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Colleagues Offer New Details on Al-Qaeda Suspect: Devout, Genial, They Say

by Adrian Cho

Adléne Hicheur, the French physicist arrested 8 October on charges of having ties to Algerian terrorists, did not hide his religious convictions. The acknowledgements in his 2003 doctoral thesis in particle physics begin: "First of all, I would like to thank Him who gave me the strength, perseverance, and endurance necessary to bring this work to its completion." The devout Hicheur was friendly and easy to work with, say former colleagues.

Hicheur, 32, was arrested by French authorities along with the younger of his two brother at the apartment in Vienne that his parents settled in after immigrating from Algeria more than 30 years ago. His brother was released after 2 days, but Hicheur remains in custody on charges of having ties with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a North African branch of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network, according to press reports. Adléne was a year old when the family arrived in France, the older of his brothers, Halim Hicheur, 30, said in an e-mail. The family of eight grew up in modest circumstance but "did not suffer from that," says Halim Hicheur, who holds a Ph.D. in physiology and biomechanics from the University of Paris VI.

Hicheur's arrest grabbed headlines internationally primarily because, as a post-doc at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne (EPFL), he was working on an experiment at the world's largest atom smasher, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at the European particle physics laboratory, CERN, near Geneva, Switzerland.

Early press reports pegged Hicheur as a nuclear physicist, perhaps picking up on CERN's original and now discarded name, the European Organization for Nuclear Research. But Hicheur's research focused on particle physics and exotic bits of matter that blip in and out of existence far too quickly to have any practical applications, nefarious or otherwise. In a statement, CERN stressed that the lab possesses no materials that would be particularly useful to terrorists.

In 2003, Hicheur complete his thesis at the University of Savoie on the production of a particle called an η' meson in the decays of another called B meson. The data for the study came from the BaBar experiment at SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory in Menlo Park, California, where Hicheur spent 6 months. B mesons can be made only in particle collisions and last for a thousandth of a nanosecond. Hicheur's thesis was relevant to a particular theoretical debate, says Yannik Karyotakis, a physicist at the Annecy-le-vieux Laboratory for Particle Physics (LAPP) who was Hicheur's thesis director. "The only practical application was [to spark] some debate over a good coffee," he says. Hicheur largely directed himself, Karyotakis notes. "He was very good so he didn't really need us," Karyotakis says.

Dominique Boutigny, a physicist at the Computing Center at the French National Institute of Nuclear Physics and Particle Physics in Lyon, shared an office at LAPP with Hicheur from 2001 to 2003 and says "he was probably one of the best students we had." Hicheur was not one to join in parties or celebrations, Boutigny says, but "he was always very friendly and we had no problems with him. ... High energy physics is almost by definition a collaborative effort, and he had no problem working with others." Hicheur was devout, but "did not try to force his ideas on others," Boutigny says.

Boutigny notes that Hichuer seemed particularly close to his family. "I remember he had a number of phone calls with his younger brother to help him and push him to get his diploma," he says. After receiving his Ph.D., Hicheur did a post-doc at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory near Oxford, U.K., during which time he worked on the gargantuan ATLAS particle detector at the LHC, helping with its alignment. By 2006 he had taken a position at EPFL and switched to working on the smaller LHCb detector, which will study more B mesons. According to press reports, authorities say Hicheur corresponded by e-mail with Al-Qaeda members in Algeria and may have been looking to aid in attacks on European targets.

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