

French police arrest student on charges of plotting Paris terror attack

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A 24-year-old Franco-Algerian IT student, Sid Ahmed Ghlam, has been in police custody since Sunday on charges of preparing a terrorist attack. Ghlam, who was already known to French intelligence services due to alleged ties with Islamist groups, is charged with plotting terrorist attack on two churches in the Paris area. He is also being questioned about the killing of a fitness teacher on Sunday.

On Sunday, ambulance staff reportedly notified police that they had received an 8 a.m. call from a man with a gunshot wound to the thigh. Police tracked the trail of blood to a vehicle and said they found an assault rifle, a bulletproof vest, and ammunition there. Ghlam stated that he was the owner of the vehicle, and he was then placed under medical arrest.

Reports of the alleged “imminent” terrorist attack broke only four days after Ghlam’s arrest, however, when they were trumpeted to the mass media. On Wednesday, French interior minister Bernard Cazeneuve told the media, “A terrorist attack was foiled on Sunday morning.”

“Documents were also found and they prove, without any ambiguity, that the individual was preparing an imminent attack, in all probability, against one or two churches,” said Cazeneuve.

Cazeneuve also charged Ghlam with the murder of a 33-year-old fitness teacher, Aurélie Châtelain, who was found dead in the passenger seat of her car in Villejuif, just south of Paris. DNA at the scene links Ghlam with Aurélie’s murder, according to Cazeneuve.

Ghlam’s sister was also arrested in Saint-Dizier; French media claimed that she was a “known radical.” His girlfriend has also been held for questioning.

According to press reports, Ghlam had traveled to Turkey for a week earlier this year and was detained upon his return to France. *Le Monde* noted, “The

technical environment (Internet browsing data, telephone, etc.) of this student had been drawn up and he was the subject of a ‘S file’ for State security, which means he was under police surveillance ‘that does not attract attention.’ ” After studying these details, however, police let him go, according to Cazeneuve, concluding they had nothing “to justify launching an investigation.”

Turkey is a frequent destination for the hundreds of European Muslims who are seeking to join reactionary Al Qaeda-linked Sunni Islamist militias in Syria, fighting in the French- and US-backed proxy war to topple Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Ghlam was reported to have posted notes on Facebook stating that he wanted to travel to Syria to fight.

On Wednesday, Cazeneuve dismissed concerns over French intelligence’s failure to foresee Ghlam’s plot though he was being watched. He told TF1 television: “The DGSI [General Directorate of Interior Security] did everything it had to do and proceeded to all the investigations that were required.”

People who knew Ghlam in France said he did not appear particularly unusual. He arrived for the first time in France with his mother in 2001 to join his father in Saint-Dizier. He had to return to Algeria in 2003 for lack of papers allowing him to remain in France, however. He received his high school diploma in Algeria in 2010, before returning to France the same year.

He was a student from November 2011 to June 2013 at the SUPINFO school of computer science, in Montparnasse. Students are selected to participate in the school based on good marks.

“He did not attract attention to himself, he was a normal student with decent results. We are very surprised to see his name in the press today,” one

school official told *Le Figaro*. While the curriculum is five years, he left at the end of its second year, however. “He was around much less in his second year. He finally told us that he wanted to switch career tracks and go to another school,” the same official added.

Until his arrest Sunday, he lived in a room of a student hostel in Paris. A spokesman for the students’ representative body (CROUS) told AFP: “It’s the first time we’ve heard about him since he took that apartment, there were no complaints about him, he paid his rent normally, around 200 euros a month.”

Given Ghlam’s history and the peculiar timing of the government’s decision to highlight his arrest, his detention raises more questions than it answers about the political forces behind the affair. As with Mohamed Merah’s shooting spree in Toulouse in 2012 and the Kouachi brothers’ shooting at *Charlie Hebdo* in January, the suspect was under close police surveillance and apparently had links to Islamist operations in Syria that are supported by sections of the state.

Now, before his case has been publicly investigated, his detention is being seized upon to justify attacks on democratic rights and handing over even greater powers to the intelligence agencies.

The Socialist Party (PS) is seizing on the arrest to push for rapid passage of its controversial surveillance bill, currently being debated in parliament, that legalises mass electronic spying and intelligence-gathering methods under the guise of fighting terrorism.

“We must always improve our intelligence capabilities,” French president François Hollande said in response to Ghlam’s arrest, stressing that this was the purpose of the surveillance bill.

The new spy measures give intelligence agencies sweeping powers to collect phone and Internet data from phone companies and Internet service providers. It allows authorities to spy on the digital and mobile communications of anyone linked to a terrorism investigation, without authorisation from a judge.

Though the bill has attracted criticism from human rights groups and even from sections of the political establishment, according to *Les Echos*, these are now “winds that the Elysée presidential palace and the Matignon prime minister’s office hope will die down on May 5, during the formal vote.”



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