

washingtonpost.com

Hamburg's Cauldron of Terror

Within Cell of 7, Hatred Toward U.S. Grew and Sept. 11 Plot Evolved

By Peter Finn

Washington Post Foreign Service

Wednesday, September 11, 2002; Page A01

Featured Advertisement **XEROX**

Advertisement

3.60%

ANNUAL PERCENTAGE YIELD

American
Dream
Savings
Account™

More Money
For Your Money™



Learn More ▶

Emigrant
Direct.com™

Ask about our
Credit Card

Member FDIC

HAMBURG -- Around 7 one evening during Ramadan in 1998, the believers filed down a long corridor leading to the prayer room of the Al Muhadjirin mosque here, placing their shoes on the dark brown shelves before stepping onto a carpet the color of turquoise, a mixture of green for Islam and blue for heaven.

Among the worshipers was a small group of men who clustered around a severe, slight Egyptian named Mohamed Atta. Few words were spoken, but Atta moved with an air of command. Even then he was the "boss," as one of his fellow hijackers, Ziad Samir Jarrah, was to call him in a telephone conversation two days before the Sept. 11 attacks.

Sheik Adel, a guest speaker from Egypt, read from the Koran, reminded the men of the suffering of their brothers in Palestine and Chechnya, and led a prayer before the daily fast was broken, according to Abderrasak Labied, a 39-year-old Moroccan present that December evening. "*Bismillah*," the congregation answered, "In the name of Allah."

A large plastic tablecloth was spread on the floor and Atta sat down to eat dates washed down with a glass of milk. Beside him were Ramzi Binalshibh, Said Bahaji and Mounir Motassadeq, three members of what would become known as the Hamburg cell, the core group that carried out the attacks on New York and the Pentagon.

These students -- a group of seven men that included Marwan Al-Shehhi, Zakariya Essabar and Jarrah -- were beginning to coalesce behind a shared commitment to jihad, or holy war. Except for Atta, age 30 at the time, all were in their twenties. Over the next year, their common journey would accelerate dramatically under the tutelage of an al Qaeda operative in the city, Mohammed Haydar Zammar, and Atta's increasingly fierce desire to lash out at the United States.

Some of the deepest roots of the Sept. 11 attacks were embedded in this windy and prosperous city where Islamic extremism was cultivated unnoticed in radical mosques, a bookstore with a private backroom stocked with violent texts, informal study groups held at a university meeting place, and roundtable talks in apartments where young men wished death on America.

In one conversation, in November 1999, a German convert to Islam, Shahid Nickels, said to Atta, "Muslims are too weak to do anything against the U.S.A.," according to material collected by German investigators.

"No, something can be done," Atta replied. "There are ways. The U.S.A. is not omnipotent."

Based on interviews with some of the Hamburg cell's family, friends and associates, some speaking to a reporter for the first time, this account explores the Hamburg milieu that inspired and nurtured the group, and the road the cell followed during the 2 1/2 years of its existence. The story also draws on extensive interviews with U.S. and German intelligence and law enforcement officers as well as on material provided by other European and Arab intelligence agencies about the plot's genesis and trajectory.

The Sept. 11 attacks remain a crime without a complete history. The precise internal mechanics of the plot may never be unlocked. A full exploration of critical elements, such as the recruitment and roles of each of the 15 hijackers from Saudi Arabia, are unknown publicly a year later.

But in Hamburg, key participants in the attacks lived in plain sight. While the Sept. 11 plot evolved in secret, they inhabited a world that was both foreign and familiar to them, providing the strict discipline and focused hatred their plan required to develop, and the freedoms it needed to succeed.

An Ideal Recruiter

The patron of the Hamburg cell was a 300-pound auto mechanic with an inviting manner and war record that made him an ideal recruiter for jihad.



Mohammed Haydar Zammar was born in 1961 in Halab, Syria, and moved to Germany in 1971 with his father. From a religiously conservative family, he impressed acquaintances as exceptionally devout by age 12. He became a regular at Hamburg's mosques, including the Imam Ali mosque, known as the Iranian mosque, and the Al Muhadjirin mosque where many years later Atta would break his Ramadan fast.

By his late teens, Zammar had established a relationship with radical Muslims through Mamoun Darkazanli, a fellow Syrian, whom U.S. authorities have identified as an al Qaeda financier. Darkazanli is still living in Hamburg and is under investigation, but German officials say they do not have enough evidence to arrest him. He denies involvement with al Qaeda or the Sept. 11 plot.

After high school, Zammar attended a metalworking college and had a training period at Mercedes-Benz. In the mid-1980s, he lived in Saudi Arabia for several years, working as a translator for a German-Saudi joint venture construction company, then returned to Hamburg, where he was a driver for a hauling company.

In 1991, Zammar decided on a career in jihad, according to an Arab intelligence agency. He traveled to Pakistan on a German passport, then on to an Arab guesthouse in Afghanistan. Zammar underwent training in weapons, explosives and tactics with other Arab fighters. He was then assigned to a second, elite camp near Jalalabad.

Although al Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, was living in Sudan at the time, the organization had established training camps in the eastern part of Afghanistan under the protection of the warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Zammar fought alongside Hekmatyar's troops against the communist Afghan regime.

Battle-hardened, Zammar returned to Hamburg at the end of 1991, and over the next few years visited Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Sweden while working as a mechanic and at odd jobs in Germany. In 1995 he went to fight in Bosnia, where he was based in Zenica with other Arab mujaheddin.

In 1996, Zammar set off for another visit to Afghanistan, where he formally pledged allegiance to al Qaeda, according to an Arab intelligence agency. The next year, the Germans, tipped off by Turkish intelligence, placed Zammar under surveillance. But, as with a later surveillance of one of Atta's roommates, Said Bahaji, the tail was dropped within months for lack of evidence of criminal planning.

"What we did not see were concrete signs for such a violent act as occurred in New York," said Peter Frisch, the former head of the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution, which monitored extremists in the country. "We had neither the people to do [surveillance], nor did we know that we should."

Hamburg -- and Germany as a whole -- was an almost risk-free environment for Islamic radicals. German officials, mindful of the country's Nazi past, say now that they were reluctant to target mosques and risk allegations of racism or religious persecution. Such reservations meant that while authorities were aware of the calls to arms that fired up the members of the Hamburg cell, they saw no cause to intervene.

As a full-fledged apostle of jihad, Zammar quickly became one of the best known figures in the tight extremist Islamic community in Hamburg. He railed against the United States and the West.

"We cannot just sit and do nothing," Zammar said in a speech about the West's injustices against Islam, according to Azam Irschid, deputy director of the Al Muhadjirin mosque. "Who are the worst terrorists?" Zammar shouted on another occasion. "The so-called civilized world."

Abderrasak Labied remembers an invitation to Zammar's home around this time. Labied remains a roommate of one of the signatories to Atta's will, Abdelghani Mzoudi, and has been questioned by German police about the Hamburg cell. Officials allege that Labied was among a group of radicals who pledged themselves to martyrdom in the backroom of the Attawhid Islamic bookstore in Hamburg this April. Labied denies the charge.

But Labied is open about his friendships with the group that included the hijackers. In a recent interview, he recalled a dinner at Zammar's apartment in mid-1999 after a game of soccer in a local park. Zammar cooked a dish of chopped meat, with tomatoes, onions and rice. He even baked a cake for dessert, laughing loudly as he pattered.

Among those at the table with Zammar were young men from Somalia, Ethiopia, Algeria and Morocco, whom Zammar regaled with stories from the front lines of the holy war, Labied recalled.

The big man was looking for volunteers.

Connections at the Mosque

Mohamed Atta got to know Zammar in the Al Quds mosque in Hamburg, most likely in 1998, according to U.S., German and Arab sources. Atta had arrived in Hamburg in 1992 and later enrolled at the Technical University of Hamburg-Harburg. A disciplined student and pious Muslim, Atta was reserved and aloof, particularly in the company of Germans.

Among fellow Muslims, he could be a hectoring moralist. He chastised Ziad Samir Jarrah and Marwan Al-Shehhi for their affection for music, alcohol and cigarettes until his two young companions also renounced the trappings of Western indulgence.

The Al Quds mosque opened in 1993 and became a center for incendiary views. "The Jews and crusaders must

have their throats slit," said Imam Mohammed bin Mohammed al Fizazi in a pre-Sept. 11 sermon, which was videotaped.

Such preaching has continued. The Post last month purchased a video at the Al Quds mosque in which an Islamic preacher, identified as Sheik Azid al Kirani, shouts out a call for mortal combat against "Jews, Israel and all unbelievers."

The mosque is spread over three floors of an unremarkable building near the Hamburg train station and a red-light district. It is across the street from a police station. On the first floor is the prayer room for men, where both the carpets and wall are turquoise. The room for men can fit 400 people, said Abdel Aziz Alaoui, the mosque director. On the left is the women's prayer room, unpainted and uncarpeted.

By 1998, when he met Zammar, Atta had been a regular at the mosque for at least four years. He also had attended study groups run by a local radical, Mohammed bin Nasser Belfas. Atta visited the Attawhid bookstore where literature and videos on jihad were sold from a backroom that the public could not enter.

These places were the first of several local hubs for the Hamburg cell. Its members had come to Germany as students from different Arab countries between 1992 and 1997. After attending a variety of colleges, they met in Hamburg between the mid- and late 1990s, according to Kay Nehm, Germany's lead federal prosecutor.

Mounir Motassadeq, for instance, met Atta in 1995 and the following year was a signatory to Atta's will. Motassadeq later introduced Atta to both Said Bahaji, a German Moroccan, and Zakariya Essabar, a Moroccan. Atta met Al-Shehhi, from the United Arab Emirates, at a German language school in Bonn in 1997. Jarrah, from Lebanon, came into the circle through Essabar. Ramzi Binalshibh, an asylum-seeker from Yemen, met the group through the Al Quds mosque.

Others floated into the circle, but for one reason or another were cast aside. Through friendship, belief and ambition, these seven crystallized as a unit: Atta, Al-Shehhi, Jarrah, Binalshibh, Bahaji, Motassadeq and Essabar.

"The mastermind of the group was . . . Atta," Nehm said. "He was considered the boss of the group on grounds of his age, his longer stay in Germany and the resulting good language skills, but also on grounds of his organizing talents and his persuasiveness."

In November 1998, Atta, Binalshibh and Bahaji moved into an apartment on Marien Street near the university. Al-Shehhi also lived there occasionally, and Motassadeq, Essabar and Jarrah met the others for long discussions in the apartment.

Zammar was a frequent visitor, but quickly he was eclipsed by Atta as the voice of authority. Zammar was respected mostly for his contacts with an international network.

"While up to then, the group members seemed modern and open and had Western appearances and some even led consumerist, hedonistic lives, their behavior and looks changed now for [fundamentalist] ones," Nehm said.

Jarrah forsook the parties and alcohol that he loved and grew a beard. Essabar sold his television set and VCR. Al-Shehhi, who used to rent a Mercedes to cut a flashy figure, took to wearing traditional Afghan clothes, according to the German magazine Der Spiegel.

Atta refused to shake hands with women, even when a female professor informed him he had secured his master's degree in town planning and extended her hand to congratulate him.

"The group's discussions became increasingly virulent," said Nehm, citing evidence gathered from a German investigation. "The members' hatred focused on 'world Jewry' and the United States of America. To defeat these was seen as the central objective of the jihad, the fulfillment of which promised eternal happiness in paradise."

The group deepened its bonds in intense discussions. Atta, Bahaji and a third man, a Pakistani pilot named Atif bin Mansoor, applied for a room at the Technical University where Muslim students could meet and pray, citing the precedent that evangelical Christian students had a room on campus.

"As you certainly know, spirituality plays an essential role in each person's life and fosters mental productivity," the three wrote in their letter. A room "would offer the possibility of advising and helping one another."

The university rejected the request, but Atta later founded an Islamic association through the university's student government. The magazine *Der Spiegel* recently found a wealth of material from the association that had been stored in boxes in a closet on the campus. Included were rules, formulated by Atta, stating that whoever prayed irregularly must be killed and whoever neglects God will be punished, and declaring that TV was created by Jews.

Among the books were volumes on jihad, including one with the citation: "Osama bin Laden said: I will pay for the ticket and trip for every Arab and his family who wants to come to Jihad." According to the magazine, there was also information on airplanes obtained from the Airbus company.

These radical voices weren't heard only behind closed doors on a university campus or in a crowded walk-up apartment. Relatives of Said Bahaji were shocked by the change that had taken hold of him when they attended his wedding to a German woman at Al Quds in October 1999.

Two lambs were slaughtered for the wedding, and the guests also ate meat with baked plums, eggs, almonds and unleavened bread, followed by Moroccan sweet cakes and lemonade, according to Bahaji's widow, Neshe, in an interview at her home, her first with a journalist.

The men and women stayed in separate rooms. After prayers of thanksgiving for the food, the men were free to speak. Binalshibh said Muslims must be freed of Jews and then he and Al-Shehhi began singing of jihad, a scene that was videotaped.

Bahaji's half-brother, Daniel, who lives in Switzerland, remembers being stunned by the fervor of the participants, and how much the "religious brothers," as they described themselves, cut themselves off from others in the room. Bahaji, he said, was no longer "normal."

Bahaji's German mother, Anneliese Bahaji, in an interview at her home in Germany, said she was surprised by her son's full beard, the mark of a religious man. "I often told him, Said, the beard has to go. He said, no, the beard stays."

Plans to Use Aircraft

By the fall of 1999, members of the Hamburg cell had agreed among themselves to plan a spectacular attack using commercial aircraft, according to German investigators. This view challenges some assumptions that the Sept. 11 plot was devised entirely by the al Qaeda leadership and imparted on the hijackers during their training in Afghanistan.

"At the latest in October 1999, [the Hamburg's group radicalization] led to the idea of attacking the United States using airplanes, a concept possibly inspired by ideas from other representatives of the international network," Nehm said. "The group members then traveled to Afghanistan in order to discuss details with members of the international network and to obtain financial and logistical support."

Supporting this thesis, according to a summary of the German investigation, are witness statements and the discovery by German police of a file on flight simulators on the computer of one of the Hamburg conspirators. The material was downloaded in 1999. There is no evidence, according to the German investigation, that anyone in the Hamburg cell traveled to Afghanistan before November 1999.

But even if the Hamburg group first embraced on its own the idea of a terrorist attack using aircraft, the notion was hardly original. In 1994, Algerian terrorists planned to fly a plane into the Eiffel Tower in Paris; none of the hijackers could pilot a plane, however, and French police stormed the aircraft when it landed to refuel.

In 1995, police in Manila broke up a plot to blow up 12 U.S. airliners over the Pacific that involved one of the authors of the 1993 bombing of World Trade Center. That plan also envisioned an attack on CIA headquarters in Langley by a suicide bomber flying a plane filled with explosives.

One of the conspirators in Manila was Khalid Sheik Mohammed, a Kuwaiti of Pakistani origin known as "The Brain," who is now a fugitive described by U.S. and other intelligence services as the logistical mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks. There have been reports, based on the testimony of a single intelligence source, that Mohammed visited Germany in 1998, leading to speculation that he met with the Hamburg cell.

Mohammed, whose family is from the province of Baluchistan in Pakistan, had long viewed planes as instruments of terror and assumed an increasingly important role within al Qaeda's military structure. He is the uncle of Ramzi Yousef, the Pakistani serving a life sentence for the 1993 bombing attack on the World Trade Center.

In an interview scheduled for broadcast this week by the al-Jazeera network, Mohammed said "about 2 1/2 years prior to the holy raids on Washington and New York, the military committee held a meeting during which we decided to start planning for a martyrdom operation inside America."

An article in the Sunday Times of London by the al-Jazeera journalist who conducted the interview, Yosri Fouda, cites Mohammed and Binalshibh taking credit for the Sept. 11 attacks. Mohammed said it was his idea to target prominent buildings in the United States, and he said Atta and other operatives were earmarked as pilots sometime in 1999. He said al Qaeda had first considered hitting nuclear installations.

Others in the al Qaeda leadership shared a vision of an airborne attack. According to the interrogation of al Qaeda suspects in Jordan, Muhammad Atef, bin Laden's Egyptian military operations chief, had seized on the idea in late 1999 after American investigators said an Egypt Airlines pilot had committed suicide by crash-diving his plane into the Atlantic Ocean in October 1999.

Against this background, when Atta slipped into Afghanistan from Pakistan in late 1999 in the company of al Qaeda escorts, he was carrying an idea that would resonate with his handlers.

Training and Meetings

The first to leave Hamburg for Afghanistan was Jarrah on Nov. 25, 1999. He flew to Karachi, Pakistan, via Istanbul on Turkish Airlines. Four days later, Atta followed, taking the same route. Al-Shehhi and then Binalshibh went next, although German investigators have not uncovered exact routes for the last two. Bahaji, Essabar and Motassadeq would not follow until spring 2000, according to German officials.

In Afghanistan, the new arrivals were taken to a guesthouse in Kandahar, called the Al-Ghumad House after the Saudi Al-Ghamdi tribe, according to the al-Jazeera interviews. There they met three Saudis in what Binalshibh described to al-Jazeera as a *shura*, or council, of the future pilots and key players.

Waiting in Kandahar was Khalid Almihdhar, a former Red Sea fisherman who came from Mecca, and Nawaf Alhazmi, a merchant also from Mecca, according to interviews with officials at the Saudi Interior Ministry's offices in Jiddah.

Both of them would die on American Airlines Flight 77, which struck the Pentagon. Also present in Kandahar, the Arab network reported, was the pilot of that flight, Hani Hanjour, from Naif, southeast of Jiddah. A former resident of the United States, he was frustrated in his desire to become a pilot for Saudi Airlines.

Around these three Saudis and the Hamburg group, the plot would be constructed by al Qaeda. Al Qaeda would make up the rest of the teams of hijackers with 12 recruits drawn from Saudi tribes that bin Laden was familiar with and another hijacker from the United Arab Emirates, Fayez Rashid Ahmed Hassan Al Qadi Banihammad, also known as Fayez Ahmed.

Mohammed claimed these 13 men were drawn from al Qaeda's Department of Martyrs. They would become known by U.S. investigators as "the muscle," whose mission was to subdue the passengers and crew of the aircraft while the planes were commandeered by the plot's leaders.

In January 2000, as Atta underwent training in Afghanistan, a further meeting occurred that tied the Hamburg cell to the rest of the hijackers. Binalshibh, Almihdhar and Alhazmi met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in the presence of another al Qaeda operative, Tawfiq bin Atash, a one-legged veteran of Afghanistan.

Binalshibh, a Yemeni, is a relative of Almihdhar's wife. Almihdhar came from a prominent Yemeni family with longtime links to al Qaeda, and obtained Saudi citizenship in 1996, according to Interior Ministry officials in Jiddah.

The January meeting was photographed by Malaysian intelligence and al Qaeda is believed to have discussed an attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, which occurred later that year, as well as a strike on American soil.

By now the plot was accelerating.

Immediately after the Malaysian gathering, Almihdhar and Alhazmi flew to Los Angeles and quickly enrolled in a flight school north of San Diego.

In late February 2000, Atta and the other Hamburg pilots began to return to Germany from Afghanistan. They declared their passports stolen to cover incriminating stamps and began to contact flight schools in the United States to obtain visas to enter the country.

The members of the cell already knew they would attack New York, according to German officials, citing a statement by Al-Shehhi. In April or May, Al-Shehhi mentioned the World Trade Center as a target in a conversation in Hamburg with a female librarian, said Nehm, the prosecutor.

"There will be thousands of dead," Al-Shehhi told the librarian, according to Nehm. "You will all think of me."

The librarian later came forward as a witness, according to the federal prosecutor's office, which declined to identify her or say when she provided the information.

In the interview with al-Jazeera, Binalshibh said that Al-Shehhi, even before he learned of the operation, "used to have beautiful visions that he flies in the sky with huge green birds and crashes into things."

"What things?" asked the al-Jazeera interviewer.

"Just things," Binalshibh said.

Binalshibh also wished to participate in the attacks, as did Essabar, but both had their U.S. visa applications rejected. The indictment of Zacarias Moussaoui, a 34-year-old French national, alleges that Moussaoui was picked to replace Binalshibh in December 2000. That month, Binalshibh flew to London to meet Moussaoui, who then left Britain for Pakistan.

Binalshibh told al-Jazeera that the pilots scouted their targets and assigned them code names: The twin towers were called the Faculty of Town Planning, an apparent coy reference to Atta's studies, in which he railed against skyscrapers. The Pentagon was the Faculty of Fine Arts.

And the Capitol, which Binalshibh told al-Jazeera was the target of the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, was the Faculty of Law.

Money for the pilots was routed by an al Qaeda operative in Dubai named Moustaffa Ahmed al-Hazemi, according to U.S. investigators. On March 1, Essabar and Binalshibh moved out of the apartment on Marien Street, leaving it cleaned.

The plotters continued to travel in and out of the United States. Atta, Al-Shehhi and Jarrah all crossed the Atlantic repeatedly. Investigators in Spain have in the last year broken up an al Qaeda cell that they now believe facilitated planning meetings that Atta attended in the country in January and July 2001.

Mohammed Zammar, the Hamburg recruiter, may have played a role in the still mysterious meetings in Spain. In 1991, Zammar met a Spanish Syrian radical, Abu Mosab Souri, or Mostafa Abdel Kader Miriam, according to an Arab intelligence agency. The two men remained in contact through 2000.

Over the summer, the 13 hijackers known as "the muscle" began to arrive in the United States. Bin Laden himself appears to have had a role in directly choosing these hijackers, and he clearly wanted Saudis. "They were selected for their fervor, their discipline and their nationality," said one Arab official.

Zuher Hilal Mohamed al Tbaiti, a Saudi arrested in Morocco for planning an attack on U.S. and British ships in the Strait of Gibraltar, has told his interrogators that bin Laden had once considered him for the Sept. 11 plot, according to Moroccan intelligence officials.

Tbaiti, who had lived in New York for about six months in 1999 and was later trained in explosives in Afghanistan, quoted bin Laden as saying, "I want you for a mission in the United States." But al Qaeda later rejected him as undisciplined, according to the debriefing in Morocco of Tbaiti and alleged accomplices captured there.

The Saudi government, without providing any hard evidence, asserts that the Saudi "muscle" was recruited outside Saudi Arabia after these men had left to fight in Chechnya. The Saudi interior minister, Prince Nayef, said in an interview that he also believes most of these late volunteers did not know they were going to die on Sept. 11.

But the government offered little support for its theses. In interviews at the Interior Ministry in Jiddah, Saudi officials said their files on the 15 Saudi hijackers consisted only of basic biographical material such as date of birth, employment and marital status, date of passport issue and when they left the kingdom.

An alleged al Qaeda video released to al-Jazeera and broadcast Tuesday suggests, however, that the Saudi volunteers knew exactly what they were doing.

Abdulaziz Alomari, a graduate of an Islamic college in the Saudi province of El Qaseem, disappeared in early 2001, leaving a wife in the city of Al-Baha, according to Saudi officials. On Sept. 11, he walked behind Atta as they were filmed going through airport security in Portland, Maine, on their way to Boston's Logan airport.

Apparently referring to his last testament, Alomari said on the video: "I am writing this with my full conscience and I am writing this in expectation of the end, which is near. An end that is really a beginning.

"We will get you. We will humiliate you. We will never stop following you," he continued. "God praise everybody who trained and helped me, namely the leader Sheik Osama bin Laden. May God bless him. May God accept our deeds."

By August 2001, his disciples departed, bin Laden began to speak to followers of a dream he had, according to Tbaiti, the prisoner in Morocco. "He said he saw America in ashes," Tbaiti told his interrogators. "It was like a prophecy."

Only three members of the Hamburg cell -- Atta, Jarrah and Al-Shehhi -- died on Sept. 11. Essabar, Bahaji and Binalshibh fled Germany shortly before the attacks; all three are being sought on an international arrest warrant issued by German officials. Motassadeq was indicted in Germany last month on at least 3,116 counts of accessory to murder.

As for Zammar, the recruiter, he was arrested in Morocco last year and deported to Syria, where he is being interrogated.

One year later, families of the hijackers, whether in Saudi Arabia or Hamburg, remain in a state of angry denial.

Neshe Bahaji, Said Bahaji's widow, emerged recently from behind the door of her new apartment holding her 18-month-old son, Omar. She was forced out of her last apartment in Hamburg because of the infamy of her husband. She last saw him on Sept. 3, when he told her he was going to Pakistan for two months to take up an internship with a computer company.

Before departing, he went to the mosque, and returned with his hair cropped short, she said.

"My husband is innocent," she said, a head scarf enclosing her pale face. She believes he is alive. In June, her mother-in-law received a telephone call that she said was a greeting from Bahaji relayed by an unknown voice on the other end of the line.

Now he is afraid to come home, Neshe Bahaji believes.

"This whole theater is predestinated," she said, feeding her son a spoonful of rice. "Allah gives me strength to endure. It is a test."

Special correspondents Souad Mekhennet in Hamburg and Shannon Smiley in Berlin contributed to this report.