

By Scott Stewart

On Oct. 8, 2009, French police and agents from the Central Directorate of Interior Intelligence (known by its French acronym, DCRI) arrested French particle physicist Adlene Hicheur and his brother, Halim, who has a Ph.D. in physiology and biomechanics. French authorities arrested the brothers at their family home in Vienne, France, and also seized an assortment of computers and electronic media. After being questioned, Adlene Hicheur was kept in custody and charged on Oct. 12 with criminal association with a terrorist enterprise for allegedly helping al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) plan terrorist attacks in France. Halim Hicheur was released and denies that the brothers were involved in any wrongdoing.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of this case is that Adlene Hicheur, the man the French government has charged with seeking to help AQIM conduct attacks in France, earned a doctorate in particle physics and has worked at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). In addition to his work at CERN, Hicheur also reportedly worked at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory (RAL) in Oxfordshire, England, for about a year in 2005 and is believed to have spent six months in 2002 at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center in California, where he conducted research for his doctorate.

However, while Hicheur is a particle physicist and has worked at some high-profile scientific sites -- like the CERN Large Hadron Collider and the RAL -- simply being a scientist does not necessarily mean that a person is a trained militant operative capable of successfully conducting terrorist operations. It is also important to understand that Hicheur's specific field of scientific work was not directly applicable to building improvised weapons that could be used in a terrorist attack. Therefore, while the Hicheur case is a good reminder of the threat of hiring infiltrators and sympathizers, and that people with hard-science backgrounds (e.g., doctors and engineers) seem for some reason to be disproportionately prone to embrace jihadist ideology, it is also important not to exaggerate the potential dangers associated with this particular case.

### Details of the Case

We have not yet seen the exact details of how or when Hicheur first became radicalized. However, from French government and press reports, it appears that after he became radicalized he reached out and made contact with various jihadist entities over the Internet. Hicheur reportedly first came to the attention of French authorities during a joint French/Belgian investigation into a European jihadist network that was working to recruit European Muslims to fight in places like Iraq and Afghanistan and to raise funds for jihadist operations. Hicheur reportedly established contact with this network via the Internet. This network was just that, an unnamed constellation of kindred souls rather than some sort of hierarchical group, although it clearly did have connections to jihadist groups like al Qaeda and did send fighters and funds to the group. Of course, being amorphous and not having a formal group structure allowed the

members of the network to practice better operational security while under heavy scrutiny by European authorities.

Now, while the network was not hierarchical, it did have its celebrities, such as Malika el-Aroud, who wrote long screeds condemning the West and urging Muslims to join the jihadist struggle using the Internet pseudonym "Oum Obeyda." El-Aroud is given immense respect in jihadist circles because she is the widow of Dahmane Abd al-Sattar, one of the al Qaeda suicide bombers who posed as journalists in order to assassinate Afghan Northern Alliance commander Ahmed Shah Massoud on Sept. 9, 2001.

The network has recruited individuals who have been tied to some high-profile attacks, such as the November 2005 suicide bombing conducted by a Belgian woman in Iraq. Because of this high level of activity, the network has also been under near-continuous investigation and heavy scrutiny by the authorities in several European countries. It is this scrutiny (which includes heavy monitoring of the Web sites and e-mail addresses associated with the network) that reportedly first alerted French authorities to Hicheur's jihadist bent some 18 months ago, and he has been under investigation ever since.

In December 2008, Belgian police arrested el-Aroud and a number of her associates, fearing that they were planning an attack against a meeting of the leaders of the European Union nations that was to be held in Brussels. That raid and follow-on operations, which included the May 2009 arrest of two members of the network who were believed to have been smuggling suicide bombers into Italy, struck a major blow to the network's fundraising and recruitment efforts.

According to French authorities, the network's demise led Hicheur (who was already being monitored by French authorities) to establish contact over the Internet with members of AQIM, al Qaeda's North African franchise. He reportedly communicated with AQIM using encrypted e-mails sent under a pseudonym, but the security measures were apparently foiled by the French authorities, who may have planted software on Hicheur's computer that allowed them to see his encrypted messages.

AQIM, which had been the Algerian militant group Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) before formally becoming an al Qaeda franchise in 2006, has always had strong connections to France due to the fact that Algeria is a former French colony and that there is a large Algerian community in France. In fact, Hicheur's family is from Algeria and Hicheur still reportedly has many relatives living there. It is therefore not surprising that he would be in contact with AQIM.

According to French Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux, after monitoring Hicheur's communications with AQIM for some time, French authorities determined that he posed a threat and decided to arrest him. Hortefeux would not provide a list of targets Hicheur was apparently planning to attack, stating only that "the investigation will reveal what were the objectives in France or elsewhere." Thus far, it has not been shown that Hicheur posed an imminent threat, but it is unlikely that authorities would have arrested Hicheur unless they were sure they had enough evidence to prove the case against him in court. Some of this evidence may have been

linked to a large withdrawal of cash Hicheur recently made from a bank account. Halim Hicheur has told the press that his brother had withdrawn 13,000 euros (about \$19,500) to buy some land in Algeria, and he believes that the French government mistakenly thought the money was going to support AQIM.

While the French government has officially refused to discuss the potential targets Hicheur reportedly discussed with AQIM, the European press has been filled with such reports. According to the British newspaper The Telegraph, Hicheur had discussed conducting a bombing attack against a refinery belonging to the multinational oil company Total. (While a refinery may seem like an ideal terrorist target, causing substantial damage at such a physical plant is more difficult than it would seem -- especially with a small improvised explosive device. Refineries often experience accidental fires or small explosions, and those events rarely affect the whole facility.)

According to the British paper The Mirror, citing an unnamed French security source, Hicheur also compiled a list of senior European politicians for assassination -- a list that included French President Nicolas Sarkozy. According to media reports, Hicheur had ruled out acting as a suicide bomber, insisting that such an attack would be less effective than a more conventional one. Whether these press reports turn out to be valid -- and some of them have been quite alarmist, with The Daily Mail even speculated that Hicheur was hoping to develop a nuclear weapon -- French government sources report that Hicheur was not anywhere close to being ready to launch an attack at the time of his arrest. Additionally, the French have given no indication that Hicheur was working on any sort of militant nuclear program.

On Oct. 12, investigating judge Christophe Teissier filed charges against Hicheur, placed him under formal investigation and ordered his detention. The charge Teissier filed against Hicheur, "criminal association with a terrorist enterprise," is one frequently applied in terrorism-related cases in France. Under French law, which operates under the Napoleonic Code, judges take the lead in the investigation of crimes. The fact that Teissier filed preliminary charges in this case indicates that he has determined there is strong evidence to suggest Hicheur's involvement in a crime, and the preliminary charges provide additional time for Teissier and his team to complete the formal investigation.

### Insider Threat?

Because of Hicheur's profession and employment, the case does raise the specter of the insider threat (as does the recently reported arrest of a nuclear scientist in Pakistan who was allegedly associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir). However, due to the fact that Hicheur's work as a physicist at CERN was analyzing data -- and due to the nature of the CERN particle collider itself -- there is very little he could have done to cause any sort of catastrophic event at the CERN site through sabotage.

Furthermore, because of Hicheur's efforts to reach out to jihadist organizations using the Internet, it does not appear that he was a "sleeper" sent by jihadists to penetrate CERN. It also does not look as if AQIM or any other jihadist group was seeking specifically to recruit Hicheur because of his position and training -- although in the past, al Qaeda leaders like Ayman

al-Zawahiri have made appeals for Muslim scientists to join the jihadist cause.

Instead, Hicheur appears to have been a jihadist sympathizer who approached the jihadist organizations himself after already establishing his career as a particle physicist. This means that, from a jihadist perspective, he was more akin to an intelligence "walk-in" -- that is, an asset who is already in place and then approaches an intelligence service and offers to work for it, rather than someone who was sent in as a mole or who was targeted for recruitment.

Besides, particle physics is a very theoretical science. It is devoted to the study of the most fundamental building blocks of matter, subatomic particles. Particle physicists need tools, like the particle collider at CERN, with which they can probe the tiniest known particles in the universe and test the forces that affect them. Studying these particles is not a skill that can easily be translated into building some type of weapon -- nuclear or conventional. There are far better scientific specialties that could be looked for by a militant group seeking to start a program to build weapons of mass destruction, and there are far more consequential facilities where moles could be placed for a sabotage operation than the CERN particle collider (which in part explains why Hicheur apparently did not discuss attacking CERN). The scientist and the facility simply do not lend themselves to those sorts of scenarios.

It is also important to be mindful of the fact that being a trained scientist does not automatically make a person a successful militant operative. Certainly, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was a mechanical engineer, Abdel Basit (aka Ramzi Yousef) was an electrical engineer and Mohammed Atta was a civil engineer, but these individuals also attended lengthy training courses that taught them what we refer to as terrorist tradecraft -- the tools a person needs to be a successful terrorist operative.

Without formal training, even brilliant and highly educated people require a lot of practical experience to learn the skills required to conduct effective terrorist attacks. One excellent example of this is Theodore Kaczynski, the "Unabomber," who has a Ph.D. in mathematics. Despite his genius-level intellect and advanced education, Kaczynski faced a steep learning curve as a self-taught bombmaker, and several of his early devices did not explode or function as designed. In fact, during Kaczynski's 18-year bombing campaign, he succeeded in killing only three people.

A more recent example is the three medical doctors who tried to conduct a string of attacks in London and Glasgow in June 2007. The doctors had plenty of material resources and were well-educated, but their attacks failed because they lacked the practical skill to construct effective improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Certainly, an educated person can become a master bombmaker, like Yahya Ayyash, the electrical engineer who became known simply as "The Engineer" when he served as the master bombmaker for Hamas. However, that transformation requires a lot of training and a lot of practical, hands-on experience. There is no indication that Hicheur had the practical aptitude to construct a simple IED, much less some sort of weapon of mass destruction, as some are suggesting. Indeed, we have not even seen an indication that he had acquired any sort of material for creating any type of weapon.

The Hicheur case is interesting and we will continue to follow it, but the threat that he really posed to France and rest of the world must not be overblown.

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