

French Officials Now Say Killing of Jew Was in Part a Hate Crime

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PARIS, Feb. 22 — French authorities say a young Jewish man who was tortured and killed here this month was singled out because of his religion, supporting claims by French Jews that his killing was in part a hate crime.

"The truth is that these hoodlums first of all acted for villainous and sordid reasons — money — but they had the belief, and I quote, 'that Jews have money,' " the interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, told French lawmakers on Tuesday, citing a statement by one of the men who kidnapped the victim, Ilan Halimi.

Mr. Halimi, 23, was kidnapped and held for three weeks while his captors, led by a Muslim immigrant from Ivory Coast, demanded a ransom from his family. He was found on Feb. 13, naked and covered with cigarette burns, near a suburban train station outside Paris, and died on his way to a hospital.

The French police initially dismissed accusations by Mr. Halimi's family and Jewish groups that anti-Semitism played a role in the crime, even after one suspect told investigators that Mr. Halimi had been a target because he was a Jew. The authorities changed their position after another suspect said Mr. Halimi had been burned on his forehead with a cigarette because of his religion.

[France](#) has struggled to strike a balance between suppressing anti-Semitism within the country's large Muslim community and addressing rising anti-Islamic sentiments in the broader population. The government was widely criticized several years ago for responding sluggishly to an outbreak of anti-Semitic incidents.

Jewish leaders again criticized the police and the news media, saying they played down the anti-Semitic aspect of the killing for fear of increasing tensions with Muslims.

Ruth Halimi, Mr. Halimi's mother, told the Israeli daily Haaretz on Sunday, "If Ilan hadn't been Jewish, he wouldn't have been murdered." She also told the newspaper that the police told the family to ignore the gang's attempts to contact them.

"Nobody is denying that their priority was money, " said Roger Cukierman, president of CRIF, France's umbrella Jewish organization. "But their vision, based on the prejudice that Jews have money, and then once they are kidnapped, the way they happily tortured them, shows the anti-Semitic element."

President [Jacques Chirac](#) called Mr. Halimi's parents on Tuesday and assured them that full light would be shed on the circumstances, and in particular whether it was an anti-Semitic act, Élysée Palace said in a statement.

On Wednesday, Mr. Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin said they would attend a memorial service for Mr. Halimi on Thursday. CRIF plans a silent march through Paris on Sunday.

The police found literature linking some suspects in the case to Palestinian and fundamentalist Muslim causes, but Mr. Sarkozy warned against blaming the country's Muslims. "What we don't need now, in addition to this barbarity, is misunderstanding, intolerance and racism," he said Tuesday.

Mr. Halimi was abducted in January after being approached by a young woman at his workplace, a phone store. They later met at an undisclosed location, where his abductors were waiting for him.

Thirteen people are under formal investigation for the crime.

The main suspect, Youssouf Fofana, is thought to have fled to his native Ivory Coast. Mr. Fofana has been involved a number of violent robberies, a judicial official said.

Ariane Bernard reported from Paris for this article, and Craig S. Smith from Brussels.