

tactical commander of the operation. Such a quick and critical judgment invites speculation about whether they had already taken Atta's measure at some earlier meeting. To be sure, some gaps do appear in the record of Atta's known whereabouts during the preceding years. One such gap is February–March 1998, a period for which there is no evidence of his presence in Germany and when he conceivably could have been in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ Yet to date, neither KSM, Binalshibh, nor any other al Qaeda figure interrogated about the 9/11 plot has claimed that Atta or any other member of the Hamburg group traveled to Afghanistan before the trip in late 1999.

While the four core Hamburg cell members were in Afghanistan, their associates back in Hamburg handled their affairs so that their trip could be kept secret. Motassadeq appears to have done the most. He terminated Shehhi's apartment lease, telling the landlord that Shehhi had returned to the UAE for family reasons, and used a power of attorney to pay bills from Shehhi's bank account.⁹⁵ Motassadeq also assisted Jarrah, offering to look after Aysel Senguen in Jarrah's absence. Said Bahaji attended to similar routine matters for Atta and Binalshibh, thereby helping them remain abroad without drawing attention to their absence.⁹⁶

Preparing for the Operation

In early 2000, Atta, Jarrah, and Binalshibh returned to Hamburg. Jarrah arrived first, on January 31, 2000.⁹⁷ According to Binalshibh, he and Atta left Kanda-har together and proceeded first to Karachi, where they met KSM and were instructed by him on security and on living in the United States. Shehhi apparently had already met with KSM before returning to the UAE. Atta returned to Hamburg in late February, and Binalshibh arrived shortly thereafter. Shehhi's travels took him to the UAE (where he acquired a new passport and a U.S. visa), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and one or more other destinations. Shehhi also returned to Germany, possibly sometime in March.⁹⁸

After leaving Afghanistan, the hijackers made clear efforts to avoid appearing radical. Once back in Hamburg, they distanced themselves from conspicuous extremists like Zammar, whom they knew attracted unwanted attention from the authorities.⁹⁹ They also changed their appearance and behavior. Atta wore Western clothing, shaved his beard, and no longer attended extremist mosques. Jarrah also no longer wore a full beard and, according to Senguen, acted much more the way he had when she first met him. And when Shehhi, while still in the UAE in January 2000, held a belated wedding celebration (he actually had been married in 1999), a friend of his was surprised to see that he had shaved off his beard and was acting like his old self again.¹⁰⁰

But Jarrah's apparent efforts to appear less radical did not completely conceal his transformation from his Lebanese family, which grew increasingly concerned about his fanaticism. Soon after Jarrah returned to Germany, his father asked Jarrah's cousin—a close companion from boyhood—to intercede. The