazil. "Hicheur has paid a heavy price for his online correspondence with someone purportedly from Al Qaeda. But he never committed, directly or indirectly, any terrorist or criminal act. He served his sentence and has been working peacefully in Brazil," Italian physicist Monica Pepe Altarelli, of the LHCb experiment, says in an email to *The Wire*. "The article is not based on facts and is inconsistent with the open humanitarian tradition of Brazil," says Altarelli, who is also the vice-spokesperson for CERN.

With the gates of CERN shut for the next five years, Hicheur decided to move to Brazil as he admired the country for its history, "independent foreign policy" and vibrant civil society. He also knew some of the best

Brazilian minds in particle physics. He arrived here in May 2013 and started his work first at CFBP and then – since June 2014 – at UFRJ.

Despite the tropical heat of Rio being very different from both France and Algeria, he began to find his footing. After a few weeks in Copacabana, Hicheur moved to a street in Tijuca and began discovering the city. “I love walking in the Tijuca forest. It is so good to be part of the nature,” he says, adding that the Rio hill reminds him of the mountains in Algeria. Because of his limited Portuguese, Hicheur first served only as a researcher at UFRJ. But in the next semester, he began teaching renewable energy sustainability and experimental physics to graduate students. All his colleagues are full of praise for his work. Leandro Salazar de Paula, who heads the Elementary Particles Laboratory of the Physics Institute, defines him as “an excellent researcher, just brilliant”. “If Adlène Hicheur leaves the country, I believe it will be a huge loss to our research programme,” says the professor who himself has been part of CERN.

A media trial

Last week, Hicheur decided to leave Brazil. But departure has been on his mind since last October when he was accosted by an English-speaking man on his street. “I panicked. You may think I am paranoid but because of my bad experience in France, I was not sure who this man was and what he wanted from me,” says Hicheur. The man was an official of the Federal Police who wanted to “talk to him about an incident” at Masjid el Nur, a mosque in Rio, which Hicheur occasionally

visits.



Mesquita da Luz (Masjid el Nur), Rio de Janeiro. Credit:
Malik Abdou/Facebook

Hicheur is sure that the incident is just an excuse to push him out. In January 2015, a few days after the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in Paris, a CNN Espanol team arrived at the mosque to record some footage. Just when the crew were filming a small gathering of worshippers, a man, who has never been there before and never happened to come after, removed his shirt in front of the cameras to reveal a Islamic State flag on his T-shirt. That, the Federal Police told Hicheur, made them look into all regulars at the mosque. "This story is full of holes. It's a bad excuse to look into my old case. I was not at the mosque that day. I was not even in Brazil. I was in Europe visiting my family," says Hicheur, hinting that he suspects a French hand in this probe. "This is just a pretext to make me feel unwelcome and run."

Though it was this investigation of a case that has nothing to do with him that was used by *Epoca* as the peg of their story, Hicheur says the police have nothing against him. "There is no case against me in Brazil," he says, producing a Criminal Antecedents Certificate, obtained online from the PF site, which proves his point. "Federal Police certify after research at the national system of criminal investigation that till this date (January 14) there is no criminal record in the name of Adlene Hicheur," says the certificate seen by *The Wire*.

But after the *Epoca* story, even as his colleagues defended Hicheur, he received a massive setback on January 11, 2016 when Brazil's education minister, Aloizio Mercadante stated that someone "condemned for terrorism" can't stay in the country. The very next

day Hicheur decided to leave. “They left me with no choice,” he says. “I came here legally. I came to work and contribute to physics but I am being forced to leave the country,” says Hicheur, his voice rising with anger.

Hicheur’s anger is shared by Brazil’s top scientists. Ronald Shellard, the director of CBPF, minces no words in criticising the media and government. “He spent over a year in an office next to mine. I talked to him about prison and politics in the Middle East. He always criticised terrorist groups, including the Islamic State. And then came this story and his effort to rebuild his scientific life just collapsed. It was made worse by a statement from a minister and he started to feel threatened. He did not want to be humiliated again. He entered the country through the front door and wants to get out the front door,” says Shellard, for whom Hicheur’s exit would be a great symbolic defeat for Brazil. “If he goes away, it will mean a defeat for our generation who fought against the military dictatorship. In France, he was convicted for his political opinions on a hard disk. This reminds me of George Orwell’s *1984*,” he adds.

Although Hicheur’s destination is not yet decided, he has already stopped teaching at UFRJ. He continues to conduct research, however. Even in the middle of this current turmoil, he has been working on two scientific papers. On January 17, his media trial in full swing, he made a presentation about a little known subatomic particle called “Bc” to a group of 700 international scientists through a video conference from his room in Rio. The whole group accepted his data and analysis without a single question being asked. The loss of such

a brilliant mind has enraged his colleagues. “Hicheur was subjected to lynching by the magazine and the statement from the education minister was irresponsible. This is prejudice against him for being scientist who is Muslim,” says Ignacio Bediaga, head of the LHCb group at CBPF.

There is no doubt in Hicheur’s mind that a lynch-mob was setup on him to make him flee. “I am being judged for something I have already been judged for in France. That old case and those old fears are being reignited,” he says. “My case has to be seen in the context of France. If you take Islam out of the equation, there is no problem.”

In his worldview, personal and political are the same. He doesn’t see his own persecution differently from the “constant wars against the Muslim countries” by the West but, he says, he never supported any form of violence. “I am against violence. But they should not interfere in our countries. They should not wage war in our country. They push people into a corner and when they react, they say we are violent,” says Hicheur, when asked about his views on political violence. “I came to Brazil to rebuild my life and they are pushing me out. I am 10,000 kms away from Paris but I am still in their reach. Where should I go?” he asks, his pitch rising in anger.

Hicheur is silent again, but smiling. “They had told me that I won’t be a physicist again,” he says. “But I did it. I did science again. Brazil gave me that space,” says Hicheur.

Dusk has given way to darkness. Now Hicheur is on his feet, walking up and down the room. It seems he is getting ready to leave but he is still talking. "Brazil doesn't need to import Islamophobia from Europe. That is the last thing they need in this country," he says, packing his books and prayer mat in his bag.

Adlène Hicheur may leave Brazil soon, to rebuild his life somewhere else once again; but his farewell advice is something Brazil should pay heed to.

Shobhan Saxena is a Sao Paulo-based Indian journalist. Florencia Costa is a Brazilian journalist who has reported as foreign correspondent from Moscow, Mumbai and New Delhi. She is the author of Os Indianos (The Indians)

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