

Setting the record straight

CERN researcher Adlène Hicheur has been held in a French jail for a year and a half without charge. **Michael Dittmar** says it is time that the physics community got behind him

“‘Al-Qaeda-link’ CERN worker held”; “The star science pupil who grew up to become Al-Qaeda’s ‘nuclear mastermind’”; “Al-Qaeda scientist held at nuclear base”. These were just some of the lurid headlines that followed the arrest of physicist Adlène Hicheur and his brother in Vienne, France, on 8 October 2009. At the time, Hicheur, now 35, was working for the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL) in Lausanne and at the LHCb experiment at the CERN particle-physics lab near Geneva. He was arrested at his parents’ home in Vienne apparently because he had participated in Internet discussion groups. We do not know the details of these discussions, but obviously this alone does not make him a terrorist.

Instead of the media writing articles about the right to freedom of speech, however, they preferred to focus on absurd accusations. It is ridiculous to even think that Hicheur was an Al-Qaeda terrorist attempting to attack military installations in France. Indeed, there was a bit of good news last January when it was reported that the Swiss government had announced it had no evidence against Hicheur and was closing the investigation. Unfortunately, the French authorities did not follow the same line, and decided in the same month to extend Hicheur’s detention until May. Nothing so far seems to point to him being released anytime soon and no trial has been scheduled. I hope that CERN – an international laboratory founded after the Second World War to allow scientists from Europe to work together peacefully – can now start to play a role in trying to get Hicheur released.

Helping hands

Born in France, Hicheur completed his PhD in 2003, where he worked on the decay of B mesons and spent some time at the SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory in the US. After his PhD, he was at the UK’s Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, spending time at CERN on the ATLAS experiment before joining the EPFL in Switzerland in 2006, where he continued to work at CERN on the LHCb detector.

Hicheur’s arrest came as a shock to many



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One of our own Does the physics community hold the key to getting CERN researcher Adlène Hicheur released?

physicists at CERN and we were certainly not prepared for the possible existence of “black holes” in the justice system within its member states. According to French pre-emptive anti-terrorism laws, any person can be held in prison for up to two years (and perhaps more) without charge. Those laws also state that suspects may be subjected to oppressive questioning – at any time of the day or night – without a lawyer being present. The arbitrary nature of French terrorism laws is not just my opinion – it has also been highlighted, for example, by the US group Human Rights Watch in a report published in July 2008. It is shocking and scandalous that this can happen in a country like France, which claims to be a worldwide defender of human rights.

Since November 2010, on the initiative of his former PhD adviser Jean-Pierre Lees at the Laboratory of Particle Physics in Annecy-le-Vieux in France, a website has been set up detailing the current situation of Hicheur’s imprisonment. An “international defence committee”, consisting of about 100 scientists, has since held a press conference about his unjust imprisonment and has also written letters to the French authorities, including the French president Nicolas Sarkozy. Unfortunately, no response regarding Hicheur’s release has been obtained. The initiative is certainly gaining some momentum and one can only hope that this terrible situation can be ended soon. But it is now time that the wider community, and CERN, got behind this cause to help release Hicheur.

Counting on support

To bring an end to this unfortunate situation, my fellow scientists and I in “conCERNed for Humanity” are seeking the support of the CERN management and the lab’s international community of users. While a public statement from CERN may not be possible, perhaps the lab could offer help in providing legal assistance. CERN managers and the worldwide community of scientists – known for its capacity to overcome almost impossible problems – could even contact the French authorities directly, possibly facilitating a way out of this “black hole”. While trying to get Hicheur released, we also need to start thinking about how the scientific community, not just at CERN, can help him after his liberation to find a way back to normality. As Hicheur’s career as a scientist currently lies in ruins, CERN could provide support by offering him employment after his release.

Finally, one hopes that this shameful detention and our failure to react reminds us about our responsibilities to strive for societies where human rights are and remain respected. We should also realize that the goals of our scientific endeavour can only be achieved under conditions where human rights for all are the guiding principle.



Michael Dittmar is based at ETH Zurich and works on the CMS experiment at CERN. He is also president of “conCERNed for Humanity” – a group of CERN researchers working on issues such as the environment and human rights, e-mail michael.dittmar@cern.ch