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News

Physicist languishes in French prison

Two years after his arrest over allegations of terrorism, researcher still awaits trial.

Geoff Brumfiel

French intelligence services say that Adlène Hicheur is a dangerous terrorist who was caught plotting attacks in Europe and beyond; family members and colleagues argue that he is a brilliant young physicist singled out because of his academic background. Guilty or innocent, on Saturday Hicheur will have spent two years in detention without trial.

Hicheur, now 34, was arrested on 8 October 2009 in his home town of Vienne. At the time, the French-Algerian was a postdoc in high-energy physics at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne and was working on the LHCb detector at CERN, Europe's premier particle-physics laboratory near Geneva in Switzerland.

The French authorities allege that Hicheur was working with members of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb — the terrorist group's North African wing. Press reports at the time stated that he was plotting attacks against French forces and an oil refinery owned by the French firm Total. On 12 October, an independent judicial investigation into the case will close. Prosecutors will then have one month to decide whether to try him or dismiss the charges.

Since his arrest, Hicheur has remained in 'provisional detention' at Fresnes Prison near Paris, with limited access to the outside world. But, in answers relayed through his brother, Halim, the physicist denies involvement in any terrorist plot. Rather, he says, he was engaged in vigorous Internet discussions about ongoing world conflicts, including those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The online debates, in web forums, covered numerous topics, including terrorism. But he says that he never planned attacks such as those reported in the press.

Weight of evidence

Halim Hicheur, a neuroscience postdoc working in France, says his family believes that the intelligence agencies have held off bringing the case to trial because they lack evidence. "Our feeling is that the French services after two years know that they have nothing against Adlène," he says.

The imprisoned physicist also has the support of former colleagues. Jean-Pierre Lees, a physicist at the Laboratory of Particle Physics in Annecy-le-Vieux, France, worked with Hicheur when the physicist was a graduate student and has spearheaded a campaign in support of his freedom. Lees says that many current



Adlène Hicheur has been held for two years without trial in Fresnes prison.

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