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Innocent till proven guilty

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On Tuesday, B'nai Brith Canada called attention to the situation of Hassan Diab, a Lebanese-Canadian dual citizen who has been accused of masterminding the bombing of a Parisian synagogue in 1980. Four passersby died in the blast, which has been ascribed to a radical branch of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and which signalled a subsequent wave of terror attacks against Jews in Europe. Mr. Diab, now a sociology professor at the University of Ottawa, is free on bail while he awaits an extradition hearing scheduled for early next year; in the meantime, Carleton University, where he has also taught part-time, had agreed to allow him to conduct an introductory sociology class. But yesterday, that arrangement was abruptly ended-- and Mr. Diab is now out of a job.

Evidence from the files of the old East German secret police, the Stasi, leaves little doubt that someone then going by the name "Hassan Diab" was responsible for the bombing. The French investigating authorities are certain they have found the right man, and have witnesses who are prepared to say so, as well as other evidence implicating the Ottawa prof. But Mr. Diab, who has a common Lebanese name, insists that he is a wholly innocent victim of mistaken identity.

Wading into this situation is the Jewish advocacy group B'nai Brith Canada, which on Tuesday put out a press release attacking Carleton for not prejudging Mr. Diab's guilt. "We find it deplorable that university officials believe that there is nothing wrong with employing Diab," read the statement. "The safety and security of the community as a whole, and of the Carleton University campus in particular, are of great concern to us. The conditions of Diab's bail do not even allow him to leave his home alone or to own a cellphone, but Carleton officials believe that it is fine for them to make him a member of their faculty? The last place in the world where this man belongs is in a university classroom, in front of impressionable students."

B'nai Brith raises a real question as to whether Carleton undergraduates are about to sign up for a course taught by a multiple murderer -- one who, if he is really responsible for the bombing of the synagogue on the Rue Copernic, may have literally picked his intended French Jewish victims out of a phone book because actual Israeli targets on French soil were too staunchly defended against terrorism. But the group's rhetoric, particularly the reference to "safety and security," is overheated. The accused (and that's what he is: accused) has never given evidence anyone can point to of anti-Semitism or anti-Zionism. While it is possible he is a sort of Arab Bill Ayers, there is no sign he has ever shown any particular interest in the Palestinian question at all-- which would make him just about the only sociology prof in North America who wasn't completely preoccupied with it.

One cannot, in good conscience, rule out the possibility of an identity glitch by the French investigators. Sometimes, policemen (and, no doubt, French-style judges d'instruction) will cut corners when there is a promise of

closing an old file. Mr. Diab is entitled to the legal presumption of innocence; and, he should not be regarded as guilty until a fair trial has found him so. Yet that seems to be what Carleton has done.

Moreover, there is no evidence that the school's sociology department was behaving in the spirit of supporters of Pennsylvania's Black Panther police-killer Mumia Abu-Jamal-- those weird leftist obsessives who offer ever-shifting defences of a self-styled intellectual that are, with painful obviousness, motivated by his guilt of the deed attributed to him, not his innocence.

So far, mercifully, there is no prospect or indication of such malign intent. And for his part, Mr. Diab has refused to budge from the claim that he is altogether the wrong man. The testimonials offered on his behalf, meanwhile, have consisted of flat denials that he could be capable of political violence. Carleton made the wrong decision: Until such time as Mr. Diab is proven to have been the man who killed four innocents in Paris 29 years ago, he should be free to teach at Canadian universities.

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