

News

Physicists protest colleague's terrorism detention

Letter urges end to lengthy imprisonment of French scientist.

[Geoff Brumfiel](#)



Prior to his arrest, Adlène Hicheur worked on the LHCb experiment at CERN. M. Brice / CERN

Adlène Hicheur, a high-energy physicist who has worked on the world's largest particle collider, has been held in a French prison under suspicion of terrorism for more than a year. Now, his colleagues are publicly protesting what they describe as his Kafkaesque detention.

In [a letter](#) to the French Physical Society, 19 physicists say that they are deeply concerned about Hicheur, a 33-year-old French-Algerian who until his arrest was a postdoctoral researcher at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) and worked on the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at CERN, near Geneva, Switzerland. Signatories to the letter include Jack Steinberger, winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize in Physics, who works at CERN.

"The research career of Adlène, even in the case that he is publically (sic) demonstrated to be innocent of all charges, is greatly endangered by the length and the arbitrariness of the procedure," the group writes.

Hicheur was arrested on 8 October 2009 at his family's home in the southern French town of Vienne. According to press reports, he was suspected of plotting terrorism attacks with 'Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb' — the North African branch of the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda.

From the beginning, colleagues have had their doubts about the case. "I think he is innocent," says Jean-Pierre Lees, deputy director of the Laboratory of Particle Physics in Annecy-Le-Vieux, France, who worked with Hicheur when the postdoc was a graduate student and helped to organize the letter. Lees says that, in the days after the arrest, he had kept quiet at

the request of Hicheur's family and lawyer, who told him that any noise could slow Hicheur's release.

In limbo

But little has changed over the past year. Hicheur has remained incarcerated in Fresnes Prison near Paris while prosecutors gather evidence. Presiding judges have denied repeated requests for his provisional release until the trial, on the grounds that his communications and movements should be strictly guarded, says Dominique Beyreuther-Minkov, Hicheur's lawyer. The case remains open, with no firm date for either a trial or a formal indictment.

"My opinion is that it is an empty case," says Beyreuther-Minkov, before adding that she can't discuss further details, owing to strict secrecy laws surrounding French legal proceedings.

The office of Christophe Teissier, the anti-terrorism judge who is presiding over the case, declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation.

Those who worked with Hicheur also have deep doubts over the accusations. Lees describes Hicheur as a shy but affable scientist who loved political debate. Olivier Schneider, a physicist at EPFL who worked with Hicheur and signed the letter, says that the young man was a brilliant researcher whose job was to model magnetic fields inside the LHCb detector, one of four giant detectors at the collider. Schneider describes his colleague as quiet but "rather normal", and says that he is increasingly distressed by Hicheur's prolonged detention. "After a year, either they have some proof and he should be judged or they have no proof and he should be released," says Schneider.

Lees says that he decided to organize the letter in Hicheur's defence because he was one of the few who knew the French-Algerian physicist well. "If I don't speak, very few people will," he says, "and this could last forever."

Additional reporting by Julie Aramburu.