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French standoff raises fears for incarcerated physicist

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Today's death of a suspected terrorist in southern France has raised fears that an incarcerated French physicist may be unable to get a fair hearing in his trial next week.

Mohamed Merah, a 24-year-old French citizen of Algerian descent, died after a tense, 30-hour standoff with police, according to reports. Merah was suspected of killing seven over an eight-day shooting spree, including soldiers and innocent civilians outside a Jewish school in Toulouse. Merah reportedly told authorities he was working with al-Qaeda to avenge French involvement in Afghanistan and the death of Palestinian children.



The case bares some similarity to allegations against Adlène Hicheur, a 36-year-old high-energy physicist of French-Algerian descent who was arrested in October of 2009 on suspicion of plotting attacks in France. Hicheur is accused of planning attacks against military targets based on a series of e-mails to suspected members of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the organisation's North African wing. Many details of the case remain hidden from public view by France's strict anti-terrorism laws, but it appears to rest on a series of online exchanges between Hicheur and suspected terrorists in Algeria. Hicheur's family and supporters maintain that the evidence is not enough to support his incarceration for two and a half years. *Nature* has called for a fair and timely trial in Hicheur's case.

Hicheur is now scheduled to have a two-day trial starting on 29 March. His lawyers now fear that the latest incident could bias the hearing and are consulting with Hicheur about whether to seek a delay, according to Jean-Pierre Lease, a physicist at the Laboratory of Particle Physics in Annecy-le-Vieux, France, who heads a campaign in support of Hicheur's freedom.

"I was yesterday evening [with] Adlene's family and everybody was really concerned," Leese says in an e-mail.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy has called for a crackdown on those who visit extremist websites: "From now on, any person who habitually consults Web sites that advocate terrorism or that call for hatred and violence will be criminally punished," Sarkozy said in a televised address, according to Reuters.

Although there appear to be similarities, there are some notable differences between the cases of Hicheur and Merah. According to the *Wall Street Journal* and other sources, Merah had a criminal record and was heavily armed. He had also travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan prior to the attacks, where he had actually been detained

by American troops and returned to France.

French intelligence appears to have been monitoring Merah just as they did Hicheur. However, Claude Guéant, France's interior minister, told the press that in Merah's case, they did not consider his beliefs were sufficient to warrant an arrest: "Expressing ideas and jihadist opinions is not sufficient grounds for bringing someone up before the courts," he said.

Hicheur's brother, Halim Hicheur, says that an online campaign has collected more than 6,000 signatures from friends, neighbours and colleagues. "We are convinced that Adlène will be released," he says.

Credit: THIERRY PONS / PHOTOSHOT

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