Prosecutor now suspects antisemitism behind murder of elderly French Jewish man

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By AFP

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An 89-year-old man who was pushed out of his 17th-story window by a neighbor may have been killed because he was Jewish, a prosecutor said Friday, after several shocking antisemitic murders in France in recent years.

The victim’s body was found at the foot of his building in Lyon, southeast France. On May 17, the 51-year-old neighbor was arrested. But investigators did not initially charge him with a racist crime.

Local newspaper Le Progrès reported that police had initially investigated a possible antisemitic motive but then excluded it. They believe the incident was the result of an argument that was unconnected to the fact that Hadjaj was Jewish. French media have not reported the identity of the suspect or other details about him.

Last Sunday, the BNVCA anti-Semitism watchdog group said it would seek to be a plaintiff in the case, citing its similarity with the 2017 murder of Sarah Halimi, a 65-year-old thrown from her window in a case that sparked a national outcry.

“After social media postings were provided to us, the prosecutor’s office has asked judges to consider the aggravating circumstance of an act committed because of the victim’s ethnicity, nationality, race or religion,” Lyon prosecutor Nicolas Jacquet told AFP.

He did not provide examples of the posts, but Gilles-William Goldnadel, a lawyer and commentator for CNews television, said Wednesday on Twitter that the suspect had called out Goldnadel in messages, including one that told him to “remember your origins.”

“It’s no longer a question of telling us it’s the act of a mentally disturbed person. The truth of antisemitism must no longer be hidden,” Goldnadel wrote.

France has grappled with a sharp rise in violence targeting its roughly 500,000 Jews, the largest community in Europe, in addition to jihadist attacks in recent years.

The murder of Halimi drew particular outrage after the killer, who had shouted “Allahu akbar” (“God is greatest” in Arabic), avoided trial because a judge determined he was under the influence of drugs and not criminally responsible.

That prompted French President Emmanuel Macron to seek a law change to ensure people face responsibility for violent crimes while under the influence of drugs, which was adopted in December 2021.

In 2018, 85-year-old Mireille Knoll was brutally stabbed in an attack by two men said to have been looking for “hidden treasures” in her Paris apartment.

More recently, a Jewish man died in a suburb of Paris after running into the path of a passing tram while escaping a group of individuals on the street.

The death of Jérémie Cohen in February was initially treated as an accident until his family recovered footage of the assault. The family gave the evidence to Éric Zemmour, a far-right French Jewish politician, who highlighted the case in his presidential campaign last month.