

French Alps killings probe focuses on family feud

Slain father was allegedly in conflict with brother, French prosecutor says

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A tow truck with the victims' car leaves the site of the killings near Chevaline in the French Alps on Thursday. (Laurent Cipriani/Associated Press)

The brother of an Iraqi-born British man shot dead in the French Alps with his wife and two other people came forward to British police on Friday and denied any conflict in the family, while investigators looked into a possible money dispute among the siblings, a French prosecutor said.

Two days after the killings, authorities identified the dead as mechanical design engineer Saad al Hilli and his wife, Ikbal, based partly on the testimony of their four-year-old daughter Zeena, who survived unhurt by hiding under her mother's skirt as some 25 automatic-handgun rounds were fired.

French cyclist Sylvain Mollier, 45, whom authorities suspect was in the wrong place at the wrong time, was also killed in Wednesday's rampage. Investigators were working to identify a fourth victim, an elderly, Iraqi-born Swedish woman also inside the family's vehicle.



Prosecutor Eric Maillaud answers a question during a news conference in Annecy, France, Friday. Maillaud said that the four-year-old girl who survived the slaying of her family in couldn't help their investigation since she hid under her mother's legs during the killings. (Lionel Cironneau/Associated Press)

French authorities, cautious about tipping off the culprit or culprits, offered only a trickle of clues about the investigation. Eric Maillaud, the prosecutor in nearby Annecy, said British police reported that Saad may have feuded with his brother Zaid over money.

On Friday, after learning about media reports that cited authorities' suspicion about a possible family dispute, Zaid went to British police and told them, "I have no conflict with my brother," according to Maillaud.

"This brother came forward spontaneously to investigators, first to ask simply about the state of his brother because he heard through British media that his brother was dead," Maillaud said.

Possible inheritance dispute

But Mae Faisal El-Wailly, a childhood friend of the brothers, made available a letter written to her by Saad last year that alluded to a possible inheritance dispute. She said the brothers' father had died recently, and she described the family as wealthy and well-travelled.

"Zaid and I do not communicate any more as he is another control freak and tried a lot of underhanded things even when my father was alive," Saad wrote. The letter was dated Sept. 16, 2011.

"He tried to take control of fathers assets and demanded control," the letter says. "(A)nyway it is a long story and now I have just had to wipe him out of my life. Sad but I need to concentrate now on my wife and two lovely girls..."

Public records show Zaid resigned from Saad's small aeronautics design firm, Shtech Ltd., last year. The company had only modest assets, with a net worth of £8,331 (roughly \$13,000).

Maillaud said he had not heard about any possible inheritance issue and that Zaid remains "a free man."

Girls in police protection

The prosecutor also said it was a "miracle" that the dead couple's other daughter, seven-year-old Zaina, who was shot in the shoulder and beaten, survived. She remained unconscious Friday in a medically induced coma in a Grenoble hospital, under close police guard.

Maillaud said investigators looked forward to speaking with the girl to help identify or describe any suspects.

So far, authorities have questioned her four-year-old sister Zeena, but Maillaud said her account was filled with "kids' words."

She "was asked time and again to tell us who she was with," he said. "She said, 'With my daddy' and gave his first name, and 'With my mummy' and gave her first name, 'and my sister'."

Maillaud said the girl provided no other details that might advance the investigation.

For the first time in nearly two days, police allowed access to the site of the shooting, along a potholed, one-lane road near a mountain stream. Broken glass and skid marks marred the parking area where the family was found.

Maillaud said each victim was shot at least three times and hit at least once in the head.

Investigators were looking for a green or dark-colored 4x4 vehicle and a motorbike, based on a possible witness sighting.

Four French police investigators were heading to England following the launch of a French judicial investigation on charges of assassination and attempted assassination.

Police in Surrey, England, said in a statement Friday that the al Hilli family had a residence in the town of Claygate, but they declined to provide details on the investigation.

Autopsies continued Friday.

International links

The case has taken international ramifications, with links tying the slain family to Britain, Iraq, Sweden and Spain.

Maillaud said the BMW station wagon in which three of the bodies were found was registered to Saad al-Hilli, a British man born in Baghdad in 1962. He had lived in Britain since at least 2002, and his family had been in France since August.



A police officer walks near the home of Saad al-Hilli in Claygate, south of London, Sept. 6. (Neil Hall/Reuters)

Public records identified al-Hilli as a mechanical engineer and his LinkedIn page described him as an aerospace consultant.

Sweden confirmed one of the victims was Swedish. French authorities found a Swedish passport that apparently belonged to the older woman, born in 1938, as well as an Iraqi passport.

Saad al-Hilli's father died recently in Spain, family friend Mae Faisal El-wailly told The Associated Press. She described the family as wealthy and well-travelled.

4-year-old 'deeply shocked'

Peter Ricketts, the British ambassador to France, said Friday that the elder girl was in serious but stable condition, and that both sisters would be looked after by British consular staff until family could go to France. Britain's Foreign Office said diplomats had contacted relatives.

"The younger girl, who is not physically hurt but deeply, deeply shocked, has British consular staff with her — English-speaking, friendly faces to be with her alongside the French authorities, which I think is what everybody would expect," he told BBC television.

"The older girl is still badly hurt but I think stable. We will be with her as soon as it's medically feasible for us to be so, so that there's a friendly face around them, to support them."