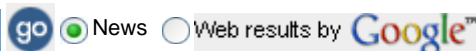


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## Yemeni Fugitive Was Critical To Unfolding of Sept. 11 Plot

By Peter Finn  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
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TARRAGONA, Spain -- On the morning of July 9, 2001, Mohamed Atta drove a silver Hyundai rental car east out of Madrid toward this Mediterranean beach area, a ribbon of resorts crowded with vacationers. The attacks on New York and the Pentagon were just weeks away and Atta was headed to a secret meeting to complete the planning, according to U.S. officials and a Spanish police investigation of the lead hijacker's movements.

As Atta drove 300 miles across the country, his old roommate in Germany, Ramzi Binalshibh, was boarding a budget flight from Hamburg to Reus, the small airport that serves this region. For Binalshibh, a Yemeni whose repeated failures to get a U.S. visa had ended his ambition to join Atta in death in the United States, the meeting in Tarragona would crown a mission that began for him at a similar summit 18 months earlier in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, U.S. law enforcement and Western intelligence officials said.

Investigators said they believe that planning for the Sept. 11 attacks was punctuated at either end of the plot's trajectory by the two critical meetings. Binalshibh, who is believed to be alive, is the only person known to have attended both meetings, making him a key potential source of answers to the enduring questions about the plot, Western intelligence officials said.

The Spanish summit is an important piece of the puzzle,

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but it too is riddled with gaps, despite nearly a year of work by Spanish investigators working with the FBI. For three days, Atta and Binalshibh vanished into the summer crowd here. Investigators still do not know whom the pair met with in the Tarragona area, where exactly they met or what support they may have received from Muslim radicals in the area to hold the meeting.

"The Spanish trip remains a mystery to us," said a U.S. counterterrorism official, who added that U.S. intelligence officials theorize that at least one senior, trusted al Qaeda courier flew to Spain for a meeting that lasted several days at a local safe house.

As the investigation continues, Binalshibh is now the most wanted figure from the tight circle of operatives believed to have planned and carried out the attacks.

"We want him bad," said one U.S. official, who described the 29-year-old fugitive as playing a critical support role in the methodical planning of the attacks until he fled Germany for Afghanistan on Sept. 5, 2001.

Investigators suspect that among members of a radical cell in Hamburg at the center of the Sept. 11 probe, Binalshibh maintained the most contact with other terrorists in Europe; his phone number, for instance, surfaced during German raids on a group in Duisburg linked to a bombing attack on a synagogue in Tunisia in April, in which 14 German tourists were killed.

Officials suspect Binalshibh also may have played a role in the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, where he grew up in the eastern province of Hadramaut, considered a hotbed of Islamic radicalism.

German authorities have issued an international arrest warrant for Binalshibh. He is also named as an unindicted co-conspirator in the trial of Zacarias Moussaoui, the French Moroccan who investigators believe took Binalshibh's place among the hijackers after Binalshibh failed to get a visa. Moussaoui allegedly received \$14,000 from Binalshibh shortly after the Spanish meeting.

The importance of Binalshibh's role has been sharpened by the belief

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that he was at the Malaysia meeting that investigators say was critical to the Sept. 11 plot. The sighting, based on photographs, had been the subject of some debate within the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement communities, U.S. officials said. The meeting was photographed by Malaysian intelligence at the request of the CIA.

"I've seen the photographs and I don't think there's any doubt that it's him," said a Western intelligence official. "Everybody that has seen it in the intelligence and law enforcement community says, without question, it's him."

The official noted, however, "We have shown [the photos] to his supposed friends, or people that know him, and they've said they don't think it's him."

### **Rethinking Attacks**

In 1999, before the Malaysian summit, al Qaeda was focused on a series of planned bombing attacks in Los Angeles and Jordan, timed for the turning of the millennium. The plots all failed, and in January 2000, al Qaeda members met in Kuala Lumpur to assess their failure and plan new attacks -- both the strike against the USS Cole and the attacks on New York and the Pentagon, U.S. intelligence officials said.

Among those attending the summit were Tawfiq bin Atash, a senior aide to Osama bin Laden, as well as two Sept. 11 hijackers, Saudi nationals Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi. The presence of Binalshibh is the earliest clear evidence of a link between the German-based hijackers and the larger group of Saudis.

"When Binalshibh went to the meeting in Malaysia in 2000, that's when they got the plans to go ahead with this thing," said the Western intelligence official.

The unassuming Binalshibh had come a long way since he stepped off a ship in Hamburg in 1995 and asked for political asylum, claiming to be a refugee from Sudan who had been jailed following a student demonstration in Khartoum. His story wasn't believed, but by the time he was ordered deported, in December 1997, he had obtained a visa, in circumstances that remain unclear.

He quickly slipped into the radical Islamic milieu in Hamburg, a world marked by the al-Quds mosque and a nearby bookstore with a backroom where violent tracts and videos on jihad, or holy war, were sold.

Investigators believe that members of the Hamburg cell that would carry out the hijackings were recruited by Mohammed Haydar Zammar, a 41-year-old German citizen of Syrian origin. Binalshibh, slight of build and 5 feet 7 inches tall, was not Zammar's ideal candidate, but he was close to Atta and increasingly committed to jihad, investigators said. Binalshibh was videotaped at the wedding

of another Hamburg recruit, Said Bahaji, in October 1999, where he was recorded speaking of the "danger" posed by Jews before reciting a paean to holy war, said German officials, who found the video in raids after the Sept. 11 attacks.

In November 1998, after dropping out of preparatory German classes for a college degree, Binalshibh moved into an apartment with Atta and Bahaji. Zammar became a frequent visitor to their apartment on Marien Street near the university where Atta studied, neighbors said.

"What they did was say, 'We want to be fighters for Allah,' " said a Western intelligence official. "And then Zammar said, 'If you want to do that, here's where you need to go, and here's who you need to see.' "

In early 1999, Atta, Binalshibh and others in the Hamburg group made their way separately to al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan where they each spent about two months undergoing training, Western officials said.

"Once they got to Afghanistan and got trained, they got assessed by the people there as trustworthy," the intelligence official said.

#### **'Only by Luck'**

After the meeting in Malaysia, Binalshibh planned to participate directly in the attacks as a pilot. Between May and October 2000, however, he failed four times in Germany and Yemen to obtain a U.S. visa.

"It was only by luck, really, he wasn't given a visa," said one official. "Otherwise, he'd have been on one of those planes that went down."

Binalshibh's presence in Yemen in August and September 2000 has raised suspicions that he may have been involved in the October attack on the USS Cole, a suicide mission that was planned at the Malaysian summit, U.S. officials said.

Shortly after Binalshibh's last visa rejection, the plotters allegedly turned to another possibility for the 20th hijacker -- Moussaoui, who had trained in Afghanistan in 1998, U.S. officials said.

In May and June 2001, the plot was accelerating and the last of the Saudis -- believed to be the "muscle" on the planes -- began to arrive in the United States. With everyone in the country, Atta flew to Spain.

That first night in Madrid, Atta placed two calls to a cell phone in Germany that has proved untraceable to any individual, investigators said.

The next day, Binalshibh was on the move.

The flight from Hamburg landed at 7 p.m. on July 9 and three hours later, Binalshibh, accompanied by another man, pulled up in a car outside the Hotel Monica in the coastal town of Cambrils, a few miles south of the Reus airport. Atta's and Binalshibh's movements in the area were first detailed by the Spanish newspaper El Pais.

### **No Vacancies**

According to Pere Gomez, the hotel manager, the receptionist on duty declined to rent them a room, despite vacancies, because she didn't like the look of Binalshibh; the other man stayed in the car and the receptionist did not get a clear view of him, the hotel manager said. The two drove off to the nearby Hotel Tropicana, which was full but whose receptionist offered to call other hotels to find the pair a room. She located a double room -- back at the Hotel Monica.

The two men returned and this time the receptionist gave them the room, explaining that there had been a cancellation. Binalshibh registered for the two men, Gomez said. They spent the night and checked out the next morning.

The identity of Binalshibh's companion remains unknown to investigators, but his description matches that of Bahaji, a German citizen of Moroccan origin, who is also wanted on an international arrest warrant issued by Germany. But a U.S. official, confirming what the hotel manager said in an interview, noted that investigators had no clear description of Binalshibh's companion, and it could also have been Atta.

Atta had left Madrid in his rental car early that morning and did not check into a hotel in the area until July 13. No traces have been discovered of Atta and Binalshibh in the Tarragona area between July 10 and July 13, officials said.

On July 13, Atta surfaced at a travel agency in Tarragona where he purchased a ticket to Florida for July 19. Over the coming days, he stayed in three different hotels, moving because he couldn't find a booking for consecutive nights during the crowded tourist season.

On the 16th, Binalshibh flew back to Hamburg, investigators said.

With preparations for the attack complete after the Spanish summit and the final cash transfers to Moussaoui complete, Binalshibh fled Germany on Sept. 5, investigators said. Apparently taking a circuitous route through Spain en route to Pakistan, officials believe he disappeared into Taliban-controlled Afghanistan just before Sept. 11.

In December 2001, Binalshibh resurfaced in an al Qaeda video that was seized by U.S. forces from the bombed-out home of Muhammad Atef, the al Qaeda military operations chief.

Wide-eyed and wearing a red kaffiyeh, Binalshibh looked at the

camera and promised holy war.

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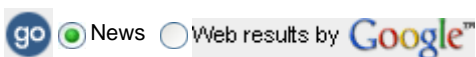
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