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Brother says French physicist detained for 2 years denies alleged terror plans

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GENEVA — Colleagues and relatives of a nuclear physicist detained in France since 2009 on suspicion of associating with members of al-Qaida's North Africa branch expressed hope Tuesday that the case against him would be dropped, even as they voiced anger over the two years Adlene Hicheur has already spent in prison without trial.

An investigating magistrate will decide Wednesday whether the case against Hicheur should be closed or handed to a prosecutor, who would have up to one more year to prepare a trial.

French authorities say the 34-year-old has acknowledged to investigators that he corresponded over the Internet with a member of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

His brother, Halim Hicheur, dismisses the claim.

“Adlene does not acknowledge any preparation of a terrorist act or any intention to prepare something like that,” the younger sibling said. “He exchanged political opinions about the situation in the world in general.”

Colleagues at the European Organization for Nuclear Research near Geneva — best known under its French acronym CERN as the site of the world's biggest particle collider — and at the Swiss Federal Institute for Technology in Lausanne, or EPFL, where Hicheur was based, told The Associated Press that the scientist was an example of excessive anti-terror laws.

“Independently of what Adlene may have done or not, it seems clear to me that the way he was treated in the past two years will have a profound negative impact on him, not to talk about his academic career, which is now seriously compromised,” said Olivier Schneider, a colleague at EPFL.

“If they cannot establish that he is truly a dangerous individual for society, and it seems that indeed they are unable to do so, otherwise they would have charged him already, then they should release him,” he added.

At CERN, where Hicheur was one of the many outside scientists sifting through results gleaned from its \$10 billion Large Hadron Collider, Monica Pepe Altarelli said she was shocked at the Frenchman's treatment.

“For me it is a scandal, even if legal under French law,” she said.

A brief acquaintance before his arrest, Altarelli said she now regularly sends scientific journals to

Hicheur's prison near Paris so he can stay informed about progress in CERN's efforts to unlock the mysteries of the universe.

"Adlene has worked for many years preparing to take data at the LHC, but then could not really share with us the success of the experiment and the joy and pride of its physics results," she said. "We try to make him feel that he has not been forgotten by his friends and colleagues and encourage him to have the strength to resist this difficult situation."

CERN itself offered only limited support for the scientist.

"CERN has obviously followed from the beginning the case," said spokeswoman Corinne Pralavorio. "However, Adlene Hicheur is not a CERN employee, and we are not informed of the evolution of the case," she said. "The initiatives taken by some physicists are personal and not taken on behalf of CERN."

Hicheur's brother Halim claims it was precisely his role as a physicist that put him in the crosshairs of French intelligence.

At the time of his arrest, media reports portrayed him as a dangerous genius capable of harnessing his knowledge of nuclear physics to destructive ends. CERN insists Hicheur never had access to dangerous materials.

The brother cites details about Hicheur's alleged activities that were leaked to a local newspaper near his home in the southeastern town of Vienne as evidence that French authorities are more concerned with painting an ominous image of Hicheur than of proving so in court.

The paper *Le Dauphine Libere* reported shortly after his arrest on Oct. 8, 2009, that Hicheur discussed targeting a French army brigade specialized in mountain combat, and whose members were deployed in Afghanistan.

The possibility of striking French businesses was also raised, according to the report, confirmed by prosecutors.

Switzerland, which opened its own investigation into Hicheur following his arrest, chose not to press charges.

Jeannette Balmer, a spokeswoman for the Swiss Federal Prosecutors Office, told the AP that the case was suspended last year.

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