

THE ATTACK LOOMS

7.1 FIRST ARRIVALS IN CALIFORNIA

In chapter 5 we described the Southeast Asia travels of Nawaf al Hazmi, Khalid al Mihdhar, and others in January 2000 on the first part of the “planes operation.” In that chapter we also described how Mihdhar was spotted in Kuala Lumpur early in January 2000, along with associates who were not identified, and then was lost to sight when the group passed through Bangkok. On January 15, Hazmi and Mihdhar arrived in Los Angeles. They spent about two weeks there before moving on to San Diego.¹

Two Weeks in Los Angeles

Why Hazmi and Mihdhar came to California, we do not know for certain. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), the organizer of the planes operation, explains that California was a convenient point of entry from Asia and had the added benefit of being far away from the intended target area.²

Hazmi and Mihdhar were ill-prepared for a mission in the United States. Their only qualifications for this plot were their devotion to Usama Bin Ladin, their veteran service, and their ability to get valid U.S. visas. Neither had spent any substantial time in the West, and neither spoke much, if any, English.³

It would therefore be plausible that they or KSM would have tried to identify, in advance, a friendly contact for them in the United States. In detention, KSM denies that al Qaeda had any agents in Southern California. We do not credit this denial.⁴ We believe it is unlikely that Hazmi and Mihdhar—neither of whom, in contrast to the Hamburg group, had any prior exposure to life in the West—would have come to the United States without arranging to receive assistance from one or more individuals informed in advance of their arrival.⁵

KSM says that though he told others involved in the conspiracy to stay away from mosques and to avoid establishing personal contacts, he made an exception in this case and instructed Hazmi and Mihdhar to pose as newly arrived

Saudi students and seek assistance at local mosques. He counted on their breaking off any such relationships once they moved to the East Coast.⁶ Our inability to ascertain the activities of Hazmi and Mihdhar during their first two weeks in the United States may reflect al Qaeda tradecraft designed to protect the identity of anyone who may have assisted them during that period.

Hazmi and Mihdhar were directed to enroll in English-language classes upon arriving in Southern California, so that they could begin pilot training as soon as possible. KSM claims to have steered the two to San Diego on the basis of his own research, which supposedly included thumbing through a San Diego phone book acquired at a Karachi flea market. Contradicting himself, he also says that, as instructed, they attempted to enroll in three language schools in Los Angeles.⁷

After the pair cleared Immigration and Customs at Los Angeles International Airport, we do not know where they went.⁸ They appear to have obtained assistance from the Muslim community, specifically the community surrounding the King Fahd mosque in Culver City, one of the most prominent mosques in Southern California.

It is fairly certain that Hazmi and Mihdhar spent time at the King Fahd mosque and made some acquaintances there. One witness interviewed by the FBI after the September 11 attacks has said he first met the hijackers at the mosque in early 2000. Furthermore, one of the people who would befriend them—a man named Mohdar Abdullah—recalled a trip with Hazmi and Mihdhar to Los Angeles in June when, on their arrival, the three went to the King Fahd mosque. There Hazmi and Mihdhar greeted various individuals whom they appeared to have met previously, including a man named “Khallam.” In Abdullah’s telling, when Khallam visited the al Qaeda operatives at their motel that evening, Abdullah was asked to leave the room so that Hazmi, Mihdhar, and Khallam could meet in private. The identity of Khallam and his purpose in meeting with Hazmi and Mihdhar remain unknown.⁹

To understand what Hazmi and Mihdhar did in their first weeks in the United States, evidently staying in Los Angeles, we have investigated whether anyone associated with the King Fahd mosque assisted them. This subject has received substantial attention in the media. Some have speculated that Fahad al Thumairy—an imam at the mosque and an accredited diplomat at the Saudi Arabian consulate from 1996 until 2003—may have played a role in helping the hijackers establish themselves on their arrival in Los Angeles. This speculation is based, at least in part, on Thumairy’s reported leadership of an extremist faction at the mosque.¹⁰

A well-known figure at the King Fahd mosque and within the Los Angeles Muslim community, Thumairy was reputed to be an Islamic fundamentalist and a strict adherent to orthodox Wahhabi doctrine. Some Muslims concerned about his preaching have said he “injected non-Islamic themes into his guidance/prayers at the [King Fahd] Mosque” and had followers “supportive of the events of September 11, 2001.”¹¹ Thumairy appears to have associ-

ated with a particularly radical faction within the community of local worshippers, and had a network of contacts in other cities in the United States. After 9/11, Thumairy's conduct was a subject of internal debate among some Saudi officials. He apparently lost his position at the King Fahd mosque, possibly because of his immoderate reputation. On May 6, 2003, Thumairy attempted to reenter the United States from Saudi Arabia but was refused entry, based on a determination by the State Department that he might be connected with terrorist activity.¹²

When interviewed by both the FBI and the Commission staff, Thumairy has denied preaching anti-Western sermons, much less promoting violent jihad. More to the point, he claimed not to recognize either Hazmi or Mihdhar. Both denials are somewhat suspect. (He likewise denied knowing Omar al Bayoumi—a man from San Diego we will discuss shortly—even though witnesses and telephone records establish that the two men had contact with each other. Similarly, Thumairy's claim not to know Mohdar Abdullah is belied by Abdullah's contrary assertion.) On the other hand, Thumairy undoubtedly met with and provided religious counseling to countless individuals during his tenure at the King Fahd mosque, so he might not remember two transients like Hazmi and Mihdhar several years later.¹³

The circumstantial evidence makes Thumairy a logical person to consider as a possible contact for Hazmi and Mihdhar. Yet, after exploring the available leads, we have not found evidence that Thumairy provided assistance to the two operatives.¹⁴

We do not pick up their trail until February 1, 2000, when they encountered Omar al Bayoumi and Caysan Bin Don at a halal food restaurant on Venice Boulevard in Culver City, a few blocks away from the King Fahd mosque. Bayoumi and Bin Don have both told us that they had driven up from San Diego earlier that day so that Bayoumi could address a visa issue and collect some papers from the Saudi consulate. Bayoumi heard Hazmi and Mihdhar speaking in what he recognized to be Gulf Arabic and struck up a conversation. Since Bin Don knew only a little Arabic, he had to rely heavily on Bayoumi to translate for him.¹⁵

Mihdhar and Hazmi said they were students from Saudi Arabia who had just arrived in the United States to study English. They said they were living in an apartment near the restaurant but did not specify the address. They did not like Los Angeles and were having a hard time, especially because they did not know anyone. Bayoumi told them how pleasant San Diego was and offered to help them settle there. The two pairs then left the restaurant and went their separate ways.¹⁶

Bayoumi and Bin Don have been interviewed many times about the February 1, 2000, lunch. For the most part, their respective accounts corroborate each other. However, Bayoumi has said that he and Bin Don attempted to visit the King Fahd mosque after lunch but could not find it. Bin Don, on the other

hand, recalls visiting the mosque twice that day for prayers, both before and after the meal. Bin Don's recollection is spotty and inconsistent. Bayoumi's version can be challenged as well, since the mosque is close to the restaurant and Bayoumi had visited it, and the surrounding area, on multiple occasions, including twice within six weeks of February 1. We do not know whether the lunch encounter occurred by chance or design. We know about it because Bayoumi told law enforcement that it happened.¹⁷

Bayoumi, then 42 years old, was in the United States as a business student, supported by a private contractor for the Saudi Civil Aviation Authority, where Bayoumi had worked for over 20 years.¹⁸ The object of considerable media speculation following 9/11, he lives now in Saudi Arabia, well aware of his notoriety. Both we and the FBI have interviewed him and investigated evidence about him.

Bayoumi is a devout Muslim, obliging and gregarious. He spent much of his spare time involved in religious study and helping run a mosque in El Cajon, about 15 miles from San Diego. It is certainly possible that he has dissembled about some aspects of his story, perhaps to counter suspicion. On the other hand, we have seen no credible evidence that he believed in violent extremism or knowingly aided extremist groups.¹⁹ Our investigators who have dealt directly with him and studied his background find him to be an unlikely candidate for clandestine involvement with Islamist extremists.

The Move to San Diego

By February 4, Hazmi and Mihdhar had come to San Diego from Los Angeles, possibly driven by Mohdar Abdullah. Abdullah, a Yemeni university student in his early 20s, is fluent in both Arabic and English, and was perfectly suited to assist the hijackers in pursuing their mission.²⁰

After 9/11, Abdullah was interviewed many times by the FBI. He admitted knowing of Hazmi and Mihdhar's extremist leanings and Mihdhar's involvement with the Islamic Army of Aden (a group with ties to al Qaeda) back in Yemen. Abdullah clearly was sympathetic to those extremist views. During a post-9/11 search of his possessions, the FBI found a notebook (belonging to someone else) with references to planes falling from the sky, mass killing, and hijacking. Further, when detained as a material witness following the 9/11 attacks, Abdullah expressed hatred for the U.S. government and "stated that the U.S. brought 'this' on themselves."²¹

When interviewed by the FBI after 9/11, Abdullah denied having advance knowledge of attacks. In May 2004, however, we learned of reports about Abdullah bragging to fellow inmates at a California prison in September–October 2003 that he had known Hazmi and Mihdhar were planning a terrorist attack. The stories attributed to Abdullah are not entirely consistent with each other. Specifically, according to one inmate, Abdullah claimed an unnamed individual had notified him that Hazmi and Mihdhar would be arriv-

ing in Los Angeles with plans to carry out an attack. Abdullah allegedly told the same inmate that he had driven the two al Qaeda operatives from Los Angeles to San Diego, but did not say when this occurred. We have been unable to corroborate this account.²²

Another inmate has recalled Abdullah claiming he first heard about the hijackers' terrorist plans after they arrived in San Diego, when they told him they planned to fly an airplane into a building and invited him to join them on the plane. According to this inmate, Abdullah also claimed to have found out about the 9/11 attacks three weeks in advance, a claim that appears to dovetail with evidence that Abdullah may have received a phone call from Hazmi around that time, that he stopped making calls from his telephone after August 25, 2001, and that, according to his friends, he started acting strangely.²³

Although boasts among prison inmates often tend to be unreliable, this evidence is obviously important. To date, neither we nor the FBI have been able to verify Abdullah's alleged jailhouse statements, despite investigative efforts.

We thus do not know when or how Hazmi and Mihdhar first came to San Diego. We do know that on February 4, they went to the Islamic Center of San Diego to find Omar al Bayoumi and take him up on his offer of help. Bayoumi obliged by not only locating an apartment but also helping them fill out the lease application, co-signing the lease and, when the real estate agent refused to take cash for a deposit, helping them open a bank account (which they did with a \$9,900 deposit); he then provided a certified check from his own account for which the al Qaeda operatives reimbursed him on the spot for the deposit. Neither then nor later did Bayoumi give money to either Hazmi or Mihdhar, who had received money from KSM.²⁴

Hazmi and Mihdhar moved in with no furniture and practically no possessions. Soon after the move, Bayoumi used their apartment for a party attended by some 20 male members of the Muslim community. At Bayoumi's request, Bin Don videotaped the gathering with Bayoumi's video camera. Hazmi and Mihdhar did not mingle with the other guests and reportedly spent most of the party by themselves off camera, in a back room.²⁵

Hazmi and Mihdhar immediately started looking for a different place to stay. Based on their comment to Bayoumi about the first apartment being expensive, one might infer that they wanted to save money. They may also have been reconsidering the wisdom of living so close to the video camera-wielding Bayoumi, who Hazmi seemed to think was some sort of Saudi spy. Just over a week after moving in, Hazmi and Mihdhar filed a 30-day notice of intention to vacate. Bayoumi apparently loaned them his cell phone to help them check out possibilities for new accommodations.²⁶

Their initial effort to move turned out poorly. An acquaintance arranged with his landlord to have Mihdhar take over his apartment. Mihdhar put down a \$650 deposit and signed a lease for the apartment effective March 1. Several weeks later, Mihdhar sought a refund of his deposit, claiming he no longer

intended to move in because the apartment was too messy. When the landlord refused to refund the deposit, Mihdhar became belligerent. The landlord remembers him “ranting and raving” as if he were “psychotic.”²⁷

Hazmi and Mihdhar finally found a room to rent in the home of an individual they had met at a mosque in San Diego. According to the homeowner, the future hijackers moved in on May 10, 2000. Mihdhar moved out after only about a month. On June 9, he left San Diego to return to Yemen. Hazmi, on the other hand, stayed at this house for the rest of his time in California, until mid-December; he would then leave for Arizona with a newly arrived 9/11 hijacker-pilot, Hani Hanjour.²⁸

While in San Diego, Hazmi and Mihdhar played the part of recently arrived foreign students. They continued to reach out to members of the Muslim community for help. At least initially, they found well-meaning new acquaintances at the Islamic Center of San Diego, which was only a stone’s throw from the apartment where they first lived. For example, when they purchased a used car (with cash), they bought it from a man who lived across the street from the Islamic Center and who let them use his address in registering the vehicle, an accommodation “to help a fellow Muslim brother.” Similarly, in April, when their cash supply may have been dwindling, Hazmi persuaded the administrator of the Islamic Center to let him use the administrator’s bank account to receive a \$5,000 wire transfer from someone in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates (this was KSM’s nephew, Ali Abdul Aziz Ali).²⁹

Hazmi and Mihdhar visited other mosques as well, mixing comfortably as devout worshippers. During the operatives’ critical first weeks in San Diego, Mohdar Abdullah helped them. Translating between English and Arabic, he assisted them in obtaining California driver’s licenses and with applying to language and flight schools. Abdullah also introduced them to his circle of friends; he shared an apartment with some of those friends near the Rabat mosque in La Mesa, a few miles from the hijackers’ residence.³⁰

Abdullah has emerged as a key associate of Hazmi and Mihdhar in San Diego. Detained after 9/11 (first as a material witness, then on immigration charges), he was deported to Yemen on May 21, 2004, after the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of California declined to prosecute him on charges arising out of his alleged jailhouse admissions concerning the 9/11 operatives. The Department of Justice declined to delay his removal pending further investigation of this new information.³¹

Other friends of Abdullah also translated for Hazmi and Mihdhar and helped them adjust to life in San Diego. Some held extremist beliefs or were well acquainted with known extremists. For example, immediately after 9/11, Osama Awadallah, a Yemeni whose telephone number was found in Hazmi’s Toyota at Washington Dulles International Airport, was found to possess photos, videos, and articles relating to Bin Ladin. Awadallah also had lived in a house where copies of Bin Ladin’s fatwas and other similar materials were distributed

to the residents. Omar Bakarbashat, a Saudi, also met Hazmi and Mihdhar at the Rabat mosque. He admitted helping Hazmi to learn English and taking over the operatives' first apartment in San Diego after they moved out. Bakarbashat apparently had downloaded stridently anti-American Web pages to his computer's hard drive.³²

Another potentially significant San Diego contact for Hazmi and Mihdhar was Anwar Aulaqi, an imam at the Rabat mosque. Born in New Mexico and thus a U.S. citizen, Aulaqi grew up in Yemen and studied in the United States on a Yemeni government scholarship. We do not know how or when Hazmi and Mihdhar first met Aulaqi. The operatives may even have met or at least talked to him the same day they first moved to San Diego. Hazmi and Mihdhar reportedly respected Aulaqi as a religious figure and developed a close relationship with him.³³

When interviewed after 9/11, Aulaqi said he did not recognize Hazmi's name but did identify his picture. Although Aulaqi admitted meeting with Hazmi several times, he claimed not to remember any specifics of what they discussed. He described Hazmi as a soft-spoken Saudi student who used to appear at the mosque with a companion but who did not have a large circle of friends.³⁴

Aulaqi left San Diego in mid-2000, and by early 2001 had relocated to Virginia. As we will discuss later, Hazmi eventually showed up at Aulaqi's mosque in Virginia, an appearance that may not have been coincidental. We have been unable to learn enough about Aulaqi's relationship with Hazmi and Mihdhar to reach a conclusion.³⁵

In sum, although the evidence is thin as to specific motivations, our overall impression is that soon after arriving in California, Hazmi and Mihdhar sought out and found a group of young and ideologically like-minded Muslims with roots in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, individuals mainly associated with Mohdar Abdullah and the Rabat mosque. The al Qaeda operatives lived openly in San Diego under their true names, listing Hazmi in the telephone directory. They managed to avoid attracting much attention.

Flight Training Fails; Mihdhar Bails Out

Hazmi and Mihdhar came to the United States to learn English, take flying lessons, and become pilots as quickly as possible. They turned out, however, to have no aptitude for English. Even with help and tutoring from Mohdar Abdullah and other bilingual friends, Hazmi and Mihdhar's efforts to learn proved futile. This lack of language skills in turn became an insurmountable barrier to learning how to fly.³⁶

A pilot they consulted at one school, the Sorbi Flying Club in San Diego, spoke Arabic. He explained to them that their flight instruction would begin with small planes. Hazmi and Mihdhar emphasized their interest in learning to fly jets, Boeing aircraft in particular, and asked where they might enroll to train

on jets right away. Convinced that the two were either joking or dreaming, the pilot responded that no such school existed. Other instructors who worked with Hazmi and Mihdhar remember them as poor students who focused on learning to control the aircraft in flight but took no interest in takeoffs or landings. By the end of May 2000, Hazmi and Mihdhar had given up on learning how to fly.³⁷

Mihdhar's mind seems to have been with his family back in Yemen, as evidenced by calls he made from the apartment telephone. When news of the birth of his first child arrived, he could stand life in California no longer. In late May and early June of 2000, he closed his bank account, transferred the car registration to Hazmi, and arranged his return to Yemen. According to KSM, Mihdhar was bored in San Diego and foresaw no problem in coming back to the United States since he had not overstayed his visa. Hazmi and Mohdar Abdullah accompanied him to Los Angeles on June 9. After visiting the King Fahd mosque one last time with his friends, Mihdhar left the country the following day.³⁸

KSM kept in fairly close touch with his operatives, using a variety of methods. When Bin Ladin called KSM back from Pakistan to Afghanistan in the spring of 2000, KSM asked Khallad (whom we introduced in chapter 5) to maintain email contact with Hazmi in the United States. Mihdhar's decision to strand Hazmi in San Diego enraged KSM, who had not authorized the departure and feared it would compromise the plan. KSM attempted to drop Mihdhar from the planes operation and would have done so, he says, had he not been overruled by Bin Ladin.³⁹

Following Mihdhar's departure, Hazmi grew lonely and worried that he would have trouble managing by himself. He prayed with his housemate each morning at 5:00 A.M. and attended services at the Islamic Center. He borrowed his housemate's computer for Internet access, following news coverage of fighting in Chechnya and Bosnia. With his housemate's help, Hazmi also used the Internet to search for a wife (after obtaining KSM's approval to marry). This search did not succeed. Although he developed a close relationship with his housemate, Hazmi preferred not to use the house telephone, continuing the practice he and Mihdhar had adopted of going outside to make phone calls.⁴⁰

After Mihdhar left, other students moved into the house. One of these, Yazeed al Salmi, stands out. In July 2000, Salmi purchased \$4,000 in traveler's checks at a bank in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. On September 5, Hazmi deposited \$1,900 of the traveler's checks into his bank account, after withdrawing the same amount in cash. It is possible that Hazmi was simply cashing the traveler's checks for a friend. We do not know; Salmi claims not to remember the transaction. After 9/11, Salmi reportedly confided to Mohdar Abdullah that he had previously known terrorist pilot Hani Hanjour. After living in the same house with Hazmi for about a month, Salmi moved to the La Mesa apartment shared by Abdullah and others.⁴¹

By the fall of 2000, Hazmi no longer even pretended to study English or take flying lessons. Aware that his co-conspirators in Afghanistan and Pakistan would be sending him a new colleague shortly, he bided his time and worked for a few weeks at a gas station in La Mesa where some of his friends, including Abdullah, were employed. On one occasion, Hazmi told a fellow employee that he was planning to find a better job, and let slip a prediction that he would become famous.⁴²

On December 8, 2000, Hani Hanjour arrived in San Diego, having traveled from Dubai via Paris and Cincinnati. Hazmi likely picked up Hanjour at the airport. We do not know where Hanjour stayed; a few days later, both men left San Diego. Before departing, they visited the gas station in La Mesa, where Hazmi reportedly introduced Hanjour as a “long time friend from Saudi Arabia.” Hazmi told his housemate that he and his friend “Hani” were headed for San Jose to take flying lessons and told his friends that he would stay in touch. Hazmi promised to return to San Diego soon, and he and Hanjour drove off.⁴³

Hazmi did not sever all contact with his friends in San Diego. According to Abdullah, after Hazmi left San Diego in December 2000, he telephoned Abdullah twice: in December 2000 or January 2001, Hazmi said he was in San Francisco and would be attending flight school there; about two weeks later, he said he was attending flight school in Arizona. Some evidence, which we will discuss later, indicates that Hazmi contacted Abdullah again, in August 2001. In addition, during the month following Hazmi’s departure from San Diego, he emailed his housemate three times, including a January 2001 email that Hazmi signed “Smer,” an apparent attempt to conceal his identity that struck the housemate as strange at the time. Hazmi also telephoned his housemate that he and his friend had decided to take flight lessons in Arizona, and that Mihdhar was now back in Yemen. That was their last contact. When the housemate emailed Hazmi in February and March of 2001 to find out how he was faring, Hazmi did not reply.⁴⁴

The housemate who rented the room to Hazmi and Mihdhar during 2000 is an apparently law-abiding citizen with long-standing, friendly contacts among local police and FBI personnel. He did not see anything unusual enough in the behavior of Hazmi or Mihdhar to prompt him to report to his law enforcement contacts. Nor did those contacts ask him for information about his tenants/housemates.

7.2 THE 9/11 PILOTS IN THE UNITED STATES

The Hamburg Pilots Arrive in the United States

In the early summer of 2000, the Hamburg group arrived in the United States to begin flight training. Marwan al Shehhi came on May 29, arriving in Newark on a flight from Brussels. He went to New York City and waited there for

Mohamed Atta to join him. On June 2, Atta traveled to the Czech Republic by bus from Germany and then flew from Prague to Newark the next day. According to Ramzi Binalshibh, Atta did not meet with anyone in Prague; he simply believed it would contribute to operational security to fly out of Prague rather than Hamburg, the departure point for much of his previous international travel.⁴⁵

Atta and Shehhi had not settled on where they would obtain their flight training. In contrast, Ziad Jarrah had already arranged to attend the Florida Flight Training Center (FFTC) in Venice, Florida. Jarrah arrived in Newark on June 27 and then flew to Venice. He immediately began the private pilot program at FFTC, intending to get a multi-engine license. Jarrah moved in with some of the flight instructors affiliated with his school and bought a car.⁴⁶

While Jarrah quickly settled into training in Florida, Atta and Shehhi kept searching for a flight school. After visiting the Airman Flight School in Norman, Oklahoma (where Zacarias Moussaoui would enroll several months later and where another al Qaeda operative, Ihab Ali, had taken lessons in the mid-1990s), Atta started flight instruction at Huffman Aviation in Venice, Florida, and both Atta and Shehhi subsequently enrolled in the Accelerated Pilot Program at that school. By the end of July, both of them took solo flights, and by mid-August they passed the private pilot airman test. They trained through the summer at Huffman, while Jarrah continued his training at FFTC.⁴⁷

The Hamburg operatives paid for their flight training primarily with funds wired from Dubai by KSM's nephew, Ali Abdul Aziz Ali. Between June 29 and September 17, 2000, Ali sent Shehhi and Atta a total of \$114,500 in five transfers ranging from \$5,000 to \$70,000. Ali relied on the unremarkable nature of his transactions, which were essentially invisible amid the billions of dollars flowing daily across the globe.⁴⁸ Ali was not required to provide identification in sending this money and the aliases he used were not questioned.⁴⁹

In mid-September, Atta and Shehhi applied to change their immigration status from tourist to student, stating their intention to study at Huffman until September 1, 2001. In late September, they decided to enroll at Jones Aviation in Sarasota, Florida, about 20 miles north of Venice. According to the instructor at Jones, the two were aggressive, rude, and sometimes even fought with him to take over the controls during their training flights. In early October, they took the Stage I exam for instruments rating at Jones Aviation and failed. Very upset, they said they were in a hurry because jobs awaited them at home. Atta and Shehhi then returned to Huffman.⁵⁰

In the meantime, Jarrah obtained a single-engine private pilot certificate in early August. Having reached that milestone, he departed on the first of five foreign trips he would take after first entering the United States. In October, he flew back to Germany to visit his girlfriend, Aysel Senguen. The two traveled to Paris before Jarrah returned to Florida on October 29. His relationship with her remained close throughout his time in the United States. In addition

to his trips, Jarrah made hundreds of phone calls to her and communicated frequently by email.⁵¹

Jarrah was supposed to be joined at FFTC by Ramzi Binalshibh, who even sent the school a deposit. But Binalshibh could not obtain a U.S. visa. His first applications in May and June 2000 were denied because he lacked established ties in Germany ensuring his return from a trip to the United States. In September, he went home to Yemen to apply for a visa from there, but was denied on grounds that he also lacked sufficient ties to Yemen. In October, he tried one last time, in Berlin, applying for a student visa to attend "aviation language school," but the prior denials were noted and this application was denied as well, as incomplete.⁵²

Unable to participate directly in the operation, Binalshibh instead took on the role of coordinating between KSM and the operatives in the United States. Apart from sending a total of about \$10,000 in wire transfers to Atta and Shehhi during the summer of 2000, one of Binalshibh's first tasks in his new role as plot coordinator was to assist another possible pilot, Zacarias Moussaoui.⁵³

In the fall of 2000, KSM had sent Moussaoui to Malaysia for flight training, but Moussaoui did not find a school he liked. He worked instead on other terrorist schemes, such as buying four tons of ammonium nitrate for bombs to be planted on cargo planes flying to the United States. When KSM found out, he recalled Moussaoui back to Pakistan and directed him to go to the United States for flight training. In early October, Moussaoui went to London. When Binalshibh visited London in December, he stayed at the same 16-room dormitory where Moussaoui was still residing. From London, Moussaoui sent inquiries to the Airman Flight School in Norman, Oklahoma.⁵⁴

Confronting training or travel problems with Hazmi, Mihdhar, Binalshibh, and Moussaoui, al Qaeda was looking for another possible pilot candidate. A new recruit with just the right background conveniently presented himself in Afghanistan.

The Fourth Pilot: Hani Hanjour

Hani Hanjour, from Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, first came to the United States in 1991 to study at the Center for English as a Second Language at the University of Arizona. He seems to have been a rigorously observant Muslim. According to his older brother, Hani Hanjour went to Afghanistan for the first time in the late 1980s, as a teenager, to participate in the jihad and, because the Soviets had already withdrawn, worked for a relief agency there.⁵⁵

In 1996, Hanjour returned to the United States to pursue flight training, after being rejected by a Saudi flight school. He checked out flight schools in Florida, California, and Arizona; and he briefly started at a couple of them before returning to Saudi Arabia. In 1997, he returned to Florida and then, along with two friends, went back to Arizona and began his flight training there in earnest. After about three months, Hanjour was able to obtain his private

pilot's license. Several more months of training yielded him a commercial pilot certificate, issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in April 1999. He then returned to Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶

Hanjour reportedly applied to the civil aviation school in Jeddah after returning home, but was rejected. He stayed home for a while and then told his family he was going to the United Arab Emirates to work for an airline. Where Hanjour actually traveled during this time period is unknown. It is possible he went to the training camps in Afghanistan.⁵⁷

The fact that Hanjour spent so much time in Arizona may be significant. A number of important al Qaeda figures attended the University of Arizona in Tucson or lived in Tucson in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁵⁸ Some of Hanjour's known Arizona associates from the time of his flight training in the late 1990s have also raised suspicion.⁵⁹ FBI investigators have speculated that al Qaeda may have directed other extremist Muslims in the Phoenix area to enroll in aviation training. It is clear that when Hanjour lived in Arizona in the 1990s, he associated with several individuals holding extremist beliefs who have been the subject of counterterrorism investigations. Some of them trained with Hanjour to be pilots. Others had apparent connections to al Qaeda, including training in Afghanistan.⁶⁰

By the spring of 2000, Hanjour was back in Afghanistan. According to KSM, Hanjour was sent to him in Karachi for inclusion in the plot after Hanjour was identified in al Qaeda's al Faruq camp as a trained pilot, on the basis of background information he had provided. Hanjour had been at a camp in Afghanistan for a few weeks when Bin Ladin or Atef apparently realized that he was a trained pilot; he was told to report to KSM, who then trained Hanjour for a few days in the use of code words.⁶¹

On June 20, Hanjour returned home to Saudi Arabia. He obtained a U.S. student visa on September 25 and told his family he was returning to his job in the UAE. Hanjour did go to the UAE, but to meet facilitator Ali Abdul Aziz Ali.⁶²

Ali opened a bank account in Dubai for Hanjour and providing the initial funds for his trip. On December 8, Hanjour traveled to San Diego. His supposed destination was an English as a second language program in Oakland, California, which he had scheduled before leaving Saudi Arabia but never attended. Instead, as mentioned earlier, he joined Nawaf al Hazmi in San Diego.⁶³

Hazmi and Hanjour left San Diego almost immediately and drove to Arizona. Settling in Mesa, Hanjour began refresher training at his old school, Arizona Aviation. He wanted to train on multi-engine planes, but had difficulties because his English was not good enough. The instructor advised him to discontinue but Hanjour said he could not go home without completing the training. In early 2001, he started training on a Boeing 737 simulator at Pan Am International Flight Academy in Mesa. An instructor there found his work well below standard and discouraged him from continuing. Again, Hanjour per-

severed; he completed the initial training by the end of March 2001. At that point, Hanjour and Hazmi vacated their apartment and started driving east, anticipating the arrival of the “muscle hijackers”—the operatives who would storm the cockpits and control the passengers. By as early as April 4, Hanjour and Hazmi had arrived in Falls Church, Virginia.⁶⁴

The three pilots in Florida continued with their training. Atta and Shehhi finished up at Huffman and earned their instrument certificates from the FAA in November. In mid-December 2000, they passed their commercial pilot tests and received their licenses. They then began training to fly large jets on a flight simulator. At about the same time, Jarrah began simulator training, also in Florida but at a different center. By the end of 2000, less than six months after their arrival, the three pilots on the East Coast were simulating flights on large jets.⁶⁵

Travels in Early 2001

Jarrah, Atta, and Shehhi, having progressed in their training, all took foreign trips during the holiday period of 2000–2001. Jarrah flew through Germany to get home to Beirut. A few weeks later, he returned to Florida via Germany, with Aysel Senguen. She stayed with him in Florida for ten days, even accompanying him to a flight training session. We do not know whether Atta or al Qaeda leaders knew about Jarrah’s trips and Senguen’s visit. The other operatives had broken off regular contact with their families. At the end of January 2001, Jarrah again flew to Beirut, to visit his sick father. After staying there for several weeks, Jarrah visited Senguen in Germany for a few days before returning to the United States at the end of February.⁶⁶

While Jarrah took his personal trips, Atta traveled to Germany in early January 2001 for a progress meeting with Ramzi Binalshibh. Binalshibh says Atta told him to report to the al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan that the three Hamburg pilots had completed their flight training and were awaiting orders. Atta also disclosed that a fourth pilot, Hanjour, had joined Hazmi. Upon returning to Florida, Atta wired Binalshibh travel money. Binalshibh proceeded to Afghanistan, made his report, and spent the next several months there and in Pakistan.⁶⁷

When Atta returned to Florida, Shehhi left for Morocco, traveling to Casablanca in mid-January. Shehhi’s family, concerned about not having heard from him, reported him missing to the UAE government. The UAE embassy in turn contacted the Hamburg police and a UAE representative tried to find him in Germany, visiting mosques and Shehhi’s last address in Hamburg. After learning that his family was looking for him, Shehhi telephoned them on January 20 and said he was still living and studying in Hamburg. The UAE government then told the Hamburg police they could call off the search.⁶⁸

Atta and Shehhi both encountered some difficulty reentering the United States, on January 10 and January 18, respectively. Because neither presented a

Atta's Alleged Trip to Prague

Mohamed Atta is known to have been in Prague on two occasions: in December 1994, when he stayed one night at a transit hotel, and in June 2000, when he was en route to the United States. On the latter occasion, he arrived by bus from Germany, on June 2, and departed for Newark the following day.⁶⁹

The allegation that Atta met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague in April 2001 originates from the reporting of a single source of the Czech intelligence service. Shortly after 9/11, the source reported having seen Atta meet with Ahmad Khalil Ibrahim Samir al Ani, an Iraqi diplomat, at the Iraqi Embassy in Prague on April 9, 2001, at 11:00 A.M. This information was passed to CIA headquarters.

The U.S. legal attaché (“Legat”) in Prague, the representative of the FBI, met with the Czech service’s source. After the meeting, the assessment of the Legat and the Czech officers present was that they were 70 percent sure that the source was sincere and believed his own story of the meeting. Subsequently, the Czech intelligence service publicly stated that there was a 70 percent probability that the meeting between Atta and Ani had taken place. The Czech Interior Minister also made several statements to the press about his belief that the meeting had occurred, and the story was widely reported.

The FBI has gathered evidence indicating that Atta was in Virginia Beach on April 4 (as evidenced by a bank surveillance camera photo), and in Coral Springs, Florida on April 11, where he and Shehhi leased an apartment. On April 6, 9, 10, and 11, Atta’s cellular telephone was used numerous times to call various lodging establishments in Florida from cell sites within Florida. We cannot confirm that he placed those calls. But there are no U.S. records indicating that Atta departed the country during this period. Czech officials have reviewed their flight and border records as well for any indication that Atta was in the Czech Republic in April 2001, including records of anyone crossing the border who even looked Arab. They have also reviewed pictures from the area near the Iraqi embassy and have not discovered photos of anyone who looked like Atta. No evidence has been found that Atta was in the Czech Republic in April 2001.

According to the Czech government, Ani, the Iraqi officer alleged to have met with Atta, was about 70 miles away from Prague on April 8–9 and did not return until the afternoon of the ninth, while the source was firm that the sighting occurred at 11:00 A.M. When questioned about the reported April 2001 meeting, Ani—now in custody—has denied ever

meeting or having any contact with Atta. Ani says that shortly after 9/11, he became concerned that press stories about the alleged meeting might hurt his career. Hoping to clear his name, Ani asked his superiors to approach the Czech government about refuting the allegation. He also denies knowing of any other Iraqi official having contact with Atta.

These findings cannot absolutely rule out the possibility that Atta was in Prague on April 9, 2001. He could have used an alias to travel and a passport under that alias, but this would be an exception to his practice of using his true name while traveling (as he did in January and would in July when he took his next overseas trip). The FBI and CIA have uncovered no evidence that Atta held any fraudulent passports.

KSM and Binalshibh both deny that an Atta-Ani meeting occurred. There was no reason for such a meeting, especially considering the risk it would pose to the operation. By April 2001, all four pilots had completed most of their training, and the muscle hijackers were about to begin entering the United States.

The available evidence does not support the original Czech report of an Atta-Ani meeting.⁷⁰

student visa, both of them had to persuade INS inspectors that they should be admitted so that they could continue their flight training. Neither operative had any problem clearing Customs.⁷¹

After returning to Florida from their trips, Atta and Shehhi visited Georgia, staying briefly in Norcross and Decatur, and renting a single-engine plane to fly with an instructor in Lawrenceville. By February 19, Atta and Shehhi were in Virginia. They rented a mailbox in Virginia Beach, cashed a check, and then promptly returned to Georgia, staying in Stone Mountain. We have found no explanation for these travels. In mid-March, Jarrah was in Georgia as well, staying in Decatur. There is no evidence that the three pilots met, although Jarrah and Atta apparently spoke on the phone. At the end of the month, Jarrah left the United States again and visited Senguen in Germany for two weeks. In early April, Atta and Shehhi returned to Virginia Beach and closed the mailbox they had opened in February.⁷²

By the time Atta and Shehhi returned to Virginia Beach from their travels in Georgia, Hazmi and Hanjour had also arrived in Virginia, in Falls Church. They made their way to a large mosque there, the Dar al Hijra mosque, sometime in early April.⁷³

As we mentioned earlier, one of the imams at this mosque was the same Anwar Aulaqi with whom Hazmi had spent time at the Rabat mosque in San Diego. Aulaqi had moved to Virginia in January 2001. He remembers Hazmi

from San Diego but has denied having any contact with Hazmi or Hanjour in Virginia.⁷⁴

At the Dar al Hijra mosque, Hazmi and Hanjour met a Jordanian named Eyad al Rababah. Rababah says he had gone to the mosque to speak to the imam, Aulqi, about finding work. At the conclusion of services, which normally had 400 to 500 attendees, Rababah says he happened to meet Hazmi and Hanjour. They were looking for an apartment; Rababah referred them to a friend who had one to rent. Hazmi and Hanjour moved into the apartment, which was in Alexandria.⁷⁵

Some FBI investigators doubt Rababah's story. Some agents suspect that Aulqi may have tasked Rababah to help Hazmi and Hanjour. We share that suspicion, given the remarkable coincidence of Aulqi's prior relationship with Hazmi. As noted above, the Commission was unable to locate and interview Aulqi. Rababah has been deported to Jordan, having been convicted after 9/11 in a fraudulent driver's license scheme.⁷⁶

Rababah, who had lived in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, told investigators that he had recommended Paterson, New Jersey, as a place with an Arabic-speaking community where Hazmi and Hanjour might want to settle. They asked for his help in getting them an apartment in Paterson. Rababah tried without success. He says he then suggested that Hazmi and Hanjour travel with him to Connecticut where they could look for a place to live.⁷⁷

On May 8, Rababah went to Hazmi and Hanjour's apartment to pick them up for the trip to Connecticut. There he says he found them with new roommates—Ahmed al Ghamdi and Majed Moqed. These two men had been sent to America to serve as muscle hijackers and had arrived at Dulles Airport on May 2. Rababah drove Hanjour to Fairfield, Connecticut, followed by Hazmi, who had Moqed and Ghamdi in his car. After a short stay in Connecticut, where they apparently called area flight schools and real estate agents, Rababah drove the four to Paterson to have dinner and show them around. He says that they returned with him to Fairfield that night, and that he never saw them again.⁷⁸

Within a few weeks, Hanjour, Hazmi, and several other operatives moved to Paterson and rented a one-room apartment. When their landlord later paid a visit, he found six men living there—Nawaf al Hazmi, now joined by his younger brother Salem, Hanjour, Moqed, probably Ahmed al Ghamdi, and Abdul Aziz al Omari; Hazmi's old friend Khalid al Mihdhar would soon join them.⁷⁹

Atta and Shehhi had already returned to Florida. On April 11, they moved into an apartment in Coral Springs. Atta stayed in Florida, awaiting the arrival of the first muscle hijackers.⁸⁰

Shehhi, on the other hand, bought a ticket to Cairo and flew there from Miami on April 18. We do not know much more about Shehhi's reason for traveling to Egypt in April than we know about his January trip to Morocco.

Shehhi did meet with Atta's father, who stated in a post-9/11 interview that Shehhi just wanted to pick up Atta's international driver's license and some money. This story is not credible. Atta already had the license with him and presented it during a traffic stop on April 26 while Shehhi was still abroad. Shehhi spent about two weeks in Egypt, obviously more time than would have been needed just to meet with Atta's father. Shehhi could have traveled elsewhere during this time, but no records indicating additional travel have been discovered.⁸¹

Shehhi returned to Miami on May 2. That day, Atta and Jarrah were together, about 30 miles to the north, visiting a Department of Motor Vehicles office in Lauderdale Lakes, Florida, to get Florida driver's licenses. Back in Virginia, Hazmi and Hanjour were about to leave for Connecticut and New Jersey. As the summer approached, the lead operatives were settled in Florida and New Jersey, waiting for the rest of their contingent to join them.⁸²

7.3 ASSEMBLING THE TEAMS

During the summer and early autumn of 2000, Bin Ladin and senior al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan started selecting the muscle hijackers—the operatives who would storm the cockpits and control the passengers. Despite the phrase widely used to describe them, the so-called muscle hijackers were not at all physically imposing; most were between 5' 5" and 5' 7" in height.⁸³

Recruitment and Selection for 9/11

Twelve of the 13 muscle hijackers (excluding Nawaf al Hazmi and Mihdhar) came from Saudi Arabia: Satam al Suqami, Wail al Shehri, Waleed al Shehri, Abdul Aziz al Omari, Ahmed al Ghamdi, Hamza al Ghamdi, Mohand al Shehri, Majed Moqed, Salem al Hazmi, Saeed al Ghamdi, Ahmad al Haznawi, and Ahmed al Nami. The remaining recruit, Fayez Banihammad, came from the UAE. He appears to have played a unique role among the muscle hijackers because of his work with one of the plot's financial facilitators, Mustafa al Hawsawi.⁸⁴

Saudi authorities interviewed the relatives of these men and have briefed us on what they found. The muscle hijackers came from a variety of educational and societal backgrounds. All were between 20 and 28 years old; most were unemployed with no more than a high school education and were unmarried.⁸⁵

Four of them—Ahmed al Ghamdi, Saeed al Ghamdi, Hamza al Ghamdi, and Ahmad al Haznawi—came from a cluster of three towns in the al Bahah region, an isolated and underdeveloped area of Saudi Arabia, and shared the same tribal affiliation. None had a university degree. Their travel patterns and information from family members suggest that the four may have been in contact with each other as early as the fall of 1999.⁸⁶

Five more—Wail al Shehri, Waleed al Shehri, Abdul Aziz al Omari, Mohand al Shehri, and Ahmed al Nami—came from Asir Province, a poor region in southwestern Saudi Arabia that borders Yemen; this weakly policed area is sometimes called “the wild frontier.” Wail and Waleed al Shehri were brothers. All five in this group had begun university studies. Omari had graduated with honors from high school, had attained a degree from the Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, was married, and had a daughter.⁸⁷

The three remaining muscle hijackers from Saudi Arabia were Satam al Suqami, Majed Moqed, and Salem al Hazmi. Suqami came from Riyadh. Moqed hailed from a small town called Annakhil, west of Medina. Suqami had very little education, and Moqed had dropped out of university. Neither Suqami nor Moqed appears to have had ties to the other, or to any of the other operatives, before getting involved with extremists, probably by 1999.⁸⁸

Salem al Hazmi, a younger brother of Nawaf, was born in Mecca. Salem’s family recalled him as a quarrelsome teenager. His brother Nawaf probably recommended him for recruitment into al Qaeda. One al Qaeda member who knew them says that Nawaf pleaded with Bin Ladin to allow Salem to participate in the 9/11 operation.⁸⁹

Detainees have offered varying reasons for the use of so many Saudi operatives. Binalshibh argues that al Qaeda wanted to send a message to the government of Saudi Arabia about its relationship with the United States. Several other al Qaeda figures, however, have stated that ethnicity generally was not a factor in the selection of operatives unless it was important for security or operational reasons.⁹⁰

KSM, for instance, denies that Saudis were chosen for the 9/11 plot to drive a wedge between the United States and Saudi Arabia, and stresses practical reasons for considering ethnic background when selecting operatives. He says that so many were Saudi because Saudis comprised the largest portion of the pool of recruits in the al Qaeda training camps. KSM estimates that in any given camp, 70 percent of the mujahideen were Saudi, 20 percent were Yemeni, and 10 percent were from elsewhere. Although Saudi and Yemeni trainees were most often willing to volunteer for suicide operations, prior to 9/11 it was easier for Saudi operatives to get into the United States.⁹¹

Most of the Saudi muscle hijackers developed their ties to extremists two or three years before the attacks. Their families often did not consider these young men religious zealots. Some were perceived as devout, others as lacking in faith. For instance, although Ahmed al Ghamdi, Hamza al Ghamdi, and Saeed al Ghamdi attended prayer services regularly and Omari often served as an imam at his mosque in Saudi Arabia, Suqami and Salem al Hazmi appeared unconcerned with religion and, contrary to Islamic law, were known to drink alcohol.⁹²

Like many other al Qaeda operatives, the Saudis who eventually became the muscle hijackers were targeted for recruitment outside Afghanistan—probably in Saudi Arabia itself. Al Qaeda recruiters, certain clerics, and—in a

few cases—family members probably all played a role in spotting potential candidates. Several of the muscle hijackers seem to have been recruited through contacts at local universities and mosques.⁹³

According to the head of one of the training camps in Afghanistan, some were chosen by unnamed Saudi sheikhs who had contacts with al Qaeda. Omari, for example, is believed to have been a student of a radical Saudi cleric named Sulayman al Alwan. His mosque, which is located in al Qassim Province, is known among more moderate clerics as a “terrorist factory.” The province is at the very heart of the strict Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia. Saeed al Ghamdi and Mohand al Shehri also spent time in al Qassim, both breaking with their families. According to his father, Mohand al Shehri’s frequent visits to this area resulted in his failing exams at his university in Riyadh. Saeed al Ghamdi transferred to a university in al Qassim, but he soon stopped talking to his family and dropped out of school without informing them.⁹⁴

The majority of these Saudi recruits began to break with their families in late 1999 and early 2000. According to relatives, some recruits began to make arrangements for extended absences. Others exhibited marked changes in behavior before disappearing. Salem al Hazmi’s father recounted that Salem—who had had problems with alcohol and petty theft—stopped drinking and started attending mosque regularly three months before he disappeared.⁹⁵

Several family members remembered that their relatives had expressed a desire to participate in jihad, particularly in Chechnya. None had mentioned going to Afghanistan. These statements might be true or cover stories. The four recruits from the al Ghamdi tribe, for example, all told their families that they were going to Chechnya. Only two—Ahmed al Ghamdi and Saeed al Ghamdi—had documentation suggesting travel to a Russian republic.⁹⁶

Some aspiring Saudi mujahideen, intending to go to Chechnya, encountered difficulties along the way and diverted to Afghanistan. In 1999, Ibn al Khattab—the primary commander of Arab nationals in Chechnya—reportedly had started turning away most foreign mujahideen because of their inexperience and inability to adjust to the local conditions. KSM states that several of the 9/11 muscle hijackers faced problems traveling to Chechnya and so went to Afghanistan, where they were drawn into al Qaeda.⁹⁷

Khallad has offered a more detailed story of how such diversions occurred. According to him, a number of Saudi mujahideen who tried to go to Chechnya in 1999 to fight the Russians were stopped at the Turkish-Georgian border. Upon arriving in Turkey, they received phone calls at guesthouses in places such as Istanbul and Ankara, informing them that the route to Chechnya via Georgia had been closed. These Saudis then decided to travel to Afghanistan, where they could train and wait to make another attempt to enter Chechnya during the summer of 2000. While training at al Qaeda camps, a dozen of them heard Bin Ladin’s speeches, volunteered to become suicide operatives, and eventually were selected as muscle hijackers for the planes operation. Khallad says he met a number of them at the Kandahar airport, where they were help-

ing to provide extra security. He encouraged Bin Ladin to use them. Khallad claims to have been closest with Saeed al Ghamdi, whom he convinced to become a martyr and whom he asked to recruit a friend, Ahmed al Ghamdi, to the same cause. Although Khallad claims not to recall everyone from this group who was later chosen for the 9/11 operation, he says they also included Suqami, Waleed and Wail al Shehri, Omari, Nami, Hamza al Ghamdi, Salem al Hazmi, and Moqed.⁹⁸

According to KSM, operatives volunteered for suicide operations and, for the most part, were not pressured to martyr themselves. Upon arriving in Afghanistan, a recruit would fill out an application with standard questions, such as, What brought you to Afghanistan? How did you travel here? How did you hear about us? What attracted you to the cause? What is your educational background? Where have you worked before? Applications were valuable for determining the potential of new arrivals, for filtering out potential spies from among them, and for identifying recruits with special skills. For instance, as pointed out earlier, Hani Hanjour noted his pilot training. Prospective operatives also were asked whether they were prepared to serve as suicide operatives; those who answered in the affirmative were interviewed by senior al Qaeda lieutenant Muhammad Atef.⁹⁹

KSM claims that the most important quality for any al Qaeda operative was willingness to martyr himself. Khallad agrees, and claims that this criterion had preeminence in selecting the planes operation participants. The second most important criterion was demonstrable patience, Khallad says, because the planning for such attacks could take years.¹⁰⁰

Khallad claims it did not matter whether the hijackers had fought in jihad previously, since he believes that U.S. authorities were not looking for such operatives before 9/11. But KSM asserts that young mujahideen with clean records were chosen to avoid raising alerts during travel. The al Qaeda training camp head mentioned above adds that operatives with no prior involvement in activities likely to be known to international security agencies were purposefully selected for the 9/11 attacks.¹⁰¹

Most of the muscle hijackers first underwent basic training similar to that given other al Qaeda recruits. This included training in firearms, heavy weapons, explosives, and topography. Recruits learned discipline and military life. They were subjected to artificial stresses to measure their psychological fitness and commitment to jihad. At least seven of the Saudi muscle hijackers took this basic training regime at the al Faruq camp near Kandahar. This particular camp appears to have been the preferred location for vetting and training the potential muscle hijackers because of its proximity to Bin Ladin and senior al Qaeda leadership. Two others—Suqami and Moqed—trained at Khaldan, another large basic training facility located near Kabul, where Mihdhar had trained in the mid-1990s.¹⁰²

By the time operatives for the planes operation were picked in mid-2000, some of them had been training in Afghanistan for months, others were just

arriving for the first time, and still others may have been returning after prior visits to the camps. According to KSM, Bin Ladin would travel to the camps to deliver lectures and meet the trainees personally. If Bin Ladin believed a trainee held promise for a special operation, that trainee would be invited to the al Qaeda leader's compound at Tarnak Farms for further meetings.¹⁰³

KSM claims that Bin Ladin could assess new trainees very quickly, in about ten minutes, and that many of the 9/11 hijackers were selected in this manner. Bin Ladin, assisted by Atef, personally chose all the future muscle hijackers for the planes operation, primarily between the summer of 2000 and April 2001. Upon choosing a trainee, Bin Ladin would ask him to swear loyalty for a suicide operation. After the selection and oath-swearing, the operative would be sent to KSM for training and the filming of a martyrdom video, a function KSM supervised as head of al Qaeda's media committee.¹⁰⁴

KSM sent the muscle hijacker recruits on to Saudi Arabia to obtain U.S. visas. He gave them money (about \$2,000 each) and instructed them to return to Afghanistan for more training after obtaining the visas. At this early stage, the operatives were not told details about the operation. The majority of the Saudi muscle hijackers obtained U.S. visas in Jeddah or Riyadh between September and November of 2000.¹⁰⁵

KSM told potential hijackers to acquire new "clean" passports in their home countries before applying for a U.S. visa. This was to avoid raising suspicion about previous travel to countries where al Qaeda operated. Fourteen of the 19 hijackers, including nine Saudi muscle hijackers, obtained new passports. Some of these passports were then likely doctored by the al Qaeda passport division in Kandahar, which would add or erase entry and exit stamps to create "false trails" in the passports.¹⁰⁶

In addition to the operatives who eventually participated in the 9/11 attacks as muscle hijackers, Bin Ladin apparently selected at least nine other Saudis who, for various reasons, did not end up taking part in the operation: Mohamed Mani Ahmad al Kahtani, Khalid Saeed Ahmad al Zahrani, Ali Abd al Rahman al Faqasi al Ghamdi, Saeed al Baluchi, Qutaybah al Najdi, Zuhair al Thubaiti, Saeed Abdullah Saeed al Ghamdi, Saud al Rashid, and Mushabib al Hamlan. A tenth individual, a Tunisian with Canadian citizenship named Abderraouf Jdey, may have been a candidate to participate in 9/11, or he may have been a candidate for a later attack. These candidate hijackers either backed out, had trouble obtaining needed travel documents, or were removed from the operation by the al Qaeda leadership. Khallad believes KSM wanted between four and six operatives per plane. KSM states that al Qaeda had originally planned to use 25 or 26 hijackers but ended up with only the 19.¹⁰⁷

Final Training and Deployment to the United States

Having acquired U.S. visas in Saudi Arabia, the muscle hijackers returned to Afghanistan for special training in late 2000 to early 2001. The training reportedly was conducted at the al Matar complex by Abu Turab al Jordani, one of

only a handful of al Qaeda operatives who, according to KSM, was aware of the full details of the planned planes operation. Abu Turab taught the operatives how to conduct hijackings, disarm air marshals, and handle explosives. He also trained them in bodybuilding and provided them with a few basic English words and phrases.¹⁰⁸

According to KSM, Abu Turab even had the trainees butcher a sheep and a camel with a knife to prepare to use knives during the hijackings. The recruits learned to focus on storming the cockpit at the earliest opportunity when the doors first opened, and to worry about seizing control over the rest of the plane later. The operatives were taught about other kinds of attack as well, such as truck bombing, so that they would not be able to disclose the exact nature of their operation if they were caught. According to KSM, the muscle did not learn the full details—including the plan to hijack planes and fly them into buildings—before reaching the United States.¹⁰⁹

After training in Afghanistan, the operatives went to a safehouse maintained by KSM in Karachi and stayed there temporarily before being deployed to the United States via the UAE. The safehouse was run by al Qaeda operative Abd al Rahim Ghulum Rabbani, also known as Abu Rahmah, a close associate of KSM who assisted him for three years by finding apartments and lending logistical support to operatives KSM would send.

According to an al Qaeda facilitator, operatives were brought to the safehouse by a trusted Pakistani al Qaeda courier named Abdullah Sindhi, who also worked for KSM. The future hijackers usually arrived in groups of two or three, staying at the safe house for as long as two weeks. The facilitator has identified each operative whom he assisted at KSM's direction in the spring of 2001. Before the operatives left Pakistan, each of them received \$10,000 from KSM for future expenses.¹¹⁰

From Pakistan, the operatives transited through the UAE en route to the United States. In the Emirates they were assisted primarily by al Qaeda operatives Ali Abdul Aziz Ali and Mustafa al Hawsawi. Ali apparently assisted nine future hijackers between April and June 2001 as they came through Dubai. He helped them with plane tickets, traveler's checks, and hotel reservations; he also taught them about everyday aspects of life in the West, such as purchasing clothes and ordering food. Dubai, a modern city with easy access to a major airport, travel agencies, hotels, and Western commercial establishments, was an ideal transit point.¹¹¹

Ali reportedly assumed the operatives he was helping were involved in a big operation in the United States, he did not know the details.¹¹² When he asked KSM to send him an assistant, KSM dispatched Hawsawi, who had worked on al Qaeda's media committee in Kandahar. Hawsawi helped send the last four operatives (other than Mihdhar) to the United States from the UAE. Hawsawi would consult with Atta about the hijackers' travel schedules to the United States and later check with Atta to confirm that each had arrived. Hawsawi told

the muscle hijackers that they would be met by Atta at the airport. Hawsawi also facilitated some of the operation's financing.¹¹³

The muscle hijackers began arriving in the United States in late April 2001. In most cases, they traveled in pairs on tourist visas and entered the United States in Orlando or Miami, Florida; Washington, D.C.; or New York. Those arriving in Florida were assisted by Atta and Shehhi, while Hazmi and Hanjour took care of the rest. By the end of June, 14 of the 15 muscle hijackers had crossed the Atlantic.¹¹⁴

The muscle hijackers supplied an infusion of funds, which they carried as a mixture of cash and traveler's checks purchased in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Seven muscle hijackers are known to have purchased a total of nearly \$50,000 in traveler's checks that were used in the United States. Moreover, substantial deposits into operatives' U.S. bank accounts immediately followed the entry of other muscle hijackers, indicating that those newcomers brought money with them as well. In addition, muscle hijacker Banihammad came to the United States after opening bank accounts in the UAE into which were deposited the equivalent of approximately \$30,000 on June 25, 2001. After his June 27 arrival in the United States, Banihammad made Visa and ATM withdrawals from his UAE accounts.¹¹⁵

The hijackers made extensive use of banks in the United States, choosing both branches of major international banks and smaller regional banks. All of the hijackers opened accounts in their own name, and used passports and other identification documents that appeared valid on their face. Contrary to numerous published reports, there is no evidence the hijackers ever used false Social Security numbers to open any bank accounts. While the hijackers were not experts on the use of the U.S. financial system, nothing they did would have led the banks to suspect criminal behavior, let alone a terrorist plot to commit mass murder.¹¹⁶

The last muscle hijacker to arrive was Khalid al Mihdhar. As mentioned earlier, he had abandoned Hazmi in San Diego in June 2000 and returned to his family in Yemen. Mihdhar reportedly stayed in Yemen for about a month before Khallad persuaded him to return to Afghanistan. Mihdhar complained about life in the United States. He met with KSM, who remained annoyed at his decision to go AWOL. But KSM's desire to drop him from the operation yielded to Bin Ladin's insistence to keep him.¹¹⁷

By late 2000, Mihdhar was in Mecca, staying with a cousin until February 2001, when he went home to visit his family before returning to Afghanistan. In June 2001, Mihdhar returned once more to Mecca to stay with his cousin for another month. Mihdhar said that Bin Ladin was planning five attacks on the United States. Before leaving, Mihdhar asked his cousin to watch over his home and family because of a job he had to do.¹¹⁸

On July 4, 2001, Mihdhar left Saudi Arabia to return to the United States, arriving at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York. Mihdhar gave



**American Airlines
Flight 11**

Left to right,
Mohamed Atta, pilot;
Waleed al Shehri,
Wail al Shehri,
Satam al Suqami,
Abdulaziz al Omari,
hijackers



**United Airlines
Flight 175**

Left to right,
Marwan al Shehhi,
pilot; *Fayeze Baniham-*
mad, *Ahmed al*
Ghamdi, *Hamza al*
Ghamdi, *Mohand al*
Shehri, hijackers



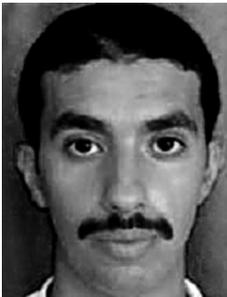
**American Airlines
Flight 77**

Left to right,
Hani Hanjour, pilot;
Nawaf al Hazmi,
Khalid al Mihdhar,
Majed Moqed, *Salem*
al Hazmi, hijackers



**United Airlines
Flight 93**

Left to right,
Ziad Jarrah pilot;
Saeed al Ghamdi,
Ahmad al Haznawi,
Ahmed al Nami,
hijackers



his intended address as the Marriott Hotel, New York City, but instead spent one night at another New York hotel. He then joined the group of hijackers in Paterson, reuniting with Nawaf al Hazmi after more than a year. With two months remaining, all 19 hijackers were in the United States and ready to take the final steps toward carrying out the attacks.¹¹⁹

Assistance from Hezbollah and Iran to al Qaeda

As we mentioned in chapter 2, while in Sudan, senior managers in al Qaeda maintained contacts with Iran and the Iranian-supported worldwide terrorist organization Hezbollah, which is based mainly in southern Lebanon and Beirut. Al Qaeda members received advice and training from Hezbollah.

Intelligence indicates the persistence of contacts between Iranian security officials and senior al Qaeda figures after Bin Ladin's return to Afghanistan. Khallad has said that Iran made a concerted effort to strengthen relations with al Qaeda after the October 2000 attack on the USS *Cole*, but was rebuffed because Bin Ladin did not want to alienate his supporters in Saudi Arabia. Khallad and other detainees have described the willingness of Iranian officials to facilitate the travel of al Qaeda members through Iran, on their way to and from Afghanistan. For example, Iranian border inspectors would be told not to place telltale stamps in the passports of these travelers. Such arrangements were particularly beneficial to Saudi members of al Qaeda.¹²⁰

Our knowledge of the international travels of the al Qaeda operatives selected for the 9/11 operation remains fragmentary. But we now have evidence suggesting that 8 to 10 of the 14 Saudi "muscle" operatives traveled into or out of Iran between October 2000 and February 2001.¹²¹

In October 2000, a senior operative of Hezbollah visited Saudi Arabia to coordinate activities there. He also planned to assist individuals in Saudi Arabia in traveling to Iran during November. A top Hezbollah commander and Saudi Hezbollah contacts were involved.¹²²

Also in October 2000, two future muscle hijackers, Mohand al Shehri and Hamza al Ghamdi, flew from Iran to Kuwait. In November, Ahmed al Ghamdi apparently flew to Beirut, traveling—perhaps by coincidence—on the same flight as a senior Hezbollah operative. Also in November, Salem al Hazmi apparently flew from Saudi Arabia to Beirut.¹²³

In mid-November, we believe, three of the future muscle hijackers, Wail al Shehri, Waleed al Shehri, and Ahmed al Nami, all of whom had obtained their U.S. visas in late October, traveled in a group from Saudi Arabia to Beirut and then onward to Iran. An associate of a senior Hezbollah operative was on the same flight that took the future hijackers to Iran. Hezbollah officials in Beirut and Iran were expecting the arrival of a group during the same time period. The travel of this group was important enough to merit the attention of senior figures in Hezbollah.¹²⁴

Later in November, two future muscle hijackers, Satam al Suqami and Majed

Moqed, flew into Iran from Bahrain. In February 2001, Khalid al Mihdhar may have taken a flight from Syria to Iran, and then traveled further within Iran to a point near the Afghan border.¹²⁵

KSM and Binalshibh have confirmed that several of the 9/11 hijackers (at least eight, according to Binalshibh) transited Iran on their way to or from Afghanistan, taking advantage of the Iranian practice of not stamping Saudi passports. They deny any other reason for the hijackers' travel to Iran. They also deny any relationship between the hijackers and Hezbollah.¹²⁶

In sum, there is strong evidence that Iran facilitated the transit of al Qaeda members into and out of Afghanistan before 9/11, and that some of these were future 9/11 hijackers. There also is circumstantial evidence that senior Hezbollah operatives were closely tracking the travel of some of these future muscle hijackers into Iran in November 2000. However, we cannot rule out the possibility of a remarkable coincidence—that is, that Hezbollah was actually focusing on some other group of individuals traveling from Saudi Arabia during this same time frame, rather than the future hijackers.¹²⁷

We have found no evidence that Iran or Hezbollah was aware of the planning for what later became the 9/11 attack. At the time of their travel through Iran, the al Qaeda operatives themselves were probably not aware of the specific details of their future operation.

After 9/11, Iran and Hezbollah wished to conceal any past evidence of cooperation with Sunni terrorists associated with al Qaeda. A senior Hezbollah official disclaimed any Hezbollah involvement in 9/11.¹²⁸

We believe this topic requires further investigation by the U.S. government.

7.4 FINAL STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Final Preparations in the United States

During the early summer of 2001, Atta, assisted by Shehhi, was busy coordinating the arrival of most of the muscle hijackers in southern Florida—picking them up at the airport, finding them places to stay, and helping them settle in the United States.¹²⁹

The majority settled in Florida. Some opened bank accounts, acquired mailboxes, and rented cars. Several also joined local gyms, presumably to stay fit for the operation. Upon first arriving, most stayed in hotels and motels; but by mid-June, they settled in shared apartments relatively close to one another and Atta.¹³⁰ Though these muscle hijackers did not travel much after arriving in the United States, two of them, Waleed al Shehri and Satam al Suqami, took unusual trips.

On May 19, Shehri and Suqami flew from Fort Lauderdale to Freeport, the Bahamas, where they had reservations at the Bahamas Princess Resort. The two were turned away by Bahamian officials on arrival, however, because they

lacked visas; they returned to Florida that same day. They likely took this trip to renew Suqami's immigration status, as Suqami's legal stay in the United States ended May 21.¹³¹

On July 30, Shehri traveled alone from Fort Lauderdale to Boston. He flew to San Francisco the next day, where he stayed one night before returning via Las Vegas. While this travel may have been a casing flight—Shehri traveled in first class on the same type of aircraft he would help hijack on September 11 (a Boeing 767) and the trip included a layover in Las Vegas—Shehri was neither a pilot nor a plot leader, as were the other hijackers who took surveillance flights.¹³²

The three Hamburg pilots—Atta, Shehhi, and Jarrah—took the first of their cross-country surveillance flights early in the summer. Shehhi flew from New York to Las Vegas via San Francisco in late May. Jarrah flew from Baltimore to Las Vegas via Los Angeles in early June. Atta flew from Boston to Las Vegas via San Francisco at the end of June. Each traveled in first class, on United Airlines. For the east-west transcontinental leg, each operative flew on the same type of aircraft he would pilot on September 11 (Atta and Shehhi, a Boeing 767; Jarrah, a Boeing 757).¹³³ Hanjour and Hazmi, as noted below, took similar cross-country surveillance flights in August.

Jarrah and Hanjour also received additional training and practice flights in the early summer. A few days before departing on his cross-country test flight, Jarrah flew from Fort Lauderdale to Philadelphia, where he trained at Hortman Aviation and asked to fly the Hudson Corridor, a low-altitude “hallway” along the Hudson River that passes New York landmarks like the World Trade Center. Heavy traffic in the area can make the corridor a dangerous route for an inexperienced pilot. Because Hortman deemed Jarrah unfit to fly solo, he could fly this route only with an instructor.¹³⁴

Hanjour, too, requested to fly the Hudson Corridor about this same time, at Air Fleet Training Systems in Teterboro, New Jersey, where he started receiving ground instruction soon after settling in the area with Hazmi. Hanjour flew the Hudson Corridor, but his instructor declined a second request because of what he considered Hanjour's poor piloting skills. Shortly thereafter, Hanjour switched to Caldwell Flight Academy in Fairfield, New Jersey, where he rented small aircraft on several occasions during June and July. In one such instance on July 20, Hanjour—likely accompanied by Hazmi—rented a plane from Caldwell and took a practice flight from Fairfield to Gaithersburg, Maryland, a route that would have allowed them to fly near Washington, D.C. Other evidence suggests that Hanjour may even have returned to Arizona for flight simulator training earlier in June.¹³⁵

There is no indication that Atta or Shehhi received any additional flight training in June. Both were likely too busy organizing the newly arrived muscle hijackers and taking their cross-country surveillance flights. Atta, moreover, needed to coordinate with his second-in-command, Nawaf al Hazmi.¹³⁶

Although Atta and Hazmi appear to have been in Virginia at about the same time in early April, they probably did not meet then. Analysis of late April communications associated with KSM indicates that they had wanted to get together in April but could not coordinate the meeting.¹³⁷ Atta and Hazmi probably first met in the United States only when Hazmi traveled round-trip from Newark to Miami between June 19 and June 25.

After he returned to New Jersey, Hazmi's behavior began to closely parallel that of the other hijackers. He and Hanjour, for instance, soon established new bank accounts, acquired a mailbox, rented cars, and started visiting a gym. So did the four other hijackers who evidently were staying with them in New Jersey. Several also obtained new photo identification, first in New Jersey and then at the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, where Hazmi and Hanjour had obtained such documents months earlier, likely with help from their Jordanian friend, Rababah.¹³⁸

Atta probably met again with Hazmi in early July. Returning from his initial cross-country surveillance flight, Atta flew into New York. Rather than return immediately to Florida, he checked into a New Jersey hotel. He picked up tickets to travel to Spain at a travel agency in Paterson on July 4 before departing for Fort Lauderdale. Now that the muscle hijackers had arrived, he was ready to meet with Ramzi Binalshibh for the last time.¹³⁹

The Meeting in Spain

After meeting with Atta in Berlin in January 2001, Binalshibh had spent much of the spring of 2001 in Afghanistan and Pakistan, helping move the muscle hijackers as they passed through Karachi. During the Berlin meeting, the two had agreed to meet later in the year in Kuala Lumpur to discuss the operation in person again. In late May, Binalshibh reported directly to Bin Ladin at an al Qaeda facility known as "Compound Six" near Kandahar.¹⁴⁰

Bin Ladin told Binalshibh to instruct Atta and the others to focus on their security and that of the operation, and to advise Atta to proceed as planned with the targets discussed before Atta left Afghanistan in early 2000—the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the White House, and the Capitol. According to Binalshibh, Bin Ladin said he preferred the White House over the Capitol, asking Binalshibh to confirm that Atta understood this preference. Binalshibh says Bin Ladin had given the same message to Waleed al Shehri for conveyance to Atta earlier that spring. Binalshibh also received permission to meet Atta in Malaysia. Atef provided money for the trip, which KSM would help Binalshibh arrange in Karachi.¹⁴¹

In early June, Binalshibh traveled by taxi from Kandahar to Quetta, Pakistan, where al Qaeda courier Abu Rahmah took him to KSM. According to Binalshibh, KSM provided a plane ticket to Malaysia and a fraudulent Saudi passport to use for the trip. KSM told him to ask Atta to select a date for the attacks. Binalshibh was to return to Germany and then inform KSM of the date. KSM

also gave Binalshibh the email address of Zacarias Moussaoui for future contact. Binalshibh then left for Kuala Lumpur.¹⁴²

Binalshibh contacted Atta upon arriving in Malaysia and found a change in plan. Atta could not travel because he was too busy helping the new arrivals settle in the United States. After remaining in Malaysia for approximately three weeks, Binalshibh went to Bangkok for a few days before returning to Germany. He and Atta agreed to meet later at a location to be determined.¹⁴³

In early July, Atta called Binalshibh to suggest meeting in Madrid, for reasons Binalshibh claims not to know. He says he preferred Berlin, but that he and Atta knew too many people in Germany and feared being spotted together. Unable to buy a ticket to Madrid at the height of the tourist season, Binalshibh booked a seat on a flight to Reus, near Barcelona, the next day. Atta was already en route to Madrid, so Binalshibh phoned Shehhi in the United States to inform him of the change in itinerary.¹⁴⁴

Atta arrived in Madrid on July 8. He spent the night in a hotel and made three calls from his room, most likely to coordinate with Binalshibh. The next day, Atta rented a car and drove to Reus to pick up Binalshibh; the two then drove to the nearby town of Cambrils. Hotel records show Atta renting rooms in the same area until July 19, when he returned his rental car in Madrid and flew back to Fort Lauderdale. On July 16, Binalshibh returned to Hamburg, using a ticket Atta had purchased for him earlier that day. According to Binalshibh, they did not meet with anyone else while in Spain.¹⁴⁵

Binalshibh says he told Atta that Bin Ladin wanted the attacks carried out as soon as possible. Bin Ladin, Binalshibh conveyed, was worried about having so many operatives in the United States. Atta replied that he could not yet provide a date because he was too busy organizing the arriving hijackers and still needed to coordinate the timing of the flights so that the crashes would occur simultaneously. Atta said he required about five to six weeks before he could provide an attack date. Binalshibh advised Atta that Bin Ladin had directed that the other operatives not be informed of the date until the last minute. Atta was to provide Binalshibh with advance notice of at least a week or two so that Binalshibh could travel to Afghanistan and report the date personally to Bin Ladin.¹⁴⁶

As to targets, Atta understood Bin Ladin's interest in striking the White House. Atta said he thought this target too difficult, but had tasked Hazmi and Hanjour to evaluate its feasibility and was awaiting their answer. Atta said that those two operatives had rented small aircraft and flown reconnaissance flights near the Pentagon. Atta explained that Hanjour was assigned to attack the Pentagon, Jarrah the Capitol, and that both Atta and Shehhi would hit the World Trade Center. If any pilot could not reach his intended target, he was to crash the plane. If Atta could not strike the World Trade Center, he planned to crash his aircraft directly into the streets of New York. Atta told Binalshibh that each pilot had volunteered for his assigned target, and that the assignments were subject to change.¹⁴⁷

During the Spain meeting, Atta also mentioned that he had considered targeting a nuclear facility he had seen during familiarization flights near New York—a target they referred to as “electrical engineering.” According to Binalshibh, the other pilots did not like the idea. They thought a nuclear target would be difficult because the airspace around it was restricted, making reconnaissance flights impossible and increasing the likelihood that any plane would be shot down before impact. Moreover, unlike the approved targets, this alternative had not been discussed with senior al Qaeda leaders and therefore did not have the requisite blessing. Nor would a nuclear facility have particular symbolic value. Atta did not ask Binalshibh to pass this idea on to Bin Ladin, Atef, or KSM, and Binalshibh says he did not mention it to them until after September 11.¹⁴⁸

Binalshibh claims that during their time in Spain, he and Atta also discussed how the hijackings would be executed. Atta said he, Shehhi, and Jarrah had encountered no problems carrying box cutters on cross-country surveillance flights. The best time to storm the cockpit would be about 10–15 minutes after takeoff, when the cockpit doors typically were opened for the first time. Atta did not believe they would need any other weapons. He had no firm contingency plan in case the cockpit door was locked. While he mentioned general ideas such as using a hostage or claiming to have a bomb, he was confident the cockpit doors would be opened and did not consider breaking them down a viable idea. Atta told Binalshibh he wanted to select planes departing on long flights because they would be full of fuel, and that he wanted to hijack Boeing aircraft because he believed them easier to fly than Airbus aircraft, which he understood had an autopilot feature that did not allow them to be crashed into the ground.¹⁴⁹

Finally, Atta confirmed that the muscle hijackers had arrived in the United States without incident. They would be divided into teams according to their English-speaking ability. That way they could assist each other before the operation and each team would be able to command the passengers in English. According to Binalshibh, Atta complained that some of the hijackers wanted to contact their families to say goodbye, something he had forbidden. Atta, moreover, was nervous about his future communications with Binalshibh, whom he instructed to obtain new telephones upon returning to Germany. Before Binalshibh left Spain, he gave Atta eight necklaces and eight bracelets that Atta had asked him to buy when he was recently in Bangkok, believing that if the hijackers were clean shaven and well dressed, others would think them wealthy Saudis and give them less notice.¹⁵⁰

As directed, upon returning from Spain, Binalshibh obtained two new phones, one to communicate with Atta and another to communicate with KSM and others, such as Zacarias Moussaoui. Binalshibh soon contacted KSM and, using code words, reported the results of his meeting with Atta. This important exchange occurred in mid-July.¹⁵¹

The conversation covered various topics. For example, Jarrah was to send Binalshibh certain personal materials from the hijackers, including copies of their

passports, which Binalshibh in turn would pass along to KSM, probably for subsequent use in al Qaeda propaganda.¹⁵²

The most significant part of the mid-July conversation concerned Jarrah's troubled relationship with Atta. KSM and Binalshibh both acknowledge that Jarrah chafed under Atta's authority over him. Binalshibh believes the disagreement arose in part from Jarrah's family visits. Moreover, Jarrah had been on his own for most of his time in the United States because Binalshibh's visa difficulty had prevented the two of them from training together. Jarrah thus felt excluded from the decisionmaking. Binalshibh had to act as a broker between Jarrah and Atta.¹⁵³

Concerned that Jarrah might withdraw from the operation at this late stage, KSM emphasized the importance of Atta and Jarrah's resolving their differences. Binalshibh claims that such concern was unwarranted, and in their mid-July discussion reassured KSM that Atta and Jarrah would reconcile and be ready to move forward in about a month, after Jarrah visited his family. Noting his concern and the potential for delay, KSM at one point instructed Binalshibh to send "the skirts" to "Sally"—a coded instruction to Binalshibh to send funds to Zacarias Moussaoui. While Binalshibh admits KSM did direct him to send Moussaoui money during the mid-July conversation, he denies knowing exactly why he received this instruction—though he thought the money was being provided "within the framework" of the 9/11 operation.¹⁵⁴

KSM may have instructed Binalshibh to send money to Moussaoui in order to help prepare Moussaoui as a potential substitute pilot for Jarrah. On July 20, 2001, Aysel Senguen, Jarrah's girlfriend, purchased a one-way ticket for Jarrah from Miami to Dusseldorf. On Jarrah's previous four trips from the United States to see Senguen and his family in Lebanon, he had always traveled with a round-trip ticket. When Jarrah departed Miami on July 25, Atta appears to have driven him to the airport, another unique circumstance.¹⁵⁵

Binalshibh picked up Jarrah at the airport in Dusseldorf on July 25. Jarrah wanted to see Senguen as soon as possible, so he and Binalshibh arranged to meet a few days later. When they did, they had an emotional conversation during which Binalshibh encouraged Jarrah to see the plan through.¹⁵⁶

While Jarrah was in Germany, Binalshibh and Moussaoui were in contact to arrange for the transfer of funds. Binalshibh received two wire transfers from Hawsawi in the UAE totaling \$15,000 and, within days, relayed almost all of this money to Moussaoui in two installments.¹⁵⁷

Moussaoui had been taking flight lessons at the Airman Flight School in Norman, Oklahoma, since February but stopped in late May. Although at that point he had only about 50 hours of flight time and no solo flights to his credit, Moussaoui began making inquiries about flight materials and simulator training for Boeing 747s. On July 10, he put down a \$1,500 deposit for flight simulator training at Pan Am International Flight Academy in Eagan, Minnesota, and by the end of the month, he had received a simulator schedule to train from

August 13 through August 20. Moussaoui also purchased two knives and inquired of two manufacturers of GPS equipment whether their products could be converted for aeronautical use—activities that closely resembled those of the 9/11 hijackers during their final preparations for the attacks.¹⁵⁸

On August 10, shortly after getting the money from Binalshibh, Moussaoui left Oklahoma with a friend and drove to Minnesota. Three days later, Moussaoui paid the \$6,800 balance owed for his flight simulator training at Pan Am in cash and began his training. His conduct, however, raised the suspicions of his flight instructor. It was unusual for a student with so little training to be learning to fly large jets without any intention of obtaining a pilot's license or other goal. On August 16, once the instructor reported his suspicion to the authorities, Moussaoui was arrested by the INS on immigration charges.¹⁵⁹

KSM denies ever considering Moussaoui for the planes operation. Instead he claims that Moussaoui was slated to participate in a "second wave" of attacks. KSM also states that Moussaoui had no contact with Atta, and we are unaware of evidence contradicting this assertion.¹⁶⁰

Yet KSM has also stated that by the summer of 2001, he was too busy with the planes operation to continue planning for any second-wave attacks. Moreover, he admits that only three potential pilots were ever recruited for the alleged second wave, Moussaoui plus two others who, by midsummer of 2001, had backed out of the plot.¹⁶¹ We therefore believe that the effort to push Moussaoui forward in August 2001 lends credence to the suspicion that he was being primed as a possible pilot in the immediate planes operation.

Binalshibh says he assumed Moussaoui was to take his place as another pilot in the 9/11 operation. Recounting a post-9/11 discussion with KSM in Kandahar, Binalshibh claims KSM mentioned Moussaoui as being part of the 9/11 operation. Although KSM never referred to Moussaoui by name, Binalshibh understood he was speaking of the operative to whom Binalshibh had wired money. Binalshibh says KSM did not approve of Moussaoui but believes KSM did not remove him from the operation only because Moussaoui had been selected and assigned by Bin Ladin himself.¹⁶²

KSM did not hear about Moussaoui's arrest until after September 11. According to Binalshibh, had Bin Ladin and KSM learned prior to 9/11 that Moussaoui had been detained, they might have canceled the operation. When Binalshibh discussed Moussaoui's arrest with KSM after September 11, KSM congratulated himself on not having Moussaoui contact the other operatives, which would have compromised the operation. Moussaoui had been in contact with Binalshibh, of course, but this was not discovered until after 9/11.¹⁶³

As it turned out, Moussaoui was not needed to replace Jarrah. By the time Moussaoui was arrested in mid-August, Jarrah had returned to the United States from his final trip to Germany, his disagreement with Atta apparently resolved. The operatives began their final preparations for the attacks.¹⁶⁴

Readying the Attacks

A week after he returned from meeting Binalshibh in Spain, Atta traveled to Newark, probably to coordinate with Hazmi and give him additional funds. Atta spent a few days in the area before returning to Florida on July 30. The month of August was busy, as revealed by a set of contemporaneous Atta-Binalshibh communications that were recovered after September 11.¹⁶⁵

On August 3, for example, Atta and Binalshibh discussed several matters, such as the best way for the operatives to purchase plane tickets and the assignment of muscle hijackers to individual teams. Atta and Binalshibh also revisited the question of whether to target the White House. They discussed targets in coded language, pretending to be students discussing various fields of study: “architecture” referred to the World Trade Center, “arts” the Pentagon, “law” the Capitol, and “politics” the White House.¹⁶⁶

Binalshibh reminded Atta that Bin Ladin wanted to target the White House. Atta again cautioned that this would be difficult. When Binalshibh persisted, Atta agreed to include the White House but suggested they keep the Capitol as an alternate target in case the White House proved too difficult. Atta also suggested that the attacks would not happen until after the first week in September, when Congress reconvened.¹⁶⁷

Atta and Binalshibh also discussed “the friend who is coming as a tourist”—a cryptic reference to candidate hijacker Mohamed al Kahtani (mentioned above), whom Hawsawi was sending the next day as “the last one” to “complete the group.” On August 4, Atta drove to the Orlando airport to meet Kahtani. Upon arrival, however, Kahtani was denied entry by immigration officials because he had a one-way ticket and little money, could not speak English, and could not adequately explain what he intended to do in the United States. He was sent back to Dubai. Hawsawi contacted KSM, who told him to help Kahtani return to Pakistan.¹⁶⁸

On August 7, Atta flew from Fort Lauderdale to Newark, probably to coordinate with Hazmi. Two days later, Ahmed al Ghamdi and Abdul Aziz al Omari, who had been living in New Jersey with Hazmi and Hanjour, flew to Miami—probably signifying that the four hijacking teams had finally been assigned. While Atta was in New Jersey, he, Hazmi, and Hanjour all purchased tickets for another set of surveillance flights. Like Shehhi, Jarrah, Atta, and Waleed al Shehri before them, Hazmi and Hanjour each flew in first class on the same type of aircraft they would hijack on 9/11 (a Boeing 757), and on transcontinental flights that connected to Las Vegas. This time, however, Atta himself also flew directly to Las Vegas, where all three stayed on August 13–14. Beyond Las Vegas’s reputation for welcoming tourists, we have seen no credible evidence explaining why, on this occasion and others, the operatives flew to or met in Las Vegas.¹⁶⁹

Through August, the hijackers kept busy with their gym training and the pilots took frequent practice flights on small rented aircraft. The operatives also

began to make purchases suggesting that the planning was coming to an end. In mid-August, for example, they bought small knives that may actually have been used in the attacks. On August 22, moreover, Jarrah attempted to purchase four GPS units from a pilot shop in Miami. He was able to buy only one unit, which he picked up a few days later when he also purchased three aeronautical charts.¹⁷⁰

Perhaps most significant, however, was the purchase of plane tickets for September 11. On August 23, Atta again flew to Newark, probably to meet with Hazmi and select flights. All 19 tickets were booked and purchased between August 25 and September 5.¹⁷¹

It therefore appears that the attack date was selected by the third week of August. This timing is confirmed by Binalshibh, who claims Atta called him with the date in mid-August. According to Binalshibh, Atta used a riddle to convey the date in code—a message of two branches, a slash, and a lollipop (to non-Americans, 11/9 would be interpreted as September 11). Binalshibh says he called Atta back to confirm the date before passing it to KSM.¹⁷²

KSM apparently received the date from Binalshibh in a message sent through Binalshibh's old Hamburg associate, Zakariya Essabar. Both Binalshibh and KSM claim that Essabar was not privy to the meaning of the message and had no foreknowledge of the attacks. According to Binalshibh, shortly after the date was chosen, he advised Essabar and another Hamburg associate, Said Bahaji, that if they wanted to go to Afghanistan, now was the time because it would soon become more difficult. Essabar made reservations on August 22 and departed Hamburg for Karachi on August 30; Bahaji purchased his tickets on August 20 and departed Hamburg for Karachi on September 3.¹⁷³

Binalshibh also made arrangements to leave for Pakistan during early September, before the attacks, as did Ali and Hawsawi, the plot facilitators in the UAE. During these final days, Binalshibh and Atta kept in contact by phone, email, and instant messaging. Although Atta had forbidden the hijackers to contact their families, he apparently placed one last call to his own father on September 9. Atta also asked Binalshibh to contact the family of one hijacker, pass along goodbyes from others, and give regards to KSM. Jarrah alone appears to have left a written farewell—a sentimental letter to Aysel Senguen.¹⁷⁴

Hazmi, however, may not have been so discreet. He may have telephoned his former San Diego companion, Mohdar Abdullah, in late August. Several bits of evidence indicate that others in Abdullah's circle may have received word that something big would soon happen. As noted earlier, Abdullah's behavior reportedly changed noticeably. Prior to September 11, both he and Yazeed al Salmi suddenly became intent on proceeding with their planned marriages. One witness quotes Salmi as commenting after the 9/11 attacks, "I knew they were going to do something, that is why I got married." Moreover, as of August 2001, Iyad Kreiwesh and other employees at the Texaco station where Hazmi had worked suddenly were anticipating attention from law enforcement

authorities in the near future. Finally, according to an uncorroborated witness account, early on the morning of September 10, Abdullah, Osama Awadallah, Omar Bakarbashat, and others behaved suspiciously at the gas station. According to the witness, after the group met, Awadallah said “it is finally going to happen” as the others celebrated by giving each other high fives.¹⁷⁵

Dissent within the al Qaeda Leadership

While tactical preparations for the attack were nearing completion, the entire operation was being questioned at the top, as al Qaeda and the Taliban argued over strategy for 2001. Our focus has naturally been on the specifics of the planes operation. But from the perspective of Bin Ladin and Atef, this operation was only one, admittedly key, element of their unfolding plans for the year. Living in Afghanistan, interacting constantly with the Taliban, the al Qaeda leaders would never lose sight of the situation in that country.

Bin Ladin’s consistent priority was to launch a major attack directly against the United States. He wanted the planes operation to proceed as soon as possible. Mihdhar reportedly told his cousin during the summer of 2001 that Bin Ladin was reputed to have remarked, “I will make it happen even if I do it by myself.”¹⁷⁶

According to KSM, Bin Ladin had been urging him to advance the date of the attacks. In 2000, for instance, KSM remembers Bin Ladin pushing him to launch the attacks amid the controversy after then-Israeli opposition party leader Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. KSM claims Bin Ladin told him it would be enough for the hijackers simply to down planes rather than crash them into specific targets. KSM says he resisted the pressure.¹⁷⁷

KSM claims to have faced similar pressure twice more in 2001. According to him, Bin Ladin wanted the operation carried out on May 12, 2001, seven months to the day after the *Cole* bombing. KSM adds that the 9/11 attacks had originally been envisioned for May 2001. The second time he was urged to launch the attacks early was in June or July 2001, supposedly after Bin Ladin learned from the media that Sharon would be visiting the White House. On both occasions KSM resisted, asserting that the hijacking teams were not ready. Bin Ladin pressed particularly strongly for the latter date in two letters stressing the need to attack early. The second letter reportedly was delivered by Bin Ladin’s son-in-law, Aws al Madani.¹⁷⁸

Other evidence corroborates KSM’s account. For instance, Mihdhar told his cousin that the attacks were to happen in May, but were postponed twice, first to July, then to September. Moreover, one candidate hijacker remembers a general warning being issued in the al Qaeda camps in July or early August, just like the warnings issued two weeks before the *Cole* bombing and ten days before the eventual 9/11 attacks. During the midsummer alert, al Qaeda members dispersed with their families, security was increased, and Bin Ladin disappeared for about 30 days, until the alert was canceled.¹⁷⁹

While the details of the operation were strictly compartmented, by the time

of the alert, word had begun to spread that an attack against the United States was coming. KSM notes that it was generally well known by the summer of 2001 that he was planning some kind of operation against the United States. Many were even aware that he had been preparing operatives to go to the United States, leading some to conclude that al Qaeda was planning a near-term attack on U.S. soil. Moreover, Bin Ladin had made several remarks that summer hinting at an upcoming attack and generating rumors throughout the worldwide jihadist community. Bin Ladin routinely told important visitors to expect significant attacks against U.S. interests soon and, during a speech at the al Faruq camp, exhorted trainees to pray for the success of an attack involving 20 martyrs. Others have confirmed hearing indications of an impending attack and have verified that such news, albeit without specific details, had spread across al Qaeda.¹⁸⁰

Although Bin Ladin's top priority apparently was to attack the United States, others had a different view. The Taliban leaders put their main emphasis on the year's military offensive against the Northern Alliance, an offensive that ordinarily would begin in the late spring or summer. They certainly hoped that this year's offensive would finally finish off their old enemies, driving them from Afghanistan. From the Taliban's perspective, an attack against the United States might be counterproductive. It might draw the Americans into the war against them, just when final victory seemed within their grasp.¹⁸¹

There is evidence that Mullah Omar initially opposed a major al Qaeda operation directly against the United States in 2001. Furthermore, by July, with word spreading of a coming attack, a schism emerged among the senior leadership of al Qaeda. Several senior members reportedly agreed with Mullah Omar. Those who reportedly sided with Bin Ladin included Atef, Sulayman Abu Ghayth, and KSM. But those said to have opposed him were weighty figures in the organization—including Abu Hafz the Mauritanian, Sheikh Saeed al Masri, and Sayf al Adl. One senior al Qaeda operative claims to recall Bin Ladin arguing that attacks against the United States needed to be carried out immediately to support insurgency in the Israeli-occupied territories and protest the presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia. Beyond these rhetorical appeals, Bin Ladin also reportedly thought an attack against the United States would benefit al Qaeda by attracting more suicide operatives, eliciting greater donations, and increasing the number of sympathizers willing to provide logistical assistance.¹⁸²

Mullah Omar is reported to have opposed this course of action for ideological reasons rather than out of fear of U.S. retaliation. He is said to have preferred for al Qaeda to attack Jews, not necessarily the United States. KSM contends that Omar faced pressure from the Pakistani government to keep al Qaeda from engaging in operations outside Afghanistan. Al Qaeda's chief financial manager, Sheikh Saeed, argued that al Qaeda should defer to the Taliban's wishes. Another source says that Sheikh Saeed opposed the operation, both out of deference to Omar and because he feared the U.S. response to an

attack. Abu Hafz the Mauritanian reportedly even wrote Bin Ladin a message basing opposition to the attacks on the Qur'an.¹⁸³

According to KSM, in late August, when the operation was fully planned, Bin Ladin formally notified the al Qaeda Shura Council that a major attack against the United States would take place in the coming weeks. When some council members objected, Bin Ladin countered that Mullah Omar lacked authority to prevent al Qaeda from conducting jihad outside Afghanistan. Though most of the Shura Council reportedly disagreed, Bin Ladin persisted. The attacks went forward.¹⁸⁴

The story of dissension within al Qaeda regarding the 9/11 attacks is probably incomplete. The information on which the account is based comes from sources who were not privy to the full scope of al Qaeda and Taliban planning. Bin Ladin and Atef, however, probably would have known, at least, that

- The general Taliban offensive against the Northern Alliance would rely on al Qaeda military support.
- Another significant al Qaeda operation was making progress during the summer—a plot to assassinate the Northern Alliance leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud. The operatives, disguised as journalists, were in Massoud's camp and prepared to kill him sometime in August. Their appointment to see him was delayed.¹⁸⁵

But on September 9, the Massoud assassination took place. The delayed Taliban offensive against the Northern Alliance was apparently coordinated to begin as soon as he was killed, and it got under way on September 10.¹⁸⁶

As they deliberated earlier in the year, Bin Ladin and Atef would likely have remembered that Mullah Omar was dependent on them for the Massoud assassination and for vital support in the Taliban military operations. KSM remembers Atef telling him that al Qaeda had an agreement with the Taliban to eliminate Massoud, after which the Taliban would begin an offensive to take over Afghanistan. Atef hoped Massoud's death would also appease the Taliban when the 9/11 attacks happened. There are also some scant indications that Omar may have been reconciled to the 9/11 attacks by the time they occurred.¹⁸⁷

Moving to Departure Positions

In the days just before 9/11, the hijackers returned leftover funds to al Qaeda and assembled in their departure cities. They sent the excess funds by wire transfer to Hawsawi in the UAE, about \$26,000 altogether.¹⁸⁸

The hijackers targeting American Airlines Flight 77, to depart from Dulles, migrated from New Jersey to Laurel, Maryland, about 20 miles from Washington, D.C. They stayed in a motel during the first week in September and spent

time working out at a gym. On the final night before the attacks, they lodged at a hotel in Herndon, Virginia, close to the airport.¹⁸⁹

Further north, the hijackers targeting United Airlines Flight 93, to depart from Newark, gathered in that city from their base in Florida on September 7. Just after midnight on September 8–9, Jarrah received a speeding ticket in Maryland as he headed north on I-95. He joined the rest of his team at their hotel.¹⁹⁰

Atta was still busy coordinating the teams. On September 7, he flew from Fort Lauderdale to Baltimore, presumably to meet with the Flight 77 team in Laurel. On September 9, he flew from Baltimore to Boston. By then, Shehhi had arrived there, and Atta was seen with him at his hotel. The next day, Atta picked up Omari at another hotel, and the two drove to Portland, Maine, for reasons that remain unknown. In the early morning hours of September 11, they boarded a commuter flight to Boston to connect to American Airlines Flight 11. The two spent their last night pursuing ordinary activities: making ATM withdrawals, eating pizza, and shopping at a convenience store. Their three fellow hijackers for Flight 11 stayed together in a hotel in Newton, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston.¹⁹¹

Shehhi and his team targeting United Airlines Flight 175 from Logan Airport spent their last hours at two Boston hotels.¹⁹² The plan that started with a proposal by KSM in 1996 had evolved to overcome numerous obstacles. Now 19 men waited in nondescript hotel rooms to board four flights the next morning.