

From Hamburg to Ground Zero: The Roots of Muslim Anger

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Even children on the street think Abderrazek Labied is a terrorist. “They come up to me and shout ‘Bin Laden! Bin Laden!’ when I walk down the street,” he says. Police have been barely more subtle with their suspicions. Abderrazek was recently detained as part of a fundamentalist cell suspected of hatching a terrorist plot in the back of an Islamic bookstore here in downtown Hamburg.

Abderrazek certainly fits the terrorist profile. A few years ago he grew a long, pious beard, stopped dating German women, became friends with the group that planned the September 11 attacks, and began praying at the radical mosque they frequented. Abderrazek Labied is about as close to the September 11 hijackers as anyone alive today.

Abderrazek also fits the profile of the September 11 hijackers in a counterintuitive way--he moved to Germany looking for a better life. He was excited to move from Morocco to Germany. “I came to Germany because every parent in the third world wants their son to emigrate to the first world,” he says, “first to take care of themselves and later to take care of the parents.” He describes how he then became repulsed by what he saw as a grim society fixated on material possessions and animal instincts.

That repulsion helped shape the man wiretapped by police a few months ago. “I hope that I will die a martyr,” a presumed co-conspirator is heard saying to Abderrazek. “Yes, God willing,” Abderrazek says in response.

Abderrazek doesn't say those kinds of things in public, especially since he is still under police investigation. But he doesn't hide his disillusionment with life in the West.

“I recently visited my family and they tell me, ‘Abderrazek, you don't laugh like you used to. You don't tell jokes like you used to. What happened?’” He kicks at some fallen leaves and steps into the shadow of the Hamburg courthouse where is attending the trial of a friend charged with assisting the September 11 attacks. “I don't know,” he said, “People change and places change them.”

Hamburg is infamous as the planning center for the September 11 attacks, yet the root causes of the terrorist threat are generally seen in Middle East problems like the Palestinian situation and Cairene slum poverty. But is that the whole picture? Were the Hamburg-based terrorists merely the puppets of far-away masters, the extensions of a distant military anger that could be summoned into action, like cruise missiles stationed on foreign soil? In the year and a half since the attacks, when our nation's fears have been coaxed from the anguish of an unfamiliar enemy to the familiar template of desert dictator, I began to wonder whether we have overlooked a critical element of what faces us.

The recent trial of Abderrazek's friend in Hamburg, Mounir el-Motassadeq, was the first opportunity to get a glimpse of the people behind the attacks. What I found as I listened to the testimony there underscored what Hamburg police has come to believe: the leaders of the September 11 attacks arrived in Germany as normal immigrants, not as committed terrorists. Only after they moved to their adopted country did they become ensnared in the machinations of Al Qaeda.

It is a pattern repeated over and over again. Ahmed Ressam, the man who wanted to send LAX into the sky on the eve of the new millennium, was radicalized in Toronto after having fled his native Algeria to escape Islamic

violence. Richard Reid, the man who tried to detonate his footwear on a flight from Paris to Miami, was radicalized in London. Jamal Beghal, arrested with a suitcase of plans to detonate the US embassy in Paris, scraped along in run-down Paris suburbs before turning to Islam, as did the Algerian men recently convicted of detonating bombs in the Paris subway.

These examples lead to a counterintuitive notion: don't be afraid of those force-fed a diet of holy hate far away in Afghani madrassas. Worry about those so enthralled by what we offer that they came over to live among us. Hamburg alone has 120,000 Muslims--so if the problem is in the immigrant communities, how big a problem are we talking?

But within the Muslim community of Hamburg, I found the vast majority are horrified that their religion has been hijacked by terrorists. Hamburg police director Bodo Franz puts the number of fundamentalists in Hamburg at "a few dozen." Whatever is causing the problem, it hasn't spread.

Abderrazek Labied was detained last April on the suspicion that he and five others had been planning a terror attack from the Attawhid ("Unity of God") Islamic bookstore, a modest store located in a small two story building in the drugs-and-prostitution section of central Hamburg. Although the store was recently allowed to reopen because police were unable to find sufficient evidence of a terrorist plot, police are still convinced they acted with probable cause and place this group firmly among the 'few dozen.'

The bookstore is a conspiratorial place, where nervous glances are exchanged and conversations drop to a whisper when a non-Arab walks in. It is a simple room with wooden racks around the perimeter of the room, lined with books in Arabic, German and French. Towards the back is a small selection of perfume, tapes, and clothing. There were also women's head scarves, which I imagine men buy for them, since I never saw a woman set foot in the store. There was a tape of

an angry-sounding sermon, in Arabic, playing over the store's stereo.

Hatem Said, another member of the bookstore group, echoes Abderrazek's disappointment about the country to which he had moved. Hatem, a man of medium build, a closely trimmed beard, and serious eyes, met a German girl in his small hometown in northern Egypt and moved with her to Germany in 1997. The marriage held, but his vision of his newly adopted country didn't.

"Everyone is just busy with themselves," he says, describing his vision of a day in the life of an average German. "You get up in the morning and you go to work, come home, have a fight with your wife, and go to bed. I had the false expectation that you wouldn't just be a work machine here."

Having left Egypt to escape sloth and corruption, he has found himself instead in a country he believes has been hollowed out in the pursuit of material happiness. As we walk through a shopping mall, I ask whether Germany's success in that pursuit of wealth mean that they are doing something right. Hatem looks at me with earnest eyes. "The Germans don't have wealth," he answers. "Maybe on vacation. But the other times they have more stress than we do." It was that stress that drove him to redefine his values. Now, he says in a German that contains only traces of his Egyptian heritage, "my sense of wealth is how I can get closer to Allah."

We walk past a billboard for a mail order catalog that features a woman wearing nothing but a bra and the company's charge card. "There must be something to interest you in things other than naked women," Hatem says. "First they have ads with half naked women, then totally naked women. Where do you go from there?"

For Hatem, this celebration of sexual urges is further proof that the society he lives in is the utter inverse of everything he values. Yet he and almost every other Muslim I spoke with couldn't stop talking about it.

This same obsession was present at the formation of modern Islamic fundamentalism. In 1948, a young Egyptian named Sayyid Qutb took a trip to

the United States, a place, he believed, where “imagination and dreams glimmer on this world with illusion and wonder.” But the America he found--more precisely, the sexuality that he encountered--were clear proof to him that the West had not risen above the level of the animal. The word ‘bashful,’ he writes angrily, has become “a dirty, disparaging word.” Yet his attempt to excoriate the “American temptress” heaves with repressed titillation. “She knows seductiveness lies in the face, and in expressive eyes, and thirsty lips,” he writes. It “lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs. She knows it lies in the clothes: in bright colors that awaken primal sensations, and in designs that reveal the temptations of the body--and in American girls these are sometimes live, screaming temptations!”

Qutb, a mild-mannered literary critic prior to his departure, returned to Egypt a changed man and ultimately became the father of the modern fundamentalist movement. His writings began to reflect his growing conviction that only a bloody jihad against the decadent West could excise the chancre of the “rubbish heap of the West.” He was soon thrown in jail, and there, under torture, he produced his most virulent work. He was hanged a year before Israel routed Egypt in 1967 in the six day war, but it was widely believed that the defeat was merely the fulfilling of Qutb’s prophecy that God would punish a nation gone astray.

Not only the tensions of Qutb’s political views are still current in Hamburg. On the way home from the bookstore, I passed a prostitute standing on a corner of the Steindamm. She was Lebanese and a Muslim by birth. She had moved here only three months ago from Berlin, but already understood the local clientele. “The Muslims are the worst,” she said, describing their insistent haggling and demanding manner. “Even the ones with the beards and religious clothing. They may come to me and say what I am doing is bad and *haram* [forbidden], but in the end they still look at me and say, ‘so, how much does it cost?’”

The gulf between the cultures seemed to widen even further after the September 11 attacks. Muslims reported being stared at in buses, avoided on sidewalks, and hassled at government offices. The open suspicion has subsided in the last year, but lingering fear has helped fuel a rightward political shift. Touting his hawkish stance on crime and immigrants, Ronald Schill was elected to the post of secretary of the interior for the state of Hamburg shortly after September 11. His tenure has done little but institutionalize the unease. “Schill and his people expect immigrants to completely mold themselves to Germany,” Mustafa Yoldas, imam of a Turkish mosque, told me. “He won’t think we’re integrated until we put in blue contact lenses, dye our hair blond, and complain about foreigners over beer and sausages.”

At the same time, Germans like Helmut Voigtland, a lawyer and the president of a St. Georg community group, still lives with the vague dread that something new is in the works. “It starts with the posters I see in Arabic or Persian,” he says. “I ask myself, are they calling for world revolution, or inviting me to a party?” Scholars of Muslim fundamentalism find the cultural schism reflected within the individuals they study. Gilles Kepel, who has written extensively on the history of Muslim fundamentalism, casts the situation in clinical terms. “They have a schizophrenic identity,” he says. “They are torn between two identities, between the slang and pop culture of the West and their traditions at home, first consorting with women and then training in Afghani or Pakistani camps.” The increased mobility of the modern world brings the two irreconcilable halves dangerously close. “This is an extraordinary byproduct of globalization,” he says. “We have produced individuals with shattered identities, desperate for a therapy to reconcile the two halves. Some of them choose a lethal therapy.” Khaled Abou El Fadl knows the desperation from personal experience. Raised in Egypt and Kuwait and now a highly respected professor of law at

UCLA, he remembers turning to radical Islam in his youth in an attempt to understand a culture that spoke in pious terms but followed every Western fashion. "The prevailing feeling I had then was one of absolute frustration," he says. "We are Arabs, we are Muslims, but the reality was a schizophrenic existence. While talking of colonization we were drinking Cokes. The contradictions are overwhelming. When I was growing up we talked about American evil, and then one guy got a white girlfriend and he was suddenly a celebrity. This made me long--long--for purity, for something that would make it all simple."

He found that simplicity in Islamic fundamentalism. "It's very easy to say aha, I can now put God into my heart. I can feel aloof, flip my nose at the various contradictions. What greater high is there than that?" Abou El Fadl was ultimately challenged by his father to take a more critical look at his religious beliefs, and now spends much of his time speaking and teaching about reconciling Islamic beliefs with modernity, an intellectual exercise which robs the faith of simple truths. Abou El Fadl remembers a woman who approached him after class. "I will never attend your classes again," Abou El Fadl recalls her telling him. "When I converted to Islam, all confusion ended. Now it's back."

Muslims often find themselves particularly marginalized in Europe, where the concepts of nationality and citizenship are much more closely intertwined than in an immigrant nation like the United States. Bassam Tibi, a professor of international relations and Islam expert at the University of Göttingen, moved to Germany from Syria forty years ago, but still doesn't feel integrated. "I would love to feel like a German, but it is impossible," he says. "To be German is an ethnic identity." He sees the liberal European legal structure regarding immigration and generous welfare net as an easy target for terrorists to exploit. European nations are now slowly awakening to the threat, although not quickly enough. "Before 9/11 England was a

paradise for Al Qaeda," he says. "Germany is still a paradise."

Hamburg is still asleep when Muslims gather for pre-dawn prayers in a mosque near the university where most of the September 11 cell studied. At this hour, most men take only ten minutes for prayers and then leave the mosque again quickly.

Several times a week, Abu Abdullah comes to this mosque to pray. He is a large man in a white kaftan and a scraggly beard, and one day after his morning prayers, he tells me how rootless his quest for roots has made him. He had arrived with dreams of a better life, but when his new life proved unsatisfactory he began to retreat into Islam.

But the more intense Abu Abdullah's devoted himself to the religion of his heritage, which he had never studied before, the less he was understood by the country around him--or by his friends back home. When he returned to Cairo in 1995 he realized how far he had drifted. He was immediately stopped and interrogated at the airport for looking like a fundamentalist. Even his friends no longer wanted anything to do with him. "They want you to be Western, with an earring and a girlfriend in a bikini," he says. "When you come from Europe with a kilo of hair on your face, talking about Allah, they just think you're crazy."

Abu Abdullah has not returned to Egypt since. "I'm more European than Egyptian now. I look like a classic Muslim, but I don't know Egypt anymore." Since September 11, he even finds he can no longer be open even with the few who understand the position he is in. The community has become splintered by suspicion. Anyone asking personal questions is bound to be asked whether they are working for the CIA or Mossad. Even Abu Abdullah, who knew terror cell members Said Bahaji and Ramzi Binalshibh from the mosque, feels that suspicion when he walks into a different mosque. "Everyone whispers 'who is that?' and they shush each other up.

‘Don’t talk about politics.’ No one knows who is who.”

I had purchased some tapes of Islamic sermons at the bookstore, and I took them for translation to Dr. Abdulhafur Sabuni, a professor of Arab language and literature at the University of Hamburg. One look at the cassette covers was all he needs. “Peasant seducers,” he says dismissively, pointing at the names of the preachers on the cassettes. I didn’t need to say anything for the next twenty minutes as Sabuni vents his frustration. He understands the vulnerable position of immigrants; he himself had come from Syria three decades ago and had resisted the same pressures that had helped shape the September 11 hijackers.

He picks up a cassette with a luridly airbrushed cover of an angry eye and bushy brow staring at the viewer from above a bed of flames. “These appeal to those looking for a grip on life,” he says. “To get the modern apartment, the modern car, you need to work a lot. But if you work a lot then you don’t have time for your family. And these people,” he says waving the tape, “these people tell them the car isn’t important, it’s the family, not the built-in kitchen and the cell phone. It is fear, nothing else.”

Sabuni understands the appeal of these preachers. “They say the government wants to separate us from our religion, the gulf states are laughing stocks, and Saudi Arabia is not a country, it is a gas station,” he says. “And that’s not false. The whole world supports Israel while the Palestinians are massacred.”

He leans forward and stabs a finger at the cassette with the fiery eye. “This is for people looking for something to hold on to,” he says. “Don’t underestimate that.”

It was Al Qaeda recruiters like Mohammed Haydar Zammar that gave that anger something to hold on to. There may well be a greater anger, in absolute terms, swirling through the slums of Cairo, but

fundamentalists know that the more valuable anger is the one that carries a Western passport. Zammar is a loud, large man believed to have been a key link between the freeform discontent in Hamburg’s mosques and the jihad goals of groups like Al Qaeda. He spent his days in mosques proselytizing against the West and taking note of who was listening.

Surprisingly, it appears to have remained a very small group. “Every time we trace a new suspect, he always leads back to people that we’ve know a long time,” Hamburg police chief Franz says. The cast of characters, Franz believes, is remarkably small and, critically, is not widely supported by the Muslim community.

Transcripts of police questioning of Zammar less than a week after the September 11 attacks document one of Zammar’s final days as a free man. After Zammar refuses to cooperate, the transcript adds a dry addendum that “In his refusal to answer more questions Mr. Zammar directed our attention to the fact that he has always been mistreated as a Muslim in Germany and that America had never been punished for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki...the witness admits that he knows something, but won’t say anything, he politicizes, gets loud, won’t let the investigator finish his sentences, and speaks of the raped women in Bosnia.”

Zammar fled Hamburg shortly thereafter. He was subsequently arrested in Syria and is now in American custody at an undisclosed location. Police have so far seen no sign of another recruiter taking his place.

Back at the trial, I look at the defendant and try to see the signs of evil. I find nothing. He exudes a bit of the wheedly sycophant, perhaps, but that’s a bit thin for someone marked as one of the most dangerous enemies of the Western world. But now I understand that one of the reasons for the lack of distinguishing characteristics is that the recent terrorist attacks have been rooted much more from within the Western experience than from the easily identifiable outside. It is not

suffering from the distant evil of the Great Satan that is a prerequisite for becoming a terrorist, but rather achieving the dream of moving there.

That helps explain why none of the terrorists were from the primary Middle Eastern flashpoints: there have been no terrorists from the slums of Cairo or from the center of the Saudi religious movement. There were no Palestinians among the 9/11 hijackers. In fact, despite the incredible importance of the Palestinian plight in the Muslim worldview, it is remarkable that there have been almost no Palestinians linked to Al Qaeda at all.

“Since September 11 I feel like a Muslim,” Hatem Said told me. “It’s the most important thing in my life.” That is the anger we need to worry about.