

The six sons of Asir

By **Christina Lamb**

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On the pavement outside the Al-Nami house in the slow, blanket heat of an afternoon in the desert mountains of Abha, a marmalade cat laps water from a metal bowl. "It was Ahmed's idea to put this out here for the cats in the area because he saw they had no water," said Abdul Ahmed Abdur-rahman Al-Nami, the head of the household. "Since he's been gone I fill it every day and I will do so until he comes back."

The boy Mr Al-Nami remembers as a loving eldest son was one of 15 Saudis among the 19 men [identified as the September 11 hijackers](#), responsible for killing more than 3,000 people. At least six of the hijackers are from the southwest provinces of Asir and Baha, a statistic that has brought this remote corner of the Saudi kingdom under the scrutiny of investigators.

Ahmed, 21, was on the fourth plane, United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside after passengers apparently confronted hijackers and brought it down before its probable intended target of the White House.

A year after first seeing his son's photograph in the newspapers, Mr Al-Nami still refuses to believe that he was involved.

"If he had so much mercy in his heart for animals how could he have been involved in killing thousands of people?" he asked. "He was the kind of boy who would come home on cold winter nights without his coat because he had given it to a poor person he had seen outside the mosque."

That view is not shared by the sullen youths hanging about the narrow streets of Al-Basra district around the Alnami house. They are convinced that Ahmed was one of the hijackers and to them that makes him a martyr bound for paradise, one of the so-called six "sons of Asir".

Mr Al-Nami insists that Ahmed is alive somewhere in Saudi Arabia and that someone stole his identity to give Saudis a bad name, possibly even Osama bin Laden, who vowed to bring down the House of Saud after the ruling family stripped him of his citizenship in 1994. Yet he has not seen his son since December 2000, when he left home saying he was going to Mecca, and has not heard from him since spring last year.

Mr Al-Nami says Ahmed called him a few months after leaving home, saying he was in Mecca looking for a job.

In fact according to friends, Ahmed had joined up with three others from Abha and the adjoining town of Khamis Mushayt and gone to a training camp in Afghanistan. A few months earlier, he, Saeed Al-Ghamdi, and brothers Wael, 25, and Waleed Al-Shehri, 21, had sworn an oath committing themselves to jihad, or holy war.

It was the start of a journey that would end with him and Al-Ghamdi on the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania and the Al-Shehri brothers on American Airlines Flight 11 that crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre.

American investigators are focusing on their home towns in an attempt to form a picture of who was recruiting for the attack and whether these young men - none of whom spoke English, say relatives - knew what they were getting into.

When I arrived in the provincial capital of Abha after the glitz of Riyadh and Jeddah, it was easy to

see why Asir might be a fertile ground for breeding dissidents. The last region to be conquered by the ruling al-Saud family, Asir did not come under central control until the 1930s and remains a highly conservative and tribal society, suspicious of the government and closer in character to neighbouring Yemen, the birthplace of bin Laden's father.

Asir has seen little of the country's vast oil wealth. The number of young men drifting about testify to the high unemployment rate, a situation likely to worsen with 60 per cent of the population under 25.

Yet Ahmed and his co-hijackers all came from comfortable middle-class backgrounds. "We Al-Namis are a big important family of government officials and scientists," said his father, who works in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The Alshehris own a construction firm, which built the highway through Khamis Mushayt in collaboration with the bin Laden construction company.

Mr Al-Nami said of his son, "He was everything a father could hope for. He wanted to be a university teacher or a judge."

Ahmed's friend Khalid Saeed, who was in the year above him at school, said, "He wasn't very religious. He was a popular, good-looking boy with a great sense of humour."

Khalid traces the change to when Ahmed began studying Islamic law at King Khalid University. "I remember he became very interested in Chechnya. He started hanging out with a different kind of people. We just sort of lost him."

In a society where cinema, theatre and dancing are banned there is little to do, and as bored youths, Al-Nami and the others may have easily come under the influence of Islamic militants from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt who have long been active in the university.

"I think these boys were victims of propaganda," said Saad Asswailim, professor of literature at King Khalid University. "We allowed people into our universities to preach how every Muslim's duty is to go and fight the infidel and talk of Islamic jihad in miracle terms - of men coming back from the dead, of one man destroying 70 Soviet tanks. Imagine the influence this has on boys between 16 and 25 who are just starting to think about existence. They can easily become extremely religious. Even suicidally religious."

Two more of the hijackers, Mohand al-Shehri and Fayez Banihammad, who were on Flight 175 which crashed into the south Tower, had spent a year at the same university.

The Al-Shehri brothers, who studied at Abha Teacher Training College, seem to have come under similar influence.

"They were ordinary guys, then they changed," said one of their cousins. "It's not unusual here for a man to change overnight from being carefree to being religious. It was a kind of Islamic awakening. They heard sermons from people who came back from jihad in Afghanistan."

The brothers disappeared for two or three months in 1999, travelling to Medina. "When they came back they were different," said their cousin. "They had grown beards and were deeply religious. They had their own group of people and had become very secretive."

In December 2000 they disappeared again, this time to Afghanistan with Al-Nami and Al-Ghamdi. The next the family heard of them was reading their names among the hijackers.

"When we read their names we were very proud because the black hand of Americans are in everything," said their cousin. "I don't think my cousins were exploited. I think they did it out of their own convictions."

Such convictions seem widely shared at Caffe Net in Abha, a male club featuring billiard tables, play stations and Internet. One desktop programme is a flight simulator.

Nasser Ibrahim, a mathematics student busy in an online chat group, said, "We discuss politics and

we donate money for families of suicide bombers in Palestine. Now we also chat a lot about Iraq."

With America gearing up for an attack on Baghdad, the kingdom's clerics will use resentment to further fuel anti-western attitudes.

At Al-Watan, an Abha-based newspaper, Dr Sa'ad Mariq, the deputy editor, is worried. "No one can explain why so many young boys from here were on the planes," he said. "Perhaps because this region is very tribal and people brave. But I have no doubt that what exacerbated the whole issue was the Palestinians - Muslim youth hate America because of what the Israelis are doing in Palestine. If America is seen to kill innocent people in Iraq that will make things worse."

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