

## **Anti-Semitism Is Alleged in French Torture-Killing**

*Some of the suspects will face hate-crime charges in addition to kidnapping and murder in the death of a Jewish store clerk near Paris.*

***Los Angeles Times***

**February 21, 2006**

**By Sebastian Rotella**

PARIS — In a new case of strife and brutality in France's immigrant neighborhoods, authorities alleged Monday that anti-Semitism influenced a gang that kidnapped a Jewish store clerk, tortured him for more than three weeks and killed him.

An investigative magistrate ruled Monday evening that some of the seven suspects would face hate-crime charges in addition to kidnapping and murder in the death last week of Ilan Halimi, 23, according to French officials and media reports. The suspects, five men and two women, were still being questioned late Monday night.

The decision came after days of fury in France's Jewish community, which held an angry street protest Sunday and accused politicians of minimizing the crime to avoid increasing tension that lingers from riots by predominantly Muslim youths late last year.

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin promised Jewish leaders at a previously scheduled community banquet Monday night that investigators would "shed light" on "an odious crime." He expressed condolences to the family of Halimi, who lived with his mother and two sisters and worked selling cellular phone equipment in a store in a middle-class neighborhood.

"I want each one of [his relatives] to know that I share their pain," De Villepin said.

The kidnapers, who called themselves "The Barbarians," beat, burned and mutilated Halimi during 24 days of captivity in the cellar of a tough housing project in Bagneux, southwest of the capital, according to investigators.

The gang taunted Halimi's family and a rabbi with anti-Semitic epithets and recited Koranic verses during telephone calls and e-mails demanding wildly diverging amounts of ransom that never were collected, investigators said. The kidnapers also sent photos of the victim with a gun to his head, bound and blindfolded, apparently mimicking images of hostages and abused prisoners in Iraq.

Those actions and others led prosecutors to add aggravating circumstances of anti-Semitism to the charges sought against some of the suspects.

"When the family said they didn't have money, they told them to go to a synagogue to get the money," said Sammy Ghozlan, a Jewish leader who is a retired police chief and has

campaigned against anti-Semitic crime here in recent years. "This gang massacred this young man. They cut off ears and fingers. It was like they had a trophy, a Jewish kid, and everybody abused him."

According to Monday's edition of Israel's Haaretz newspaper, Halimi's mother criticized the police for moving too slowly and for ignoring the anti-Semitic motives.

"If Ilan hadn't been Jewish, he wouldn't have been murdered," Ruth Halimi told Haaretz.

Police insisted that they had worked the case around the clock, but were stymied by the suspects' convoluted and evolving demands. They are still hunting for the suspected ringleader, Youssef Fofana, an ex-convict who may have fled to his native Ivory Coast, Justice Minister Pascal Clement said.

So far, the investigation suggests that the gang targeted Jews because its members believed that Jews were rich, officials say. The gang's victims in at least three previous attempted kidnappings were Jewish, but several other victims were not, a French intelligence official said.

"You have a kind of confusion that results in great cruelty," the intelligence official said. "It starts as a kidnapping for money, but ends up focusing on his religion because they found out he wasn't rich. And you end up with the murder of a Jew in horrible circumstances."

The gang used attractive young women as bait. Halimi disappeared Jan. 20 after telling his family he was going out with a woman who had come to the store, engaged him in conversation and made a date with him.

On Feb. 13, he was dumped near railroad tracks, naked, bound and with 80% of his body burned and bruised, but still alive. He died of his wounds in an ambulance on the way to the hospital.

The gang first demanded half a million dollars ransom, but kept changing demands, and ended up asking for \$6,000, officials said. The captors' perceived lack of effort to collect the money suggests to some investigators that the gang was taunting the family, officials said.

The apparently mixed motives of the kidnappers are symptomatic of the violent mentality of high-crime housing projects, where riots have left a smoldering, semi-politicized rage that at its worst is sweepingly anti-Western and hostile to Jews, Americans and the French state, observers said.

But police have found no ties between the suspects and the Islamic extremist networks active in France, authorities said.

On Monday night, two civil rights organizations that work mostly with Muslim

communities condemned the killing of Halimi.

The Movement Against Racism and for Friendship Among Peoples and the SOS Racism group said they planned to show solidarity with the Jewish community by joining forces with the prosecution as civil plaintiffs in the case.

During the last decade, France's Jewish community has been hit by periodic arson and vandalism against synagogues and schools, but incidents of serious physical violence have been infrequent.

The perpetrators are generally Muslim youths, police say. Some of the rioters who rampaged nationwide in October and November painted anti-Jewish graffiti alongside slogans insulting the police and the French state.

If the Halimi killing turns out to have been driven by anti-Semitism, it will be one of the worst such crimes in recent memory.

"There is a lot of emotion in the community tonight," said Joseph Zehrin, vice president of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France. "We hope that the justice system will do everything it takes, and that these barbarians, as they themselves call themselves, will be punished."