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(enlarge photo)

Man found in Lady Bird Lake was teacher, FBI target

Police said that victim, who taught at a Southwest Austin middle school, may have committed suicide.

By Tony Plohetski, Sue Banerjee AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Friday, April 18, 2008

Austin police said Thursday that they are leaning toward a ruling of suicide in the death of a middle school teacher and activist whose body was found Wednesday in Lady Bird Lake with his hands and legs bound and tape over his eyes.

Police identified Riad Hamad, 55, at a news conference Thursday and said the binding of his limbs and the placement of the tape was consistent with Hamad having done it himself.

Austin police homicide Sgt. Joe Chacon said family members told investigators that the Clint Small Jr. Middle School teacher had "several stressors" in his life and had talked about possibly killing himself. Police said that they think Hamad walked from his car to the lake, based on evidence they gathered at the scene.

"The car was found on the south shoreline with no signs of mysterious activity," Chacon said.

Police said that they found Hamad's car along Lady Bird Lake on Tuesday and searched but did not find him.

Joggers found Hamad's body about 2 p.m. Wednesday near Comal Street and Nash Hernandez Sr. Road. Investigators said they found no signs of trauma or a struggle.

Debbie Russell, president of the local American Civil Liberties Union chapter, sent an e-mail Thursday to dozens of activists throughout the city saying that Hamad's death had been ruled a homicide. Russell said in a later interview that she wrote that e-mail after she thought she had heard media reports that Hamad had been killed.

She said in the e-mail that Hamad had recently been under investigation by the FBI — federal officials confirmed the investigation — and described him as "NOT a terrorist but a peacemaker." Hamad was serving as an official for the Austin chapter of the Palestine Children's Welfare Fund.

FBI spokesman Erik Vasys said that Hamad had been a "person of interest" in a criminal investigation but that he could not elaborate.

Austin police said Hamad's family reported him missing Monday. Family members released a statement Thursday saying that he disappeared after going to pick up a prescription at a local pharmacy.

Hamad's body was taken to the Travis County medical examiner's office for an autopsy. The office did not respond to an open records request Thursday for information about the case and would not confirm that Hamad's body was there.

According to the family's statement, which was released through an attorney, Hamad was a University of Texas graduate and had taught in the Austin school district for a decade.

The family's statement described him as a "peace activist who worked tirelessly on behalf of those less fortunate than him and was loved and admired by many members of the local, as well as

Riad Hamad Teacher at Clint Small Jr. Middle School may have killed himself, police think.

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international community."

"Mr. Hamad's family and friends are obviously devastated over their loss," the statement said.

Hamad had taught at Austin Community College but was fired in June 1998 after officials said he violated the school's nondiscrimination policy by making "sexist and off-colored jokes" in class, school officials said.

Small Middle School Principal Sheila Anderson sent a letter to parents at the Southwest Austin school Thursday informing them of Hamad's death and saying that grief counselors were available for students and teachers.

"Mr. Hamad was a longtime and valued member of the Small Middle School faculty, and his love and passion for education touched us all," Anderson said in the letter.

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Additional material from staff writer Molly Bloom.

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