

Professor not in Paris at time of 1980 blast: lawyers

Hassan Diab tailed by Mounties for year after being named suspect

BY GARY DIMMOCK AND MATTHEW PEARSON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 20, 2008



Lawyer René Duval, shown above talking to reporters outside court last week, says his client, Ottawa university professor Hassan Diab, was nowhere near Paris during a 1980 bombing of a synagogue. Mr. Diab has been charged in connection with the terrorist attack that killed four people.

Photograph by: Rogerio Barbosa, Agence France-Presse, Getty Images, The Ottawa Citizen

Hassan Diab, the Ottawa university professor arrested in the 1980 bombing of a Paris synagogue that killed four people, wasn't in the French capital at the time of the terrorist act, according to his defence lawyers.

Still, Mr. Diab, who turned 55 this morning, finds himself in the Innes Road jail awaiting possible extradition and prosecution for the deadly bombing in a case that has haunted him since 2007, when he was named as a suspect in French and Canadian newspapers.

Mr. Diab, a sociology professor, has often felt like he's being followed around Ottawa and Hull by agents he figured were French authorities.

The Citizen has learned that Mr. Diab has, in fact, been tailed off and on over the past year by RCMP officers. They have since searched his office and Hull home, a walk-up apartment in a working-class neighbourhood.

Mr. Diab, an educated man, quickly picked up on the fact that he was being followed, so he forwarded information, including licence-plate numbers, to the Ottawa police, but nothing came of it. (The RCMP-led national security team has included members of the Ottawa police.)

The Citizen has also learned that on Saturday the Mounties dispatched a lone female RCMP officer to visit Mr. Diab in jail to talk to him without legal representation present. He didn't take the bait, the accused's lawyer confirmed.

"It was staged to elicit information. The tactic she was taking was to cajole him. She was being nice and saying, 'If there's anything I can do to help'," confirmed René Duval, Mr. Diab's lawyer, after being asked about the incident by the Citizen.

Mr. Duval said his client was not even in Paris at the time of the bombing, rather he was studying elsewhere.

Mr. Duval, who is defending Mr. Diab with law partner Jean-François Lauzon, said he intended to meet with his client at the Innes Road jail yesterday, on the eve of a bail hearing scheduled for today.

In 2007, Mr. Diab told reporters that he was the victim of mistaken identity and said his name is common and authorities should be more open when conducting their investigations.

Mr. Diab was arrested at his Hull apartment last Thursday. The apartment, its windows dirty and blinds drawn, is a world away from another address police say he kept in Ottawa, this one a condo on Dynes Road, up on the 26th floor, just below the penthouse.

His living quarters and daily routine are now far removed from his days as a sociology professor at universities, where students and faculty have expressed surprise that he's been charged in the 1980 bomb killings of four people in Paris.

"He's under a lot of stress," said Mr. Duval.

Some inmates at the Innes Road jail call it Holiday Innes -- with plenty of drugs to go around -- but it's nothing like a real holiday.

One of the last holidays for Mr. Diab came last February, on the 16th, with him on Flight TS 0561, Seat 29F, leaving Trudeau Airport in Montreal at 10:50 a.m. to Varadero, Cuba, a tourist town known for its sandy beaches, scuba diving and deep-sea fishing.

When Mr. Diab was arrested, he had yet to open the packaging to his Red Wolf fillet knife, a good fishing blade known for its non-slip handle. He kept a lawn chair, sandals, and a sun hat in the trunk of his old Plymouth Sundance.

Mr. Diab has "suffered immensely" as the result of false accusations made against him by French

authorities, a close friend says.

In a series of e-mails to the Citizen, Daniel Lee said he wanted to provide details about Mr. Diab's "personal and professional character."

Mr. Lee, who now teaches sociology in California, met Mr. Diab in 1993 when they were both graduate students at Syracuse University.

He wrote that in the 15 years since, he has been through "difficult and wonderful episodes" with his friend.

"We have hiked together in national parks, celebrated countless holidays, cooked many family dinners."

If he is extradited to France, Mr. Diab will face multiple counts of murder, attempted murder and wilful destruction of property by an organized group. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine -- Special Operations was blamed for the attack.

But according to Mr. Lee, Mr. Diab is not the man police are looking for.

"There are many Hassan Diabs in the world," he wrote. "The Hassan I know has never been a terrorist."

In another e-mail, Mr. Lee wrote: "This is a tragic story of mistaken identity and frustrated interest in bringing a criminal to justice."

In Mr. Diab's case, he wrote, "we have a man who quickly reports being followed to the police; a man who publishes research in his own name; a man who travels frequently across international borders; and a man who is socially integrated. How is it possible that the French police could not find him for so long, if anyone can simply (Google) his name?"

Mr. Lee wrote that Mr. Diab was a student in Beirut at the time of the Paris bombing, "busy falling in love with a fellow student."

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A Translation of French Newspaper Le Figaro's Interview With Hassan Diab, October 2007

Le Figaro: Did you know French authorities believe you played a role in the bomb attack on the rue Copernic?

Hassan Diab: I wasn't aware of anything. I am a victim of mistaken identity not based on anything. My last name is very common in Lebanon and in other Arabic countries; when I worked at the American University in Beirut, there were no less than four of us called Diab, and it was very common for one of my colleagues to receive a cheque intended for me. Because of such mistaken identities my travel in Canada was often affected. Notably, I was detained in several airports, though was eventually let go. They explained at the time I had been mistaken for a rascal or an illegal immigrant. The majority of the time, they didn't even ask me any questions. I am really tired of this attitude and I have told authorities that if you want to look for something, do it openly.

Le Figaro: This is how you explain your name being on several documents of the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine-Special Operations, showing you to be part of the bomb attack.

Diab: I do not see any other explanation. I have never belonged to any Palestinian organization, nor have I been militant politically. I was born in Beirut in 1953, where I studied sociology and did nothing but study. I left Lebanon for the United States in the 1980s, because I had had enough of war and violence. I received my doctorate in sociology at Syracuse University in the state of New York. They never asked me any questions in the United States -- where I went two months ago to visit some friends -- nor in Canada when I asked and obtained my citizenship in the 1990s.

Le Figaro: What would your reaction be to questions from French authorities?

Diab: I will answer questions if it happens as part of a judicial procedure of some kind, which is how it should happen in a democratic country, or that is supposed to be, like Canada. Since Sept. 11, 2001, we know files are created on nothing, particularly if you are a member of a minority, and that innocent people will admit to anything if they are put under pressure.

-- www.lefigaro.fr

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