

# Operation Holy Tuesday

The two chief planners of September 11th have confessed, and the records of their interrogations can now be used to paint a precise picture of the events leading up to the terrorist attack. Their statements also reveal how Osama Bin Laden personally selected the suicide pilots from Hamburg.

The prisoner no longer recalls precisely when he heard these words and in which of the many hideouts in the mountains bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, this single sentence uttered by Osama Bin Laden has burned itself into his memory, this decisive sentence, spoken in a soft and silky voice, that would ultimately become a death sentence for about 3,000 people: "Why do you use an ax when you can use a bulldozer?" It was this sentence that marked the beginning of operation "Holy Tuesday," as the men of the Al Qaeda terrorist network called the terrorist attack in which, on September 11, 2001, two passenger jets crashed into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York and one into the Pentagon in Washington, while a fourth exploded in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a Pakistani citizen, told his American interrogators that the "ax" to which Bin Laden referred was his own plan for an attack. In 1996, Mohammed proposed leasing a small charter plane, filling it with explosives, and crashing it into the headquarters of the American secret service agency, the CIA. His plan, however, represented little more than raising an ax to strike the hated enemy. Bin Laden preferred the "bulldozer" approach, in which his followers were to hijack several passenger jets and fly them into their targets as airborne bombs.

The powerfully built, portly sheik has repeatedly surprised his interrogators in recent months with such insider views of the Al Qaeda network. The Bin Laden associate and chief planner of September 11th was arrested in March of this year. Ever since American interrogation specialists began taking him to task, he has been talking profusely. And now that his right-hand man, Ramzi Binalshibh, who has been in custody since September 2002, has delivered a life confession of sorts, the documented confessions can be used to precisely reconstruct the genesis of the most spectacular act of terrorism in history.

The statements remove the air of mystery that surrounded the prehistory of September 11th until today. They provide evidence that top Al Qaeda leaders were permanently involved in the preparations, and at a much earlier point than has been assumed until now. Most of all, they demonstrate that the world's second-most-wanted man (after Saddam Hussein), prince of terror Osama Bin Laden, personally decided on the selection of the suicide pilots and the aircraft to be hijacked.

It is the confessions in particular that have closed gaps in the terrorism experts' information, and US security experts have allowed the first details to filter down to the public in recent weeks. These details match everything that Sheik Mohammed and Binalshibh said in a double interview the two men gave to the Al Jazeera Arab television network shortly before their arrests.

While being interrogated by the Americans, Binalshibh prided himself in the role he played in the attacks, claiming that the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were "legitimate targets, because they were military targets." After all, he said, the enemy's infrastructure as well as its political and economic symbols must be destroyed in a war. He also said that September 11th by no means marked the end of this war, and that the terrorists intended to keep attacking until America became "the land under water." Then, according to Binalshibh, it would be possible to "kill all its inhabitants."

The prominent prisoner is certainly the most qualified of all to report on the diabolical plot. Binalshibh was the decisive link in the chain, serving as the connecting point between Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan and the Hamburg cell surrounding suicide pilot Mohammed Atta, which was based in the now notorious apartment at Marienstraße 54 in Hamburg's Harburg neighborhood. Binalshibh gave Atta the targets and personally informed Bin Laden about the precise date of the deadly attacks. From his base in Hamburg, Binalshibh controlled the flow of funds and coordinated the supporters. He always had several cell phones in his pocket, none of them registered under his own name. At times he would sigh and say: "What is so wonderful about this life? Paradise is far more beautiful!"

Binalshibh's statements also explain how someone who was once an inconspicuous, open-hearted and cheery refugee first became a fraudulent applicant for political asylum and phony student and ultimately turned himself into one of the world's leading terrorists. Now he is someone who, since September 11th, is considered by Islamists the world over to be an icon of Al Qaeda, whose image even Taliban fighters carry in their breast pockets while on the battlefield. He is a manager of death who celebrated with Bin Laden's eldest son Saad in March 2002 and whose arrest just over a year ago was personally praised by US President George W. Bush: "He thought he could get away. But he forgot that he was being pursued by the most powerful nation on earth."

The last photographs of Khalid Sheik Mohammed and Binalshibh show the two strategists of the "Holy War" in humiliating poses. A confused-looking Sheikh Mohammed stares into the camera, his hair unkempt, his chest bared, and his hands apparently tied behind his back. Binalshibh is shown blindfolded with his head pulled back, while a Pakistani security officer brandishes his pistol.

Both were caught in Pakistan, and there is no doubt that they were first interrogated by the notorious Pakistani secret service, the ISI. Binalshibh began talking immediately and answered many questions. But the ISI experts were unable to break the silence of his fellow believer, Sheik Mohammed. At first he only prayed. For two full

days he crouched on the floor in a trance-like state, reciting verses from the Koran. On the third day he apparently chastised his Pakistani interrogators: "Playing the willing allies of America will not help you and your country!" Then the Pakistanis placed a mask over his head, drove him to the Chaklala air force base in Rawalpindi, and turned him over to the American authorities, just as they had done with Binalshibh five months earlier.

The methods US interrogation specialists apply to convince their prisoners to talk have already come to light in Guantanamo Bay. The terrorists imprisoned there are told, in no uncertain terms, that there is only one hope for them: to talk. Whether the prisoner is allowed to get a full night's sleep, whether the light in his cell is kept on day and night, what he gets to eat - these are all things that depend on whether he talks. The pressure seems to work. According to US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, "We have been able to get a tremendous amount of information out of them, information that will make things much more difficult for an unbelievably large number of people in this world."

## **"IF I HAD HAD MORE MONEY FOR A BIGGER BOMB, THE TOWERS WOULD NO LONGER BE STANDING."**

Nevertheless, each interrogation report on Sheik Mohammed and Binalshibh begins with the disclaimer that one cannot be sure where the real information ends and where the lies begin. The US agents believe most of what the two prisoners say about preparations for the terrorist attack, such as information about secret meetings and when the details of the plan were ironed out. However, the terrorism experts question much of what Sheik Mohammed and Binalshibh have to say about the roles of individual Al Qaeda operatives, possibly in an attempt to protect their co-conspirators.

In spite of all reservations, and although the history of September 11, 2001 has thus far been a puzzle missing a few important pieces, investigators believe that the picture is now almost complete, even down to the last detail. The prisoners, says Vince Cannistraro, former head of the CIA anti-terrorism unit, have "contributed those pieces that have been missing until now, so that the US government can be certain that it now has a relatively accurate understanding of the plan leading up to September 11th."

The same applies to the German authorities. The German government, the Federal Office of Criminal Investigation and the German intelligence services have received copies of those portions of the confession reports that apply to Germany. However, the Americans have prohibited the Germans from using the material in court cases against suspected terrorists, placing the German legal system into a rather uncomfortable position.

By now, about one-third of the 29 members of the so-called Al Qaeda round table, the assembled leadership team surrounding Bin Laden, are in custody. The interrogation experts have repeatedly compared the statements made by different prisoners, verified the information during subsequent questioning, and sorted out anything that was unclear or clearly false.

To the investigators, it is now apparent that the apocalypse in New York only became possible because three threads gradually converged in the mountains of Kandahar. The first thread was the obsession of Sheik Mohammed's clan, the members of which deeply detest the United States. The second was the power that fanatic Osama Bin Laden held over an entire army of religious fanatics with paramilitary training. The third and final thread was the blind willingness to become martyrs within a group of Muslims from Hamburg-Harburg, men who wanted nothing more fervently than to die in the war against the infidels.

The history of September 11th began as a private war on a gray Friday in the spring of 1993 - with the first bombing attack on the World Trade Center. On February 26, 1993, Ramsi Ahmed Yussuf, a nephew of Sheik Mohammed, detonated a powerful bomb in the underground parking garage of the WTC. The bomb contained about 600 kilograms of highly explosive nitroglycerin hidden in a white delivery van parked on the B 2 parking level. The explosion ripped a 200-by-100-foot crater into the building's foundation, killing six people. The towers shook. But they did not fall.

When he was arrested years later, Yussuf, a bearded, brooding, introverted man with enormous ears, was still enthralled by the brilliant design of his bomb. In 1995, investigators transported him by helicopter to the New York FBI office, and when the twin towers came into view, Yussuf said: "If I had had more money and time to build a bigger bomb, the towers would no longer be standing."

And as if he were practically yearning for the paradise he had been promised, Yussuf asked the FBI officials whether his execution would be carried out without delay once he had been sentenced to death.

Again and again, it became apparent just how deeply entrenched the hate was within the clan of the Mohammeds. Sheik Mohammed's older brother Sahid also became a member of Al Qaeda, and another brother lost his life fighting alongside the Mujaheddin in their battle with the Soviets. And according to the FBI, "KSM," US investigators' internal abbreviation for the name of Sheik Mohammed, was already involved in the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, acting as one of the masterminds who raised the money to buy the explosives.

## **SHEIK MOHAMMED PRAYED FOR TWO DAYS IN A TRANCE-LIKE STATE, AND THEN CHASTISED HIS GUARDS**

In the wake of what the terrorist clan considered to be a failed attack, it was certainly not surprising that it did not give up its efforts to strike a devastating blow against the Americans on their own soil. "KSM" and his nephews

developed a script that was to vastly exceed the attack on New York in terms of its sheer magnitude. It was called "Operation Bojinka."

It was also not surprising that Khalid Sheik Mohammed intended to join bomb maker Yussuf and play a leading role in the murderous plot this time around.

In those days Sheik Mohammed, now about 38 or 39 years old (the FBI isn't entirely sure of his age), made frequent trips to the Philippines. His father, who had emigrated to Kuwait from the Pakistani province of Beluchistan, had become a popular cleric in his adopted Arab country. The father, a businessman, sent his son Khalid to study at a Baptist college in North Carolina, and later to the University of Greensboro, where Sheik Mohammed earned a degree in mechanical engineering in December 1986.

Now he wanted to apply the technical skills he had acquired there to "Operation Bojinka." According to the plan, bombs with time fuses would be used to blow up twelve American passenger jets almost simultaneously.

However, the plan fell apart on January 6, 1995. In an apartment complex in Manila, Yussuf had been experimenting with potassium and sodium chlorate in his home laboratory when the mixture suddenly caught fire. Yussuf fled in a panic. A short time later, investigators discovered various files filled with perfidious ideas on a laptop they had found in the apartment. One of these ideas was to assassinate the Pope during his visit to Manila in early 1995, and another was a detailed plan of "Operation Bojinka."

Yussuf and two other men were arrested shortly thereafter, but his uncle, Sheik Mohammed, had managed to get away in time, and he continued his efforts. After that, the Americans began distributing "wanted" posters, some depicting the sheik as a Jihad warrior with a flowing beard and some as a clean-shaven Muslim wearing worldly clothing: a white shirt and a striped tie.

But neither the description on the "wanted" posters ("slightly overweight, brown eyes, wears glasses") nor a two million dollar bounty did the trick. Sheik Mohammed, who is said to speak fluent English, Arabic and Urdu, had gone into hiding among the Taliban in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Even there the Islamist did not lose focus on his true objective. As he has now told his astonished interrogators, it was as early as 1996 that Sheik Mohammed was able to convince Osama Bin Laden of his idea to use a small plane as a kamikaze bomber. And, according to Mohammed, he also asked Bin Laden for two things that were absolutely necessary to achieve his goals: money and martyrs.

Because Bin Laden pushed for something much bigger, a far more spectacular showdown - a "bulldozer" instead of an "ax" -, Sheik Mohammed developed a plan that was as ambitious as it was daring. According to his proposal, Al Qaeda would hijack ten aircraft simultaneously, five on the West coast and five on the East coast of the United States. Each of these aircraft would then be flown into suitable targets.

But Bin Laden had his doubts. He felt that such a massive plan was not feasible, that not even Al Qaeda could manage the organizational challenges associated with such a major attack.

During one of these meetings with Sheik Mohammed, the prince of terror pragmatically suggested an initial attack involving only four pilots. He told Mohammed that he already had four promising young men in mind, men who were prepared to die for Allah at any time, and that all they required was the appropriate training. Two of the candidates, Saudi Arabians Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hamsi, would later hijack the American Airlines jet that crashed into the Pentagon on September 11th. At the time, Bin Laden had also set his sights on two Yemenis.

It was 1996. The countdown to "Holy Tuesday" had begun.

Sheik Mohammed assumed control over the military committee of the Al Qaeda network. Soon the terror manager came to be known as "al Much" - "the brain." From then on, Sheik Mohammed was one of the key planners behind virtually every deadly attack. Investigators have learned that he also remained in charge after September 11th, such as during the attack on German tourists vacationing on the island of Jerba in April 2002.

## **SHEIK MOHAMMED DEVELOPED A DARING PLAN: HE WANTED TO HIJACK TEN AIRCRAFT.**

His people were responsible for terrorist attacks throughout the world, year after year, such as the 1998 attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Daressalam. There was only one problem: They had yet to strike the Americans in their own country. A planned attack on the Los Angeles airport in 2002 failed because the courier carrying the explosives was apprehended.

But the organization felt strong enough to try again.

A group of advisors - a small committee consisting of Bin Laden and five other men - carefully debated the pros and cons of various plans. One thing was clear, however: The Islamists intended to use hijacked passenger jets as weapons. But which targets would they attack? Nuclear power plants were discussed first, but the idea was discarded "for fear that the whole thing would spin out of control," as Sheik Mohammed said in the Al Jazeera interview. He was also concerned that the attack could fail, because the US Air Force monitors the air space over nuclear power plants very closely.

Osama's followers also considered how the great attack was to progress, and initially planned an attack in two waves. First, they intended to hijack several aircraft in America and, soon afterwards, additional aircraft in Southeast Asia. However, Bin Laden vetoed the idea of a double attack, explained Sheik Mohammed, because it would have been "too difficult to synchronize."

In 1999, the Al Qaeda leadership decided to stick to the plan that involved hijacking four aircraft. Meanwhile, the pilots Bin Laden had selected, Nawaf al-Hamsi and Chalid al-Midhar, had begun their commando training in Afghanistan. Hamsi was a fanatic who had first traveled to Afghanistan as a teenager in 1993. In 1995, he and Midhar fought as volunteers against the Serbs in Bosnia. The two later became devoted followers of Bin Laden.

But then there were problems. Only Midhar and Hamsi received visas from the US consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in April 1999. The two Yemenis who had also been suggested by Bin Laden were denied visas. The US immigration authorities were already suspicious of men from the Islamic state of Yemen before September 11th.

The Al Qaeda leadership needed a few well-trained replacements. Their qualifications included a familiarity with Western countries and the ability to solve complex problems and work independently. The ideal candidates were people who, like Sheik Mohammed himself, could even have studied in a Western country, were technically skilled, and spoke perfect English. "We had plenty of volunteers," Sheik Mohammed bragged to Al Jazeera reporter Yosri Fouda. "Our task was to find the right ones, the ones who were familiar with the West."

Under these circumstances, the four Jihad recruits from Germany who arrived in the Hindu Kush in the winter of 1999 were a true stroke of luck.

The students, Mohammed Atta, Ziad Jarrah, Marwan al-Shehhi and Ramzi Binalshibh, had left Hamburg-Harburg to join the Holy War. To fund the trip, Shehhi withdrew 12,000 German marks from his account with Dresdner Bank on November 12, 1999. He used the money to buy plane tickets on Turkish Airlines flights to Karachi via Istanbul. As a precaution, the four men flew on four different days. When Jarrah returned to Germany and his girlfriend asked him where he had been, he told her that it would be better for her "not to ask questions."

The group had recruited Mohammed Haydar Zammar, a veteran of the early Al Qaeda days who had fought in Bosnia. Zammar, a heavyset, 300-pound man, distributed manually copied Bin Laden pamphlets in Hamburg and was considered a point of contact for potential Holy Warriors. He is now in custody in Syria and has confessed to having recruited Binalshibh and others for Al Qaeda.

Just how successful he was in his efforts is documented in a video depicting many of the members of the Hamburg terrorist cell.

The video shows the wedding of Said Bahaji, one of the closest friends of Atta and Binalshibh. It was recorded on October 9, 1999, about six weeks before the group of martyrs departed for Afghanistan. The ceremony at the Kuds Mosque on Hamburg's Steindamm Street was something of a class reunion for the northern German Islamist community, and the video attests to the radicalization of the Muslims.

## **THE RECRUITS FROM HAMBURG WHO ARRIVED IN AFGHANISTAN WERE A TRUE STROKE OF LUCK FOR AL QAEDA**

In the video Binalshibh, who had been sitting quietly, cross-legged, in the large assembly room, suddenly began speaking. First he apologized politely for the interruption, but then began preaching to the assembled brothers: "The goal of every Muslim is to free the Islamic lands of every oppressor and tyrant! And when these tyrants attack you, you will become a wave of fire and blood!" Later on the guests sang old Arab fighting songs, led by Marwan al-Shehhi: "We will be filled with glowing enthusiasm, and we will crush the thrones of the oppressors!"

These were symbolic words at a wedding ceremony that would become a farewell ceremony for some of the guests, men who would only return to Hamburg intermittently on their journey to America.

Originally, as Binalshibh reported to his interrogators, the four fighters from Hamburg planned to go to Chechnya, not Afghanistan. Back then, the atrocities committed by the Russians were a constant topic of conversation in German mosques, and volunteers were always leaving for Grosny.

The Hamburg group sought the advice of experienced Mujaheddin. Finally, they were received by Mohamadou Ould Slahi, an Islamist and Al Qaeda recruiter living in Duisburg who is now in custody in Guantanamo Bay. He had received guerilla training in Afghanistan and maintained excellent international contacts.

Ould Slahi, well-versed in matters of conspiracy, warned the volunteers from the Kuds Mosque that Arabs coming from Europe were having trouble making it to Grosny. He told them that it would be better to travel to the Hindu Kush region through the Pakistani city of Quetta.

It was in Quetta, during the first few weeks of the year 2000, that the decision must have been reached to send Atta and Co. to America to conduct "Operation Holy Tuesday."

Armed with Ould Slahi's personal recommendation to Bin Laden, the four Islamists from Germany gradually arrived in Kandahar: the reserved, earnest head of the group, Egyptian Mohammed Atta, 31 at the time; the worldly Lebanese Ziad Jarrah, 24, later photographed in Florida proudly holding his newly acquired pilot's license and wearing dark sunglasses; the wealthy, plump Marwan al-Shehhi, 21, who received a check for 4,000 German marks each month from the United Arab Emirates, to pay for his education; and the jovial Yemeni Ramzi Binalshibh, 27, the last of the group to reach Afghanistan.

## **BIN LADEN ASKED THE YOUNG MEN FROM HAMBURG WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO LIVE AS A MUSLIM IN EUROPE.**

In the mountains, all four delivered the "Baia," the oath that was required to gain access to the inner circle of Al Qaeda: the oath of allegiance to Bin Laden. "I swear by Allah, in whose hands the life of Sheik Mohammed lies: I wish to fight and to die in battle, and to fight again and to die in battle, and then to fight again and to die in battle."

Before long, the group was invited by Bin Laden himself to attend a Ramadan feast, an exceptional honor bestowed upon only very few of the many thousand recruits from all over the world.

During one audience, Bin Laden asked Binalshibh how he felt about the Taliban and what it was like to live as a Muslim in Europe. Then the prince of terror promised the men that they would be permitted to enter paradise as martyrs, but he did not tell them just how this would transpire, not yet.

Shortly before their departure for Germany, Bin Laden summoned the men from Hamburg once again. Al Qaeda's military chief, the Egyptian Mohammed Atif, who was later killed in a US bombing raid in Afghanistan, told the men attending the meeting that they had been selected for a "top secret mission." They were told to obtain a pilot's license in the United States and, for the time being, to get out of Afghanistan quickly. Speed was critical, because the camp's leaders expected renewed American attacks on Al Qaeda positions in early 2000. The US Navy had already launched cruise missiles at Al Qaeda camps in August 1998, though without great success, in the wake of the attacks in Tanzania and Kenya. Now another attack was expected.

Bin Laden and Atif also gave the men a piece of practical advice. They were not to forget to throw away their passports, so that their trip to Afghanistan would remain undetected. They were also told to shave off their beards for their new passport photos, so that they would not be recognized as religious men.

And this was exactly what they did. In his Egyptian passport, number 1617066, which was issued to Atta by the Egyptian General Consulate in Hamburg on May 8, 2000, even though his old passport was still valid, the student in the photo is clean-shaven. From then on, in keeping with Bin Laden's wishes, Atta and the Lebanese Ziad Jarrah would be the leaders of the group.

Sheik Mohammed has confessed to US authorities that he developed a special training manual specifically for the hijackers, one in which behavior in American society was taken into account. It included instructions on how to find useful addresses in the yellow pages, how to select flight schools, and how to study flight schedules. The intention, after all, was to ensure that Atta and the others would be as well-prepared as possible for their time in the United States.

Binalshibh who, like Bin Laden's father, comes from the Yemeni province of Hadramaut, became one of Bin Laden's favorites during his two-month stay in Afghanistan, partly because the prince of terror believed he was especially trustworthy. "Obeida" (his code name) quickly developed the reputation of being a confidante of the boss. In fact, according to Sheik Mohammed, Binalshibh was appointed "Coordinator of the Operations of Holy Tuesday" by Al Qaeda leadership.

To assume this role, however, he had to return to Hamburg where, as Binalshibh says, "the communication among the cells came together and where the commands were received from supreme headquarters in Afghanistan."

Binalshibh was very well-qualified to perform the decisive function of a coordinator: transferring money. He spent eight years working as a clerk for the International Bank of Yemen before traveling to Germany in 1995. His supervisors in Yemen described him as highly rebellious, claiming that he often insulted his superiors, came to work late, or was simply too lazy to lock up confidential documents after the close of business. But he was familiar with the way money moves internationally.

After returning to Germany from Afghanistan, Binalshibh first tried to get pilot training on his own, traveling to the Dutch town of Apeldoorn in mid-March 2000 to enroll in flight school. But Dutch pilots told him that he should learn how to fly in America, if that was where he was headed. They also said that he would receive better training in the United States.

Between May 17, 2000 and October 25, 2000, Binalshibh made four attempts to obtain a visa for the United States, first in Germany, then in Yemen, and then in Germany again. But when a clerk at the American embassy in Berlin returned his 99-mark application fee for the fourth time and recommended that he refrain from any further attempts, it became clear that perhaps the other group members were destined to become martyrs, but not Binalshibh.

Then he gave up and concentrated on his true role - as Bin Laden's personal courier.

On January 31, 2001, a flight from Hamburg touched down onto the runway at Teheran International Airport. Ramzi Binalshibh was on board, but his only objective in making a stopover in Teheran was to cover his tracks. Back home in Hamburg, he had withdrawn all the money from his bank account, all of 1,900 German marks. It was just enough money for the trip to Afghanistan, where Bin Laden was waiting for him. It is only since Binalshibh has talked about this trip that the investigators know that a key meeting of the Al Qaeda leadership took place in the mountains of Afghanistan in early February 2001, a meeting to update Bin Laden on the progress of the plan.

Apparently he was satisfied, and was so convinced of his disciples' willingness to die for the "just cause" that he told Binalshibh what the four targets were that Al Qaeda had selected for the attacks. Three of them, the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, were in fact hit. The fourth pilot, according to Binalshibh's statements during the interrogations, was to attack the Capitol, the seat of the US parliament. However, the aircraft, flown by Ziah Jarrah, crashed over Pennsylvania after passengers resisted the terrorists. US authorities have long presumed that the plane was destined to hit the White House, and only Binalshibh's statements have corrected that erroneous assumption.

According to Binalshibh, Bin Laden had already selected the targets in May or June 2000, and the chief terrorist also personally selected the men who were to accompany each of the four pilots. The planes were not to be hijacked by men from different countries, but by a group from Saudi Arabia, a country to which he felt a particularly strong bond. There were 14 Saudi Arabians, called "the musclemen" by Al Qaeda insiders, because that could only

be used for appropriate tasks. They were men such as Hamsa al-Ghamdi, who flew into the south tower of the WTC and whom Bin Laden praised on a videotape put out by Al Qaeda to honor the attackers: "His heart was filled with love for the fight against the enemy. He was very devout, and he absorbed the Koran with a lightness of heart, like a basket that catches dates falling from a tree."

When Binalshibh left Afghanistan in February 2001, Bin Laden sent him on his way with one additional instruction: "Be patient and await further instructions."

In their confessions, Binalshibh and Sheik Mohammed also explained how the new, detailed commands from Afghanistan reached Mohammed Atta, Marwan al-Shehhi and Ziad Jarrah. At the time, the three pilots from Hamburg were just completing their flight training in the United States. Atta and Shehhi had received their pilot's licenses for civilian aircraft on December 21, 2000, three days before Christmas.

Binalshibh told the interrogation experts that he gave the pilots their instructions at a meeting in the Spanish vacation town of Tarragona in July 2001. Investigators had long since known that the meeting took place, but had virtually no other details. According to their reconstruction of the meeting, Atta himself had traveled to Spain from the United States on Iberia Airlines Flight 656 from Miami, arriving in Madrid at 4:20 p.m. In the Spanish capital, he rented a car - a Hyundai Accent - for seven days. In Tarragona, the "ringleader," as the FBI refers to Atta, checked into the Hotel Casablanca Playa. He paid in cash.

At the vacation spot, Atta told Binalshibh that the hijackers were ready and that the date had been set. Atta and Binalshibh had previously dubbed the operation "Porsche 911," a code word to be used if they ever had to speak to each other on the telephone.

And the "Porsche," Atta now said, was ready to go.

He told Binalshibh that the pilots had been selected and the routes had been coordinated. Their investigations had revealed that the cockpit doors are usually left open after takeoff, presenting ideal conditions for storming the cockpit. He also said that group members had successfully managed to get box cutters on board on test flights, and had not been questioned by security personnel.

At the end of the conversation, Atta wanted to know whether Binalshibh had remembered the jewelry. Atta had asked his co-conspirator to bring him all kinds of flashy jewelry. It was a precautionary measure to prevent him from being detected shortly before reaching his objective. Atta believed that his reentry into the United States would be far less conspicuous if he were disguised as a wealthy Arab.

Spanish investigators presume that Al Qaeda member Imad Zarkas, a.k.a. Abu Dahdah, also attended the meeting. According to FBI experts, Atta had already met with Dahdah in Spain, travelling alone at the time, in January 2001. Investigators believe that this bald man with glasses, head of a group known as "Soldiers of Allah" and currently on trial in Spain for providing assistance to the terrorists, was in charge of the cells that Binalshibh coordinated from his base in Hamburg and that were responsible for providing support to the attackers.

Shortly before the attacks, on August 6 and August 27, 2001, an unknown man named "Shakur" called Abu Dahdah. In the first conversation, he boasted: "I have prepared a few threads and things that will please you."

"Shakur" was more precise in the second telephone conversation: "We have begun studying aviation in class and have even beheaded the bird." He went on to say that it would "take another month, more or less." He then told Abu Dahdah not to mention this to anyone, because the telephone could be "hot."

It was in fact "hot." The Spanish police taped the conversations, and later, after the attack on the World Trade Center, believed that "Shakur" was one of the suicide pilots.

But "Shakur" called again, this time on September 26, 2001, 15 days after the attacks. He wanted to know whether Abu Dahdah had "taken the malaria medicine." Things were "very bad," responded the Spaniard, clearly upset, saying that he was now "ill." At that point, he was already being watched around the clock by the Spanish police, and was arrested a short time later.

Who in fact this secretive "Shakur" was remains a mystery, and the role played by his conversation partner Abu Dahdah is only likely to be elucidated in court. It is certain, however, that supporters in Spain played an important role in Binalshibh's escape during the days leading up to September 11th. On September 5, 2001, six days before the attacks took place, the Yemeni boarded Lufthansa flight 4398, departing Düsseldorf at 2:40 p.m. and bound for Madrid. As Binalshibh has now confessed, when he arrived in the Spanish capital he was met by an Al Qaeda member named Abd al-Wahid, who gave him a Saudi Arabian passport and tickets to Karachi. According to Binalshibh, Al-Wahid was a Saudi Arabian with a British identification card, and was responsible for the travel arrangements of Al Qaeda leadership. Shortly after September 11th, Binalshibh finally arrived in the Afghan city of Kandahar, the secret capital of the Taliban.

He was not the only one who fled to Afghanistan as quickly as possible during the days surrounding September 11th. As Binalshibh has said, Bin Laden knew the exact date of the attacks by no later than the end of August. The chief terrorist then discretely sent messengers around the world to instruct his followers to return to Afghanistan by "no later than September 10th." Bin Laden carelessly had someone call one of his favorite wives, who was in Syria at the time, asking her to return to the safety of Afghanistan, indicating that the request was very urgent. The telephone conversation was tapped by several intelligence services, but none of them foresaw its significance.

At 8:46 a.m. on September 11th, American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. Based on everything investigators know today, the plane was piloted by the former student of urban planning in Hamburg who had taken the German group from Hamburg to Afghanistan, via Duisburg, in the fall of 1999: Mohammed Atta.

Seventeen minutes later, at 9:03 a.m., United Airlines Flight 175 plowed into the south tower of the office complex. Atta's friend, Marwan al-Shehhi, was at the controls.

Another fourteen minutes later, at 9:43 a.m., a Boeing 757, American Airlines Flight 77, crashed into the Pentagon. Khalid al-Midhar, Bin Laden's trusted follower and the first of the volunteers to be selected, a man who had known since 1999 that he was to die a martyr, was on board.

At approximately 10:10 a.m. local time, United Airlines Flight 93 crashed into the ground near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after the passengers had heard about the apocalypse in New York and stormed the cockpit. Jarrah, the former bon vivant at the controls of the aircraft, did not reach his destination.

The terrorists killed more than 3,000 people. They destroyed a symbol of economic power and, most of all, damaged the self-confidence of an entire nation. September 11th was a victory for Islamists, and for them it has become a "holy Tuesday." Sheik Mohammed had been dreaming of such a day since 1993.

## **US PRESIDENT BUSH IS TO DECIDE WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE PLANNERS OF SEPTEMBER 11th.**

Where Binalshibh and Sheik Mohammed are currently being questioned is unknown. It is certain, however, that they are not being held in Guantanamo Bay. Otherwise, there are many rumors. They are said to be on a US warship, at the air force base on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, or at Bagram, the US' main headquarters in Afghanistan. However, it is also possible that they are being held in a country where human rights and prohibitions on torture are not taken that seriously, a country that may be handling the dirty work for the Americans. US investigators refer to these kinds of places as "Hotel California."

US interrogators have never had any doubts about the purpose of their jobs. According to the CIA, it is in the national interest that everything that the two men know about Al Qaeda be extracted from them: "If they are silent, it will cost our blood." Even American politicians are uncomfortable about this ultimatum-like approach. Without specifically mentioning the word "torture," members of the intelligence committees in the US Congress have asked whether force is being used. "All I can say to that is that there is a before and an after September 11th," responded Cofer Black, former director of counterintelligence at the CIA and currently charged with the same duties at the State Department. He added that "we have taken off our kid gloves."

Omar al-Faruk, a sort of Southeast Asia representative of Bin Laden until his arrest, discovered exactly what this means. In his isolation cell in Bagram, the light was left on day and night, and Faruk was forced to squat on the floor at night. His interrogators would suddenly raise the temperature in his cell to a tropical 100°F and then drop it to an icy 10°F, continuing this cycle until he became willing to cooperate.

The circumstances under which the confessions of Binalshibh and Sheik Mohammed were obtained will certainly influence the political and criminal assessment of their cases, if they are ever brought before ordinary courts, that is. The decision as to the legal status of the Al Qaeda members currently in custody ultimately rests with US President George W. Bush.

Will they remain locked up for the rest of their lives, or will they be tried before a military tribunal? From the US perspective, is the death penalty appropriate for a crime of such awesome proportions? Or would it be an even greater punishment if the mass murderers were to spend the rest of their lives in isolation and without any prospects, like Sheik Mohammed's nephew Ramsi Ahmed Yussuf, who was sentenced to 240 years imprisonment in a maximum-security prison in Colorado.

Ramzi Binalshibh was apparently not particularly impressed by the potential consequences of his actions. The prisoner loudly proclaimed that he had nothing against being flown to Guantanamo Bay. The internment camp, joked Binalshibh, is currently the only place in the world "where 500 Mujaheddin fighters can be together in one place." He says he would probably establish an institute or a religious school in the camp. And when he is released, Binalshibh threatens his interrogators, the first thing he will do will be to "kill 1,000 Americans."

By Georg Mascolo, Holger Stark ([www.spiegel.de](http://www.spiegel.de)) - Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

Reading recommendation by Fijihosting:  
Nick Fielding, Yosri Fouda: "Masterminds of Terror".  
Europa Verlag, Hamburg; 256 pages; € 14.90.