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How a Canadian professor's life became a horror show: Fahmy

French election results renew hope justice will finally come to Hassan Diab.



Hassan Diab, the Ottawa professor who was ordered extradited to France by the Canadian government while his lawyer, Donald Bayne, listens on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in 2012. (THE CANADIAN PRESS)

By **MOHAMED FAHMY**

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This story has been compared to a B-movie.

Canadian-Lebanese professor Hassan Diab is left in awe when a French journalist approaches him in 2007 at the University of Ottawa to inform him he is under investigation in relation to a bombing that killed four people near the Copernic St. synagogue in Paris close to three decades ago.

Thirteen months later the RCMP arrests Diab at the request of the French police, who consider him the suspect.

The suspenseful movie trailer begins with quick flashes of Diab's life spiralling out of control as the extradition court battle intensifies on Canadian soil. Journalists film Diab and dozens of his supporters holding signs protesting his innocence.

The flimsy case against Diab is built on German "secret unsourced intelligence" handed to the French. Authorities blamed the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine for the bombing. The militant group had claimed responsibility for a string of bombings, assassinations, and hijacking of airplanes in the late 1960s and 1970s.

German intelligence reports submitted to court that I read indicate "five Palestinians" known to the investigators as members of the PFLP could have been behind the attack.

Rania Tfaily, Diab's wife confirmed to me that he was not born in Palestine and had no Palestinian origins. More shockingly, the intelligence names the suspect as "Hassan El Diab" not "Diab" — a big difference that could be translated into a case of mistaken identity.

At this point of the drama we get a view of the real bomber as he fills in the registration card at the Celtic Hotel in Paris and checks in under the alias of Alexander Panadriyu, a Cypriot citizen.

Four handwriting experts have declared Diab's handwriting does not match the writing of the bomber on the card. Several French experts insist his handwriting matches five words written by the suspect — a conclusion widely critiqued.

The political thriller takes a new turn when the palm and fingerprints on the hotel registration card and in the car that transported the explosives do not match Diab's prints taken by the RCMP.

Case documents reveal the hotel receptionist and porter described the bomber as a man in his mid-40s. Diab was 26 at the time. Not a single hotel employee was able to identify Diab when the French police showed them his photo.

Nevertheless, the unprecedented two-year extradition hearing ended in catastrophe. Diab was committed to extradition in June 2011. He was flown to Paris in 2014 where he has been

languishing in a tiny cell for 22-hours day after he lost his appeal to an embarrassing Canadian court order.

To the naked eye this case would not have resulted in a conviction in a fair Canadian criminal court. Experts believe the 1999 Extradition Act is a black hole in the Canadian legal system that should be re-examined.

Unfortunately, this is not a film we can stop or fast forward as we please. It's a painful reality haunting Diab and his family every day.

It became clear to me as I interviewed Diab's resilient wife, a professor at Carlton University and mother of his two young children, would not stop until she frees her husband.

She told me Diab's arthritis is worsening while he faces fabricated crimes for allegedly making and planting 10 kilograms of explosives that were stashed in bags of the motorcycle blown up 15-metres away from the synagogue.

The good news is that French investigating judges ordered his release six times in the past year. One judge even confirmed there was "consistent evidence" Diab was a student in Lebanon during the time of the bombing in 1980.

Diab's wife gave me the bad news that the French Court of Appeal overturned all the release orders at the request of a prosecutor, who describe Diab as a "flight risk" and a "threat to the public."

In August 2015 Justin Trudeau released a statement urging then-Prime Minister Harper to extract me from an unjust case partially based on "secret unsourced intelligence" which left myself and two other Al Jazeera journalists incarcerated in Egypt for close to 400 days.

At the time Trudeau said: Mr. Harper "has an obligation to use the full force of the Prime Minister's Office to help Canadian citizens when they are unjustly imprisoned abroad. His inaction must end today."

I believe our prime minister could possibly write the happy ending of this story if he intervenes directly with France's new leadership to bring Diab home.

***Mohamed Fahmy** is an award-winning journalist and war correspondent. He is the author of *The Marriott Cell: An Epic Journey from Cairo's Scorpion Prison to Freedom.**

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