

Nuclear terror suspect is top physicist

Was a leading scientist working on Cern's Large Hadron Collider plotting with al-Qa'ida to sabotage sites in France? John Lichfield in Paris reports

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The scientist suspected of plotting terrorist attacks on nuclear sites in France is a brilliant, internationally known physicist who has worked on research projects in Britain and the US, it emerged yesterday.

Adlène Hicheur, 32, who currently works on the "Big Bang" Large Hadron Collider experiment on the Swiss-French border, was once a research fellow at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in Chilton, Oxfordshire. His name is attached to dozens of research papers presented at universities and nuclear research centres all over the world.

Mr Hicheur, and his brother, Zitouni, or Halim, also a highly qualified scientist, were arrested at their parents' home on a suburban council estate at Vienne, south of Lyons, on Thursday. French investigators say that advanced, internet "bugging" equipment allowed them to read, in "real time", emails exchanged between the brothers and the North African branch of al-Qa'ida. The messages are alleged to have contained, in recent days, suggested targets for attacks on nuclear sites in France and other countries "allied with the United States".

The brothers, French-born with devout, hard-working Algerian parents, fit a worrying pattern seen before in the arrest of suspected Islamist extremists in France. Far from being frustrated or unemployed young men from the margins of society, both Adlène and Halim had succeeded brilliantly in the French education system and taken up senior academic or research posts.

The younger brother, Halim, has a doctorate in physiology and the biomechanics of motion from the Pierre and Marie Curie University, Paris. He is now a research fellow at the Collège de France in Paris,

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

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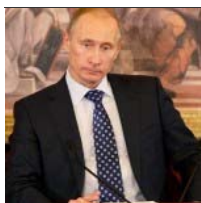
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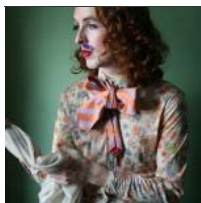
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France's most prestigious academic institution.

Neighbours of the Hicheur family in Vienne said that they were devout and hard-working people who had lived there since the 1970s. The academic success of the sons has been the pride, not just of the family, but of the whole estate.

"They were held out to young people here as an example of what you could achieve, whatever your background," said a local youth worker, who asked not to be identified. "There is a state of shock at what has happened and some anger. People think that this must be a mistake."

French counterterrorism and intelligence agencies have been tracking Adlène Hicheur for 18 months, according to French judicial sources. His name came up during another investigation into the so-called "Afghan network" of French Islamist sympathisers, trained in al-Qa'ida camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

Using sophisticated monitoring equipment that allows them to read emails as they are transmitted, French intelligence concluded in recent days that Adlène Hicheur had reached the "intention or desire stage" of preparing to mount an attack on a nuclear site. A French intelligence source told the news agency Agence France-Presse that he had not yet reached the "action stage" of gathering materials and detailed information. He had, however, put forward a list of several possible targets in emails sent to people in North Africa known to be linked to "al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb" or AQIM.

The monitoring equipment used by the French intelligence services is so elaborate that it "is almost like reading over someone's shoulder", the then French interior minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, said earlier this year. Her successor, Brice Hortefeux, decided last week that it would be dangerous to extend the surveillance any longer.

French police and agents from the internal security agency, the Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur (DCRI), raided the home of the brothers at Vienne on Thursday. The two suspects were taken to the brand new DCRI headquarters at Levallois-Perret, west of Paris, where they are being questioned by Christophe Teissier, the magistrate who heads France's anti-terror judicial investigation unit. They have not yet been formally accused of anything but are being held on suspicion of "associating with wrong-doers linked to a terrorist organisation".

Adlène Hicheur is an internationally respected young nuclear physicist, whose name appears in research papers and seminars all over the world. He was educated at a lycée in Vienne and at the nearby Laboratory of Particle Physics in Annecy. He was a research fellow, studying for his PhD, at the Stanford University Linear Accelerator Center in California in 1999 and 2002. He spent a year at the Rutherford

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Appleton Laboratory in Oxfordshire in 2003, and taught and researched at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale in Lausanne, Switzerland.

For the past six years he has been working on contract for the Atlas project, one of the programmes connected to the Large Hadron Collider at Cern, on the Franco-Swiss border. After a series of delays and glitches, the collider is scheduled to operate fully for the first time next year. It will smash atoms against one another in a 17-mile-long circular tunnel in an attempt to recreate the conditions just after the Big Bang. French judicial sources say that the brothers do not appear to have been planning to attack the Large Hadron Collider itself. Officials at Cern say that the scientist had no access to materials or sensitive information that could be used for terrorism. "None of our research has potential for military application, and all our results are published openly in the public domain," Cern said.

Adlène Hicheur appears to have specialised in the measurement side of nuclear physics. His office at Cern was in the main complex, where the collider is located. His academic papers have included accounts of research on the "electronic width of the Upsilon particle" and "measurement of the branching ratios of colour suppressed decays". His recent work at Cern has included "studying, improving and designing new tracking tools" to measure the effects when the collider finally operates.

Halim Hicheur's research concerns the movement of the human body. A biographical note on the internet says: "My research focuses on the neural and mechanical determinants of steps' formation, as well as on the principles underlying the planning and control of goal-oriented locomotion. The aim of this work is to provide an integrative view on human locomotion, studied as an activity requiring both sensorimotor co-ordination and navigational guidance."

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