

Friends shocked as Ottawa professor held in Paris bombing

Lawyer says Diab is a victim of mistaken identity, had nothing to do with deadly synagogue blast

BY DAVE ROGERS, CASSANDRA DRUDI AND GLEN MCGREGOR, WITH FILES FROM JOANNE LAUCIUS, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 15, 2008

The Ottawa university professor arrested in the 1980 bombing of a Paris synagogue made his first court appearance yesterday as his former academic advisers expressed disbelief over allegations the "lively" scholar was once involved in a terrorist act.

Hassan Diab, 54, held his hands in a prayer position as two RCMP officers escorted him into the prisoner's box for a bail hearing in a small courtroom at the Ottawa courthouse on Elgin Street.

Dressed in a grey shirt, Mr. Diab sat silently between two RCMP officers, who wore protective goggles.

Mr. Diab, a part-time professor at the University of Ottawa and Carleton University, was arrested by the RCMP at a residence in Gatineau on Thursday.

The details of the allegations against him are covered by a publication ban. But his lawyer, René Duval, said his client is wanted in France on multiple counts of murder, attempted murder and wilful destruction of property by an organized group -- charges that carry a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

Three Frenchmen and an Israeli woman were killed when a bomb hidden in motorcycle saddlebags exploded outside the synagogue on Rue Copernic in October 1980. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine -- Special Operations was blamed.

Justice Michel Charbonneau of the Superior Court of Ontario yesterday adjourned the bail hearing until Thursday, to give the Crown and defence more time to prepare. Mr. Diab will remain in custody until then.

Mr. Duval had explained he did not have time to read the sealed information about his client and federal Crown prosecutor Claude Lefrançois said he needed time to interview a police officer.

The hearing is the first step in the legal process that could see Mr. Diab extradited to France to face charges Mr. Duval says were brought against the wrong man.

The publication ban imposed Thursday and the sealing of the charges under the Extradition Act mean the public is not allowed to know details of the French government's case against Mr. Diab or any evidence that will be presented at the bail hearing.

Mr. Duval insisted yesterday that his client, with a common Lebanese name, is the victim of mistaken identity, echoing Mr. Diab's previous denials of involvement in the bombing.

"It will be difficult for the prosecution to make its case because all this happened 20 years ago," Mr. Duval said.

He said the career academic has been in shock since his arrest. "Mr. Diab was treated like a violent bandit," Mr. Duval said. "He is now going to spend time in a common jail where he doesn't belong."

He said Mr. Diab has been under stress for more than a year because two men, possibly French police officers operating in Canada, followed him daily to his home and workplace.

Mr. Duval, who works from Trois-Rivières, Que. , said he offered to speak to French officials to explain that they were investigating the wrong man, but they ignored him.

The news of Mr. Diab's arrest was met with disbelief by two of his former professors.

"It's not credible to me," said Louis Kriesberg, a thesis adviser to Mr. Diab who has continued to write letters of reference for him since he earned his PhD in sociology from Syracuse University in 1995.

"I've known him for a long time as a student. He's a very productive and very bright scholar, and he does good work," he said.

"He's very intelligent, very committed to his professional work. He's a lively person -- I enjoy him."

Mr. Kriesberg, who is Jewish, is a professor emeritus of sociology and social conflict at Syracuse University. He never knew Mr. Diab to be in any way anti-Semitic.

"We were good friends, in so much as a professor and graduate student are likely to be," Mr. Kriesberg said.

"I never sensed that he was in any way very actively involved in politics. He seemed to be paying attention, but that in no way struck me as unusual.

"I saw no evidence of any religiosity," Mr. Kriesberg said.

John Agnew also sat on Mr. Diab's dissertation committee, and was equally baffled by news of his arrest.

"He was not very sectarian," Mr. Agnew said, adding that he was "a very secular kind of guy."

"This is not someone who was very militant at all."

As a graduate student at Syracuse, Mr. Diab would occasionally visit Mr. Agnew, who was the director of the social sciences program for a time while Mr. Diab was there, with concerns about his financial situation. To make ends meet and put himself through school, Mr. Diab taught introductory sociology classes at community colleges in upstate New York, Mr. Agnew said.

He said he has not been in touch with Mr. Diab since about 1995 or 1996.

"He certainly was someone who always seemed to be worried about money."

Mr. Diab, a Lebanese native who grew up a Shia Muslim in South Beirut, obtained his Canadian citizenship in the 1990s.

He never expressed any interest in the Palestinian national cause, Mr. Agnew said.

"Either he spun a tall tale consistently over years or someone else is spinning a tale about him," Mr. Agnew wrote in an e-mail. "I tend to the latter."

Mr. Diab's main scholarly interests lay in the economic development and sectarian politics of Lebanon, and he often spoke about what it was like growing up as a Shia Muslim in South Beirut, said Mr. Agnew, now a geography professor at the University of California.

Neither Mr. Kriesberg nor Mr. Agnew knew much about Mr. Diab's personal life.

Mr. Agnew recalled that Mr. Diab was married to an American woman in upstate New York while he was a student at Syracuse University. Mr. Agnew did not know her name.

Birth records published in 1995 as a regular feature in the Syracuse Post-Standard show that a Hassan Diab was listed as the father of a baby girl born that year to a Heather L. Winne. It is unclear if this is the same Hassan Diab. Ms. Winne could not be reached and her relatives refused to comment.

A woman wearing a mauve headscarf sat at the defence table in court yesterday, apparently ready to testify on his behalf.

Mr. Diab has been a part-time professor at the University of Ottawa since 2007, said Andrée Dumulon, the university's director of communications.

Mr. Diab was teaching one class this term, and the university has said it will ensure it continues uninterrupted.

The university is not making any further comment.

A course outline on the university website lists Mr. Diab as the professor of a second year course on research methods in sociology in the winter 2008 term.

Carleton University declined to comment, confirming only that an instructor by that name is teaching a course at the university.

In addition to his PhD, Mr. Diab's CV lists a bachelor's degree from the University of Lebanon in Beirut in 1982 and a master's degree from Syracuse University in 1990.

He became an assistant professor at the American University in Beirut from 1996 to 1999, according to the CV, and from 1999 to 2001 worked at the United Arab Emirates University. Then, from 2001 to 2002, he returned to Syracuse as an adjunct professor.

He is also the author of the 1999 book Beirut: Reviving Lebanon's Past.

The RCMP released no further details about the warrant under which Mr. Diab was arrested Thursday, citing French jurisdiction over the case. The warrant was executed at a Gatineau residence as part of the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, said Cpl. Jean Hainey of the RCMP. The RCMP has said they will be providing information to the French authorities as required.

Wendy Wagner, a lawyer representing the Citizen, asked Judge Charbonneau to explain the publication ban and indicate what the media were allowed to report about the hearing. He said the order was justified under the Extradition Act, but the media can challenge it.

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen