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Some Light Shed On Saudi Suspects

Many Raised in Area of Religious Dissent

By Caryle Murphy and David B. Ottaway Washington Post Staff Writers Tuesday, September 25, 2001; Page A12

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As many as a dozen of the 19 suicide hijackers who staged America's worst terrorist attack were young Saudis dedicated to fighting for Islamic causes, the majority of them with roots in a remote, southwestern region of their country that has been a center of religious dissent, according to a U.S. government official and experts on Saudi Arabia.

Six of the men -- mostly in their twenties -- left their homes in the past two years, telling their families they were going to fight with Muslim rebels in the breakaway Russian province of Chechnya, according to Saudi newspaper reports.

Many of the hijackers appear to have come from the isolated, poverty-stricken provinces of Asir and Baha, a stronghold of traditional beliefs and distrust of the central Saudi government. In several instances, family members reported that they had grown increasingly pious before leaving home.

Since the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a good deal has become known about how the hijackers blended into American society, studied at flight schools and moved around the United States. In a few cases, the trail has led back to Germany and Egypt. But only now is information beginning to emerge about the origins, mindsets and families of most of the 19 men.

The Saudi government, which is extremely sensitive about the participation of its citizens in the plot, has not granted visas to reporters for major U.S. publications to trace the hijackers' roots. Saudi officials have repeatedly pointed out that some of the suicide hijackers adopted the names of real people who are still alive and had no involvement in the attack. But U.S. investigators believe they have positively identified 15 of the 19 hijackers.

Saudi newspapers also have used photographs released by U.S. authorities to find the families of alleged hijackers. A U.S. official familiar with the overseas investigation confirmed much of the information that has been in the Saudi papers.

Some of the stunned families said they did not believe their sons were capable of taking thousands of innocent lives, although one father told a Saudi newspaper that his son had psychological problems, and the parents of another suspected hijacker said he had asked for forgiveness and prayers when he last called home.

Among the alleged hijackers whose origins seem to be clear are:

- Fayez Ahmad Al Shehri, first

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identified by the FBI as Fayeز Ahmed, who was aboard United Airlines Flight 175, which crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center. He left his home in the Asir region more than a year ago, his father, Muhammad Al Shehri, a school principal, told the Arab News, an English language newspaper in Jidda. The younger Al Shehri told his family that he was going to join the International Islamic Relief Organization, and his last contact with his family was a phone call earlier this year.

• Ahmad Abdullah Alnami, 23, also from Asir, who was on United Airlines Flight 93, which crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside. The Arab News reported that a photograph of a youth by that name published locally was identical to one provided by the FBI.

Alnami has been missing since December, and his family did not know his whereabouts, according to Al Watan, another Saudi newspaper. It reported that Alnami, who became very religious about 2 1/2 years ago, had been the prayer leader at a mosque in Asir's capital of Abha and had studied Islamic law at King Khaled University there.

Al Watan quoted Alnami's father as saying that his son never returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca 15 months ago and had last called his family four months ago.

• Wael and Waleed M. Alshehri, brothers who were aboard American Airlines Flight 11, the plane that hit the World Trade Center's North Tower. They came from the small town of Khamis Mushayt outside Abha, where the Saudi Air Force has its main base for protecting southwest Saudi Arabia.

The brothers' pictures matched those released by the FBI, the Arab News reported. Their father, Mohammed Ali Asgley Al Shehri, a businessman, told Al Watan that his son Wael, 25, had psychological problems and had gone to Medina in December with his brother Waleed, 21, to seek help from religious officials for this problem. He said that they did not return from the trip and that he had not heard from them since.

The brothers came from a family of 11 boys and one girl, the paper said. Wael had a degree in physical education from the Abha Teachers College, where his younger brother had also studied, according to their father.

The paper cited sources close to the family as saying that both men had become very religious before disappearing and had spoken of joining Muslim fighters in Chechnya. The sources said the brothers spoke limited English.

Previous reports that Waleed Alshehri was the son of a Saudi diplomat have been denied.

• Hani Hasan Hanjour, believed to have been the pilot who flew American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon. He came from the city of Taif and left his home for the United Arab Emirates last December, Arab News reported. His family has been accepting condolences, believing that their son died in the attack, the paper said.

But the family disputed suggestions Hanjour was a hijacker. "We don't know what happened to our son on the plane," the family told Al Watan. "He had contacted us eight hours before the incident to inquire about our health. He was very normal."

• Hamza Saleh Alghamdi, 20, who was aboard Flight 175. He is from Baljurshi in Baha Province, the same town as two other Saudis believed to have been among the hijackers: Ahmed Ibrahim Alghamdi, who also was on Flight 175, and Ahmad Ibrahim Alhaznawi, who was on Flight 93 and whose father is a prayer leader at a Baljurshi mosque.

Some Light Shed On Saudi Suspects (washingtonpost.com)

Al Watan said a young man with the name Hamza Saleh Alghamdi left the country 18 months ago for Chechnya. A graduate of a religious high school, he phoned home several times from abroad but did not tell his family where he was, the Arab News said. In a call four months ago, he asked his parents to forgive him and pray for him, the paper reported.

Still, the father of Alghamdi told Al Watan that the picture provided by the FBI was not that of his son. "It has no resemblance to him at all," he said.

Arab and U.S. analysts have been struck by the number of suspects with connections to the mountainous provinces of Asir and Baha.

Asir was the last region of the kingdom conquered by the ruling Saud family and did not come under central government authority until the early 1930s. It remained a wild backwater of unruly tribes for the next 50 years. It is just north of Yemen, where the alleged terrorist leader Osama bin Laden has his family roots.

The oil boom of the 1970s that brought much wealth to the Saudi kingdom almost completely bypassed Asir. Many of its impoverished inhabitants turned to the government for jobs, seeking employment in the military and security services where they hold mostly lower and middle-ranking jobs, according to Saudi sources.

For the past 30 years, Asir has had the same governor, Prince Khalid al Faisal, who has been credited with bringing it a measure of modernity and prosperity. In the past few years, he has sought to use its natural beauty and cool climate to attract Arab tourists. But many inhabitants are resentful that the oil-based welfare state has not provided for them.

The region also has been a reservoir of Islamic militants eager to enroll themselves in *jihad*, or holy war. One reason may be that many members of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, another fundamentalist group, have served as teachers there, according to Charles W. Freeman, a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia who now heads the Middle East Policy Council.

One of the kingdom's leading dissident clerics, Safar al Hawali, comes from Abha. He has scorned the U.S. military presence in the kingdom in his anti-government preachings. No evidence has yet surfaced that any of the hijackers was a follower of Hawali. But most of them probably were aware of his militant views, which gained widespread publicity after the United States sent hundreds of thousands of troops to Saudi Arabia following Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Staff writer Hanna Rosin contributed to this report.

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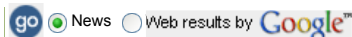
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