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Where Boys Grow Up to Be Jihadis

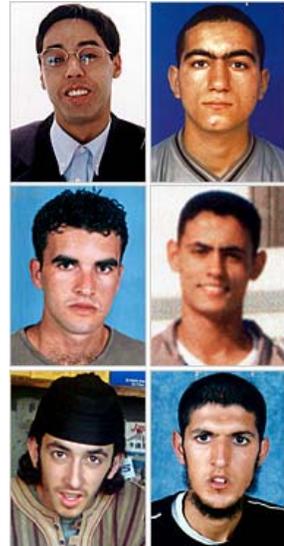


Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

By ANDREA ELLIOTT Published: November 25, 2007

No one thought it was strange when Muncif Ben About disappeared from his crowded, unkempt neighborhood in the Moroccan city of Tetouan. Men are always leaving Jamaa Mezuak, as the quarter is known. And Muncif, who was 21, had ventured off before, roaming the worn medinas of Casablanca and Marrakesh, posing stiffly for snapshots to take home. His curiosity pulled him in many directions. He was brilliant with numbers but would lose himself in novels. He began training to be a military pilot but then changed his mind and settled on engineering. A year later, in 2006, he switched to mathematics.

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THE TRAIN BOMBER Jamal Ahmidan, top left, known to friends as Chino, turned from drug dealing to

That summer, Muncif told his mother he was going to Mauritania, the parched Muslim country south of Morocco. He wanted to study Islam. She saw no reason to worry. He was a good boy; this seemed just another fit of wanderlust. But three days after he left, he called home.

"Forgive me if I have done wrong," Muncif said. It was a phrase Moroccans use to bid farewell. He was going to Iraq, he said. He wanted to do jihad.

The family was shocked. Muncif had always been strong-willed. He was stubborn in his religious convictions. But the war in Iraq seemed a world away.

Three months later, Muncif's brother Bilal disappeared. His mother told herself that Bilal, who was 26, must have found a way to Spain, where so many men from the neighborhood went looking for work. It was unthinkable that he would have followed his brother. Bilal's passions were soccer and hip-hop. He loved to dance. He hardly seemed poised to

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terror. **THE MEN WHO LEFT**
 Clockwise, from top right: In 2006, Bilal Ben Aboud, Muncif Ben Aboud, Abdelmunim Amakchar Elamrani, Hamza Akhlifa and Younes Achbak departed to wage jihad in Iraq.

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Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

IN THE SOUK A bustling marketplace in the northern Moroccan city of Tetouan.



Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

A MOTHER'S DISBELIEF Rahma Ahmidan, Chino's mother, received a phone call from her son just before he and his compatriots blew themselves up in an apartment building near Madrid.

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Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

COMMON GROUND On the Jamaa Mezuak soccer pitch, some of the young men admire both Osama bin Laden and the soccer star Zinedine Zidane.

blow himself up. But one afternoon in October, the telephone rang again.

Bilal was calling to say goodbye. He was in Syria with a group of strangers — some Turks, Moroccans and British Muslim converts — and he was heading to Iraq.

The family pleaded with him to come home. They had already seen one son leave. Bilal said he was sorry and then hung up. That same hour, another phone rang two blocks away. Bilal's close friend, Hamza Akhlifa, was also calling home to say goodbye. He was in Syria with Bilal, bound for Iraq.

Word quickly spread through the winding streets where the families live, high above a littered bluff at the edge of the city. By the end of last year, at least eight men had left Tetouan for Iraq. They hoped to become martyrs by fighting the American occupation, according to Moroccan security officials. Five of them grew up within blocks of one another, racing through the same narrow alleys, past the same whitewashed homes.

The people of Jamaa Mezuak were no strangers to militant Islam. A few years earlier, five other men from the neighborhood said their own goodbyes. They went to Spain to seek their fortunes. But they became famous as key suspects in the bombings of four commuter trains in Madrid that killed 191 people on March 11, 2004. They called home a few weeks after the attacks, their voices urgent. They were hiding in an apartment on the city's outskirts. As the Spanish police closed in, an explosion rocked the building. The men died instantly, in a ghastly group suicide.

In the years since Sept. 11, the question of what makes a terrorist has become ever more urgent. Much about young Muslim militants remains opaque, from the texture of their family lives to the full scope of their desires. Theories of radicalization have come and gone. Experts have variously blamed poverty, Arab nationalism, the Internet, geopolitics, alienation, charismatic sheiks, dictatorial regimes and youthful anomie. But in the study of contemporary terrorism, there has never been a laboratory quite like Jamaa Mezuak.

Perhaps no theory could have predicted Jamal Ahmidan, a mastermind of the Madrid bombings. He was a feisty drug

dealer with a passion for motorcycles and a weakness for Spanish women. His fellow plotters from the old neighborhood in Morocco included petty criminals and a candy vendor. If they seemed a poor fit for militant Islam, so were the young men from Jamaa Mezuak who eventually left for Iraq. One styled his hair after [John Travolta](#). Another was a frustrated comedian. They had yearned for a life in Europe, it seemed, not death in the Middle East.

What, then, caused them to embrace violent jihad? In a city flooded with televised images of civilians dying in Iraq, the forces of politics and religion surely weighed on these men's lives. For some of them, public outrage merged with personal grievance. One man lost his job and left for Iraq six months later. Another was forbidden to marry the girl he loved. The drug dealer had languished in a Moroccan jail, separated from his young son.

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Yet individual experiences and ideological convictions can only explain so much. Increasingly, terrorism analysts have focused on the importance of social milieu. Some stress that terrorists are not simply loners, overcome by a militant cause. They are more likely to radicalize together with others who share the same passions and afflictions and daily routines. As the story of Jamaa Mezuak suggests, the turn to violence is seldom made alone. Terrorists don't simply die for a cause, Scott Atran, an anthropologist who studies terrorism, told me. "They die for each other."

The Neighborhood

There is nothing isolated about Tetouan. This city of 400,000 on the northern tip of Morocco sits just miles from the Mediterranean Sea. It has long been a crossroads between Africa and Europe, a place steeped in many cultures. Today, some of its streets still carry the Spanish names of their colonial past. Men sip espressos in weathered cafes. The city is a short drive from Tangier, the onetime retreat of Paul Bowles and William Burroughs, where the Spanish coastline glimmers seductively on clear nights from across the Strait of Gibraltar. It is a constant reminder of what lies just over the horizon, the promise of a different life.

The neighborhood of Jamaa Mezuak rises up over a meandering, muddy river on the western side of Tetouan, at the foot of a craggy mountain. Lines of parched clothing crisscross the rooftops, sharing space with satellite dishes. Much of the area was once farmland owned by a wealthy man who built the first local mosque, or *jamaa*, in 1933 and gave it his family's name, Mezuak. Squatters eventually populated the area. Thousands more poured in from the nearby Rif Mountains after a devastating drought in the early 1980s. Many of these farmers and peasants struggled to adapt to city life and would feel alienated for years to come.

Their neighborhood is a cacophonous blend of urban and rural. Sheep spill down alleys, weaving around oncoming traffic. At night, the animals scuttle into converted garages, watched over by aging shepherds with wooden canes. No one knows exactly how many people live in Jamaa Mezuak — the mayor of Tetouan puts the number at 6,000, though others insist that it is triple that. But the streets teem with life. Drug dealers idle near butcher shops, where plucked chickens hang limply for sale. Boys in soccer jerseys linger on stoops. Their uncles gamble in Cafe Chicago, smoking cigarettes rolled with hashish. Weddings are held at the Palace of Peace, a catering hall aglow with glass chandeliers. Down the street, bearded men in djellabas, the hooded robes, gather outside a mosque as women pass by in whispering clusters and slip behind the mirrored doors of beauty salons.

If there is one outlet for the neighborhood's wellspring of male energy, it is soccer. In the summer, hundreds of boys gather on bleachers to watch as players glide across a worn, concrete pitch, some of them barefoot. Sitting around the bleachers one afternoon in July, a group of teenagers talked to me about their heroes. They said they worshipped [Zinedine Zidane](#), the Muslim of Algerian descent who conquered the soccer world from France. They loved the Prophet Muhammad. The mere mention of [Osama bin Laden](#) elicited a sea of upturned thumbs.

"He's very courageous," said Ayman, a short, spunky 13-year-old with honey-colored skin. "Nobody did what he did. He challenges the whole world. He even challenges George Bush."

Another teenage boy said he would gladly volunteer to fight the American occupation in Iraq if it meant bringing independence to Iraqis. "We want to help our Muslim brothers," he told me. Of the Americans, he added: "If they kill us, we go to God. If we stay here, there is joblessness."

Such talk is unremarkable in many Muslim countries. But it hardly fits Morocco's international image — not only the image that draws honeymooners to Marrakesh but also the one cultivated by many Moroccans. They take pride in their practice of a tolerant Islam and in a historical legacy that some still call "the Moroccan exception." For decades, this

country seemed immune to the political and religious struggles that engulfed the Middle East, not to mention Morocco's roiling neighbor, Algeria. Only eight miles of ocean separate Morocco from Spain. Morocco's ancient name, Al Maghreb Al Aqsa, means "the land farthest to the West." Its strategic position on the map brought centuries of plundering and colonization but also a constant exposure to new languages and ideas. Long after Morocco won independence in 1956 — from Spain in the north and France in the south — croissants are still a mainstay of breakfast. Some restaurants openly serve alcohol. Many women reject the veil.

Yet Morocco's isolation from the Muslim world was never absolute. Political power lies in the hands of a monarchy that claims a direct lineage to Islam's prophet. In the 1960s, King Hassan II allowed Islamism to spread as a counterweight to secular political opposition. The north became especially fertile ground for Islamist movements and Wahhabism, the puritanical strain of Saudi Islam. Hassan had largely abandoned the area after his forces crushed a Berber rebellion there. For more than 40 years, he rarely visited his palaces in Tangier and Tetouan. Government services in the region slackened, and Islamists filled part of the void, offering free food and medicine to the poor. Wahhabi teachings found their way to cities like Tetouan, where women wearing the niqab, or full-face veil, are now common.

Increasingly, northern Morocco is the site of cross currents: the arrival of tourists and the departure of locals. Since taking the throne in 1999, King [Mohammed VI](#) has embraced the region, vacationing in his palaces there and fostering development. But not everyone has reaped the benefits. Many of the locals find their rickety cars are no match for the smooth new highways or that they are woefully untrained to compete for jobs in the area's lavish resorts. The government has been refurbishing Tetouan in the hope of attracting foreign investment. But the city's gleaming new high-rises, bus station and art museum are a world away from the garbage-strewn streets of Jamaa Mezuak, where every other wall seems to bear the same graffiti: "Don't put your trash here, donkey."

Year after year, thousands of young Moroccans attempt the crossing to Spain, buying fake visas or hiding under trucks parked on ferries. For those who stay behind, the best jobs are often found in Tetouan's thriving contraband trade. Every morning before dawn, men and women pile into taxis and ride 30 minutes to the border with Ceuta, a Spanish enclave on the northern Moroccan coast. They cross over to buy tax-free goods — sneakers, truck tires, peanut butter, linens — and then smuggle them back to Tetouan's airless markets, climbing a hill they call Tora Bora.

King Mohammed has struggled to manage the country's rising religious tensions. Early in his reign, he sought to distance himself from his father's despotic rule by instituting a number of reforms. But his new family laws, which have raised the legal age for marriage and extended women greater rights in divorce proceedings, set off mass demonstrations before they were enacted. As the government secured free trade with the United States, as well as millions of dollars in aid, hard-liners assailed the king for being overly solicitous of the West.

Perhaps nothing has emboldened the king's detractors more than his reaction to Sept. 11. He swiftly condemned the attacks, authorizing a memorial service for the victims and declaring Morocco an ally of the United States in fighting terror. In response, a group of Moroccan theologians signed a fatwa declaring it a sin to join a coalition against a Muslim state. The kingdom stopped short of sending troops to Afghanistan or Iraq, but it has helped in other ways. The Moroccan security services have reportedly detained and interrogated terror suspects targeted by the [C.I.A.](#) As the United States was preparing to invade Iraq, Osama bin Laden released an audio recording in February 2003 in which he singled out Morocco as one of several "tyrannical and apostate regimes, enslaved by America."

Three months later, on May 16, a dozen Moroccan men blew themselves up at sites around Casablanca, killing 45 people. It was the first major terrorist attack in the nation's sovereign history — "the price that Morocco paid for collaborating with the United States,"

Mohammed Darif, a terrorism specialist at Hassan II University in Casablanca, told me. The attacks in Casablanca marked a turning point. Until then, Moroccan militants had waged jihad predominantly overseas, joining the mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s and later in Kashmir, Bosnia and Chechnya.

Several hundred miles to the north, another plot would soon take shape. It would demonstrate the strange and unpredictable ways in which a terrorist circle can form. And it would eventually propel a new group of men to leave their families in Tetouan for Iraq.

The Road to Spain

No one from the neighborhood made it in Spain like Jamal Ahmidan. A short, pugnacious high-school dropout, he was the sort of guy who drew attention long before he bought his first [BMW](#). He had crooked teeth and striking eyes that earned him the nickname Chino, Spanish for Chinaman. Before he was 30, he had built a lucrative hashish and ecstasy trade that operated from Holland to Morocco. Though he never grew taller than 5-foot-4, he had an indomitable air. He fought anyone who took him on.

“To his face you had to show respect,” one of his childhood friends, Anwar Belaman, told me.

How a small-time drug dealer from Morocco became one of the masterminds of the Madrid attacks is a mystery that continues to dog the Spanish authorities. In the epic bombing trial that concluded in Madrid on Oct. 31, Chino’s personal journey was barely glimpsed, despite his well-documented place at the center of the plot. I pieced together the following narrative from interviews with his mother, six of his siblings and his Moroccan lawyer, as well as neighbors and friends. A number of them had never spoken with a reporter.

Chino grew up as the fourth of 14 children, in a spare, cinder-block house near the center of Jamaa Mezuak. He began working for his father at 15, selling cloth from a stall in one of Tetouan’s crowded markets. He was restless with ambition. One sibling recalled that he yearned to be rich. After his older brother Mustafa moved to Europe, Chino followed in the early ’90s, crossing over illegally and settling in Madrid. Back home, they were considered pioneers — they belonged to the first large wave of Moroccans to arrive in Spain after its economy began to thrive. “They had to start from nothing, as if someone threw them from the sky to the ground,” Chino’s brother Yussef, who is 24, told me.

It was in Madrid that Chino became a man, Rahma, his mother, said. He learned to cook for himself. He told his mother he was working as a mason. In fact, he was selling drugs. He tore around Madrid on a motorcycle and went clubbing through the night, choosing Moroccan-themed locales over tapas bars. He didn’t like to dance. Women made him shy, one sibling said, though he pursued them relentlessly. He worked on his looks. After breaking his front teeth in a motorcycle accident, he paid handsomely for caps. He was fussy about his collection of pricey shirts and jackets, scolding one of his brothers when he borrowed an outfit without permission.

Surrounded by drugs and addicts, Chino succumbed to the temptation himself. He started snorting cocaine soon after he arrived in Spain, several of his brothers said. He fell in love with a teenage Spanish junkie named Rosa, with whom he would eventually have a son. In the early 1990s, while serving time in a Spanish prison for drug trafficking, he began doing heroin, according to his brother Rachid. But he kicked the habit the day he got out, forcing himself through withdrawal with a will that stunned his friends. “He was hooked, but didn’t touch it,” Rachid said.

Chino’s legend in Jamaa Mezuak was sealed by a visit home in 1993. He got drunk at a wedding and passed out in a taxi. When he woke up, Chino later told his friends, he found a man stealing his gold watch, a ring, a Walkman and some money. Chino stabbed the man in a drunken stupor, he claimed, but didn’t think he killed him. The man was later found dead. Chino fled back to Spain before the Moroccan police could find him.

Much of Chino's life was invisible to his brothers, even after most of them moved to Madrid. They knew that he traveled frequently and that he had been caught crossing European borders with fake papers and drugs. He had served time in jails in Holland, France and Switzerland, several of his brothers told me in a rare interview in their Madrid apartment one evening in July. They look on Chino's life with a mixture of sadness and awe. They talk with reverence of his escape from a Spanish detention center for illegal immigrants, which he managed by spraying mace in the face of a guard.

It was not until 1998, after Chino had served time in a prison in Spain, that his brothers first heard him mention jihad. He told them that he had seen videos of the mujahedeen who were fighting the Soviet Army in Chechnya. He also began talking obsessively about the plight of the [Palestinians](#). "Before then, he wanted to be rich," Chino's 23-year-old brother said. "After, he wanted a life in another world. He wanted to fight."

Two years later, Chino was arrested in Spain once again, this time for traveling with false documents. A jail official was so alarmed by Chino's disruptive behavior that he filed a report in which he described Chino as a "megalomaniac" who dreamed of going to Israel "to kill Jews."

Yet Chino's turn to militant Islam was neither swift nor decisive. He felt conflicted about his criminal livelihood but unwilling to start over. His solution, his brothers said, was to give his money away. He dispensed with watches. He regaled his Moroccan nieces with gold necklaces and rings. One day, while traveling in Holland, he called his brothers and told them to set fire to his cars. "Life is worth nothing," Chino told his brother Mustafa. "We won't live long." (They ignored the instruction. "Mustafa likes cars," one brother explained.)

Chino had come to believe that Muslims who earn money illegally suffer in the afterlife — unless they put the money to good use. He began sending cash to the mother of the man he had stabbed in Tetouan. He continued to drink and do drugs. But his drunken binges sometimes ended with him crying over the stabbing and the mother of the victim, one of his Madrid friends, Abdelilah el Fadwal el Akil, recalled. "He would say that it was his fault she had lost a son, and that the least he could do was take care of her," Akil wrote to me from a Spanish prison, where he was being held as a defendant in the Madrid bombing trial.

During a rare visit home to Morocco in 2000, Chino was arrested for the man's murder and imprisoned in Tetouan. But key evidence was still missing in the case, including a witness who failed to appear. Chino's parents hired a local criminal attorney, Mourad Elkharraz, who told them their son stood a good chance of acquittal. The lawyer assured them that the process would take no more than a year. Instead, it dragged on for three. During that time, the lawyer witnessed a startling transformation in his client. At first, the change was merely physical. Chino went from wearing gold necklaces and jeans to a gray, Afghan-style tunic and matching pants. He began carrying a Koran. Then he started fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. He stopped swearing and began peppering his sentences with "Allah." Eventually he became a prison imam, leading prayers five times a day. "He said: 'I've become someone else. I'm a new man,'" the lawyer told me. "But his anger rose more and more."

Chino grew deeply frustrated by the delays in his case. He yearned to see his son, an absence that "broke his heart," Chino's mother said. He lost his temper in meetings with his lawyer, demanding to know why his case had not been resolved. Yet every time Chino got angry, his lawyer recalled, something odd happened: he turned to the subject of Palestine. He seemed to conflate the personal with the political. In one breath, he would say that "Jews mistreat Muslims"; in another, that he wanted to "do jihad" to the Moroccan judges who kept him in prison. By then, Chino had befriended another prisoner who belonged to a banned Islamist party, Justice and Charity. Chino took a brief interest in the group, but he concluded it was "too passive," according to documents filed in the Madrid bombing case.

Chino was finally freed from the Moroccan prison in June 2003; the court declared him innocent of the murder charge, Elkharraz, his lawyer, said. But Chino returned to Spain a different man. He had become obsessed with the war in Iraq, his brothers recalled. He said he couldn't sleep at night knowing that women and children were dying at the hands of Americans, all in the greedy pursuit of oil. He no longer had time for small talk. He would walk into a room and within minutes begin the same diatribe.

"He would say, 'The soldiers of bin Laden are soldiers of God,' " Chino's brother Jaber told me. "Because the world was looking for them —"

"And couldn't find them," said another brother, finishing the sentence.

Chino told his brothers to cut their hair, to stop smoking, to stop going out with girls. He scolded them for not praying and urged a sister in Holland to wear a veil. He seemed agitated that so many of his siblings — eight in all — had moved to Europe and began pressing them to return to Morocco. "This isn't paradise," he would tell them. They soon tired of his campaign. He had become unbearably serious. He told his childhood friend Anwar that if he wanted to continue the friendship, "you have to go to the mosque."

Yet for all of his religious fervor, Chino continued to sell drugs. A few months before the Madrid bombings, he shot a debtor in the knee in Bilbao. Chino's underworld activities might seem incompatible with the norms of a born-again Muslim. But they did not necessarily contravene those of takfir, an ideology that divides the world between believers and nonbelievers. Some takfiris believe that Islamic law can be broken in the name of jihad — that they can commit violence or theft, for example, in order to finance attacks against the infidels. These beliefs, while unfathomable for many Muslims, were commonplace in the circles in which Chino moved.

That summer, back in Madrid, Chino reconnected with his old crew from Jamaa Mezuak. Three of his friends worked for him dealing drugs and would also fall into militant Islam, playing key roles in the deadly bombing plot, Spanish prosecutors later said. The circle included two brothers who grew up near Chino, as well as Abdennabi Kounjaa, a square-jawed man known for his religious devotion. A soft-spoken candy vendor from Jamaa Mezuak also joined the circle.

It was possibly that same summer, in 2003, that Chino met the other chief of the bombing plot, a Tunisian immigrant who would emerge as the group's spiritual leader. The man, Sarhane Fakheth, had moved to Madrid to pursue a doctorate in economics, but he never finished. For a while, he earned his living as a real estate agent. Among his fellow militants, he was seen as a visionary. He had attended a series of clandestine meetings in Madrid in 2002 that were infiltrated by a police informant, who reported back to the Spanish authorities that the group was discussing jihad, listening to sermons and watching violent videos.

By the time Chino and Fakheth became friends, the landscape of terrorism had changed considerably. Law-enforcement agencies had cracked down on organized groups like [Al Qaeda](#) and the financing on which they depended. Even as terrorist funding sources dried up, the message of violent jihad was spreading on the Web, enabling militant ideologues to link up with petty criminals. The marriage of these groups defined the Madrid plot. Fakheth, the thinker, lacked the cash and organizational muscle to pull off an attack. Chino, the hoodlum, may have seen the plot as his salvation after a life of crime.

Before long, Chino began searching for explosives and, through an old criminal acquaintance, found his way to a drug dealer who was selling stolen dynamite. The plot seems to have gained momentum in December 2003, when a 42-page document became available on a well-trafficked jihadi Web site. Fakheth got hold of the document, which was produced by a militant Islamic think tank of sorts. It analyzed the political situation in Spain and argued that "painful blows" were needed to force the Spanish government to withdraw its troops from Iraq. It also suggested making "the utmost use" of the approaching elections. In January, Chino rented a farmhouse 30 miles south of Madrid,

where he and his friends hid a cache of dynamite he bought with hashish. It was there that the plotters assembled their bombs, which they would plant on the trains in sport bags.

On the morning of March 11, three days before the Spanish general elections, 10 bombs went off within minutes of one another, tearing through the platforms of three train stations packed with commuters and ripping apart a fourth train that was seconds late to its destination. The attacks left 191 people dead and more than 1,800 injured. As the bodies were still being identified, Spanish voters ousted the government of Prime Minister [José María Aznar](#), which tried to blame the bombings on Basque separatists. In its place, they elected [José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero](#), a Socialist who swiftly removed Spain's troops from Iraq.

Over the next few weeks, Chino turned up twice at a Madrid bar owned by his brother Mustafa. He seemed withdrawn and anxious, one of his brothers recalled. During the second visit, Mustafa asked Chino if he was involved in the bombings.

"Yes," Chino said, according to Mustafa's testimony. "It's the people from your neighborhood who have done this."

As an international manhunt intensified, Chino went into hiding in an apartment in Leganés, a placid, tree-lined suburb of Madrid. On April 3, the police quietly surrounded the building, and then a helicopter arrived. Chino refused to leave, holed up with Fakhet, his four friends from Jamaa Mezuak and an Algerian man. They were heard praying and singing jihadi songs. Then they began calling their relatives to say goodbye. Chino's mother answered the phone in Morocco and heard her son say, "The police are surrounding the house and shooting at us." She fainted and then called back twice. Chino hung up on her, she told me. She then called her son Yussef in Madrid and told him that Chino had asked for her forgiveness because he "was going to God," Yussef recalled. At 9:05 p.m., the police broke the door open. Before they could enter, the apartment blew up. All seven men died instantly, along with a police officer. Chino's remains were later pulled from a swimming pool outside.

Sifting through the demolished apartment in Leganés, investigators discovered dynamite, suicide belts and evidence of more planned attacks. Kounjaa's former boss appeared at a local police station and turned over a handwritten will that the young Moroccan had left for his family in Jamaa Mezuak. In it, he reprimands them for not supporting his decision to make jihad, an obligation of "all believers." He writes of the humiliation he has felt "in the eyes of infidels and of tyrants" and declares himself a martyr. He encourages his young daughters to follow the path of the mujahedeen.

Finally, addressing himself to his "brothers on Allah's path, anywhere," he offers some advice. "Many people take life as a path to death," he writes. "I have chosen death as a path to life. You should hold onto Islam, through words and deeds, action and jihad."

The Road to Iraq

News of the suicides swept through Jamaa Mezuak. People watched in shock as photographs of the five men from their neighborhood were shown over and over again on television. Some of the Moroccans had been previously named as suspects in the train bombings, but many of their neighbors refused to believe the reports.

"We never thought that somebody from our neighborhood could do something like this," one 28-year-old man from Jamaa Mezuak, Mohsin Chabab, told me.

In the scrubbed, dimly lighted home of the Ahmidan family, Chino's mother, Rahma, stared in disbelief at the bloody images of the apartment where he died. "I saw pieces of my son's flesh," she recalled. Still, she could not bring herself to believe he killed himself or that he played any part in the Madrid attacks.

The Moroccan security forces showed no such doubt. Investigators soon appeared in Jamaa Mezuak, questioning relatives and friends of the Madrid suspects. The government

had set out to crush terrorism following the Casablanca attacks a year earlier, earning a new reputation for ruthlessness. Almost anyone could be arrested, it seemed, simply for knowing the wrong person. The neighborhood was gripped by fear.

While many people kept their distance from the families of the suspects, a few young men in the neighborhood were determined to make sense of what happened. They included the Ben About brothers — Muncif, the wandering student, and Bilal, the fan of hip-hop — as well as their friend Hamza Akhlifa.

Hamza, a lanky teenager and talented soccer goalie, had known Kounjaa, the author of the suicide note, all his life. They lived on the same block and prayed at the same mosque. Their families were joined by Kounjaa's marriage to Hamza's cousin. The Madrid bombings, followed by the group suicide, left the young man at a loss.

"He wanted to understand why Kounjaa killed himself," one of Hamza's closest friends told me.

In the search for answers, Hamza and his friends began reading about Islam.

At the time, these young men were seen as no more religious than many of their peers, who made their daily prayers and attended Friday services and fasted during Ramadan. But the Madrid bombings set them on a new course, one that would eventually lead them to Iraq. Chino's group had planted a seed. "They wanted to be like them," Hamza's friend said. "What they wanted was to die, to become martyrs."

I spent much of June and July in Tetouan and spoke with more than 20 people who knew the local men who had departed for Iraq. I met with many of their parents and siblings, as well as close friends and neighbors. Most of the men who left grew up just blocks apart, in the tranquil, southwestern corner of Jamaa Mezuak. They were not thought of as troubled boys. To their friends, they appeared privileged. They dressed well. Two had gone to college. One owned a valuable piece of land.

Perhaps none had fared better than Muncif and Bilal Ben About. Their parents own a Mercedes, a Peugeot and three shops in the city's bustling markets. Their three-story home towers over a steep slope, claiming a sweeping view of the neighborhood below. Inside, the house is filled with delicate rugs and ornate, wood-carved furniture.

Among the family's eight children, Muncif was the indisputable star. A slight boy with short-cropped hair and protruding ears, he was quiet and bookish. School excited him more than soccer. He excelled at math, engineering, physics and languages and was always first in his class. When he wasn't studying, he mostly kept to himself, reading novels or newspapers or watching documentaries on [Al Jazeera](#).

From the time he was small, he seemed unusually adult. One day, Muncif's little brother was playing with a boy from the neighborhood whose father had died. Suddenly, the Ben Abouds' father came home and Muncif's brother rose to greet him, as was custom. Muncif — who was about 10 at the time — later pulled the brother aside. "Whenever you are with that friend, do not greet our father," he said. "He has no father."

At 15, Muncif left for Marrakesh. He was one of three students from Tetouan chosen to join the prestigious École Royale de l'Air, an air-force academy where he began studying to be a pilot. It seemed a good fit, given his curiosity and discipline.

But during his third year at the school, Muncif abruptly decided the military was not for him. He had become more religious and wanted to be learned in Islam. He looked up to his father and grandfather, both of whom could sing passages from the Koran. Still, he needed a career. He pursued an engineering degree in Tangier, but he left after a year, telling one of his siblings that his teachers did not like his new beard. Back in Tetouan, he began studying mathematics at a local university.

By then, plenty of Muncif's peers had dropped out of school and drifted into menial jobs or worse. "You have to study," Muncif told his youngest brother. "This is the only way of

becoming respectable.”

Yet for all of Muncif’s scholarly gifts, he seemed unconvinced that college would pay off. He worried he would be unable to find a worthy job. He eagerly accepted his father’s invitation to run one of the family’s shops while continuing with his studies. “He said, ‘I can use this money to secure my future,’” his mother, Souad Ashtut, told me.

While Muncif rarely showed interest in girls, his older brother Bilal was a heartbreaker. He had strong shoulders, soft brown eyes and a sheepish smile. He used to walk around the neighborhood, calling out, “Hello, mother-in-law,” to all the women who hoped he would marry their daughters. Kids flocked to him. He coached a local boys’ soccer team. But as a player, he was less charming. “He got angry easily,” recalled the soccer field’s caretaker, Aamy Absalam, who said he pulled Bilal out of games twice after he threw punches at other players, only for him to resume fighting outside.

Unlike his younger brother, Bilal never excelled at school and dropped out in the ninth grade. He dreamed of becoming a comedian, his best friend told me, and wrote comedy sketches that he sometimes performed at weddings. But his father disapproved, telling him that “it’s shameful to be an artist,” recalled the friend, who asked to be identified by his childhood nickname, Dayday.

Bilal began working for his father, smuggling baby clothes into Tetouan from the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and selling them at a stall in the market. He crossed his parents again when he fell in love. The girl was not from a decent family, they told him. They insisted he marry the sister of his brother’s wife. He eventually became engaged to her, but “he always loved the other girl,” Dayday said.

Bilal found refuge in music. His car was filled with CDs. His tastes ran from Middle Eastern music to American hip-hop, including 50 Cent and [Eminem](#). He especially liked a song by Eminem that derided President Bush and had it translated into Arabic. He also wrote his own ballads, including one that became something of a local hit. It tells the story of “a son of Jamaa Mezuak” who tries to immigrate to Spain, because “despite the diplomas in our pockets, we have no jobs.”

Go to Spain

If for bread alone

Continue till Germany

And live like the Mafia

Marry an old woman

The age of my grandmother

She will get me papers and a visa

At the end of the song, the man has been caught at the border, beaten and sent back to Tetouan, where he winds up selling cigarettes on the streets. The final verse reads: “Brothers, this is my story. I narrated it all for you. God help me.”

Bilal and Muncif grew up around a troupe of neighborhood boys whose worth was tested on the soccer field. This circle of friends fluctuated in size. They played soccer on Friday mornings and took picnics in the hills and roamed the beach in the neighboring town of Martil. A few of them frequented Coiffure Cyprus, a busy barbershop near the center of Jamaa Mezuak. In a neighborhood where few boys have money for nice clothes, many of them devote careful attention to their hair. Every cut has a name. There is the “taza,” derived from the Spanish word for “cup,” which looks like a stunted version of a bowl cut. There is the “coptaza” (a cousin of the taza), the “Beckham” and the “military.” Hamza, the soccer goalie, paid the equivalent of \$2 for the “choltra,” short for John Travolta. The style apparently emulates the Travolta of “Saturday Night Fever.”

Hamza's friends admired his soccer skills. "No ball entered his net," one fellow player said. But off the field, he seemed adrift. He dropped out of high school and worked selling car parts in his father's shop. His friend Younes Achbak made it further in his studies. He was also a gifted athlete, though he smoked a pack of Marlboro Reds a day. He promised his mother he would run the family's shops once he graduated from college. But his heart was in Europe, she told me. He tried sneaking into Spain but was caught at the border and roughed up by the authorities.

Before the Madrid bombings in March 2004, Hamza, Younes and the Ben Abouds would chat casually about the day's news. Their attention drifted from topic to topic. Sometimes it was soccer; sometimes politics. But after the bombings, they became consumed by one subject: the war in Iraq. They began meeting after the *ishaa*, or evening prayer, at the dusty entrance of a middle school around the corner from the Ben Aboud home, a young man with intimate knowledge of the group told me. The man, who spoke on condition of anonymity, was one of Hamza's best friends. He is also related to two of the men who left for Iraq. He said the friends became obsessed with the war. They traded details of the day's news, stirring the anger in one another. They were outraged by the graphic deaths they saw on television and by the American contractors they heard were profiting from the occupation.

Muncif, the math student, came to find television coverage of the war inadequate. He began sitting at his computer late at night, surfing the Web for hours at a time, the friend said. Muncif discovered Web sites that showed footage of American soldiers bursting into the homes of Iraqis as women and children cowered. The links were sent to him by a Middle-Easterner he had met online. Muncif began posting them on his own Web page, which he shared with friends in Tetouan and Tangier. He collected books and CDs on jihad, which he bought from a Moroccan man who lived in Madrid and passed through Tetouan from time to time.

Muncif came to believe that defending Iraqis was an obligation of all Muslims — that the occupation of Iraq should be viewed as part of a global struggle. "If they do not have someone to help them, maybe this will happen to all Muslims," a relative recalled him saying. "Maybe if Iraq doesn't have sovereignty, Morocco will be the next country invaded."

Muncif's brother Bilal was soon talking the same way. He insisted that the war was not simply aimed at conquering Iraqis but also at defeating Islam. "The goal of the United States is to wipe Islam out," he said, according to the relative.

Over the next year, people in the neighborhood noticed changes in the group. Hamza stopped going to the barbershop. His hair grew past his shoulders, and he began wearing a hat, tunic and sandals. Younes and Bilal started dressing the same way, styling themselves after the Prophet Muhammad. "When they became very religious, they did not sit and talk to us," said 25-year-old Marwan Bilamri, who smuggles wine for a living. "They kept to themselves."

Another young man began dressing like the Prophet, the barbershop owner recalled. This young man, Abdelmunim Amakchar Elamrani, had little in common with Hamza's group. His family struggled. "We didn't have money for books," said his father, Ahmed, who trades sheep for a living. Abdelmunim kept going to school, bravely empty-handed. Finally he flunked out. After that, he would rise for the dawn prayer and then walk out the door, joining the stream of other men headed to Ceuta.

A tall, lumbering fellow, Abdelmunim had fallen into an especially perilous line of work. He bought car tires and bedcovers in Ceuta and stuffed them into plastic bags. He then waded into the Mediterranean and swam back to Morocco, pushing his bags through the ocean. He tried settling down a few years ago and married a conservative girl who wore a niqab and bore their first child. He was tender with his baby and wife. He helped her hang the laundry, she said, and knead the dough for their bread. But on his days off, he veered to more boyish pursuits, watching "Conan the Barbarian" and losing himself in PlayStation

with his little brother. They played soccer on the roof of their house, dodging clotheslines as they struggled for the ball.

Abdelmunim had one certain connection to the others who would leave for Iraq: they worshiped at the same mosque. It sits across the street from Hamza's house, a tower of concrete that reaches high above the boxy homes. The mosque has no official name and was never approved by the authorities. It is affiliated with Dawa Tabligh, a generally peaceful group of proselytizing Muslims who travel around Morocco. Strangers in silk tunics and caps passed through with such frequency that neighbors began calling it "the Afghani mosque."

The young men who prayed at this mosque were taken with its imam, Abdelilah Fathallah. He sang verses of the Koran with a melodious voice and struck his people as warm and youthful, a refreshing departure from the older imams in the neighborhood.

He would sit chatting with his congregants well into the evening. But if he was popular inside the mosque, he had a reputation of intolerance outside it. One day last year, the imam walked into the Coiffure Cyprus barbershop to have his beard trimmed. The talk turned to the situation in Lebanon, and the owner of the shop, Ali, asked the imam what he thought of [Hassan Nasrallah](#), the Shiite cleric and leader of the [Hezbollah](#) movement there.

"Shia are unbelievers," the imam declared, according to a barber in the shop.

Moroccan officials told me that at some point in 2006, the imam began talking to young men in the neighborhood about making jihad in Iraq. He acted as their recruiter and helped arrange their travel, a senior Moroccan intelligence official, Abdelhak Bassou, told me. He added that the men also got help from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, an Algeria-based group. When I asked Bassou how the imam operated, he outlined a general process that he said applied to the Jamaa Mezuak cell. Recruitment starts in the mosque, he said. The recruiter looks for people who are easy to approach and gives them books and CDs on Islam and then shows them jihadi Web sites. Eventually they become convinced.

But in describing what happened to the men of Jamaa Mezuak, Hamza's close friend offered almost the opposite narrative. They became interested in jihad on their own, he said, and then found a way to get to Iraq, possibly through the imam. "They weren't recruited," he said.

According to a sealed Moroccan court document I obtained, the imam first raised the idea of going to Iraq with Younes, the chain-smoker. The imam also discussed it with Muncif and Abdelmunim, who had quit his job as a smuggler that year after the authorities caught him pushing bags through the ocean. The imam introduced the three young men to a shoe vendor in Tetouan who was raising money for the travel of jihadi volunteers, according to the document. It details the confessions of 29 people, including the imam, who were charged with participating in a Moroccan terrorist cell that recruited, financed and sent volunteers to Iraq. (The veracity of the document is questionable. Moroccan prisoners are sometimes tortured into giving confessions and often retract them later, according to Moroccan defense lawyers and human rights groups.)

In the months before they left for Iraq, Muncif, Bilal and the others became secretive. But a few clues slipped out. One afternoon, Bilal and Hamza walked up to Bilal's friend Dayday and some other men. Dayday hardly recognized Bilal anymore. He no longer wrote comedy sketches. He had grown a beard and lost his easy laugh. The men began chatting when someone in the group joked about doing jihad in Iraq.

"You don't need to," Bilal replied. "I'm going with my friend Hamza." Dayday thought he was kidding. Plenty of young men talked that way. Bilal just did it more forcefully, Dayday thought. "Our brothers are dying, and we have to help them," he recalled Bilal saying. "Islam orders us to do jihad."

In preparing to leave, Bilal burned his nonreligious belongings, including a recording of

the song he wrote, a close friend said. Bilal and the others made a secret plan. They would travel in pairs, using aliases, shaving their faces and wearing Iraqi clothes to try to fit in, the friend said. They bought one-way plane tickets from Casablanca to Istanbul. They planned to cross over to Syria by land, American intelligence analysts told me, and would then continue to Iraq.

Younes was the first to leave. He walked out of his house in June 2006 without saying goodbye to his mother. Fearful of government surveillance, his friends stopped meeting at their usual spot by the school.

Muncif left in July, telling his mother he was going to Mauritania. Three days later, he called home and asked for his parents' forgiveness. He was already in Syria.

Abdelmunim left on a Friday morning in September. He kissed his wife on the cheek and told her he would be spending the week in Ceuta. His little brother, Usama, remembered that he left quickly, without a farewell.

Bilal and Hamza disappeared the following month.

A few days before he left, Hamza asked a friend to take his photograph. In the picture, Hamza is wearing a striped tunic and a black prayer cap. His long hair is tucked behind his ears. He stares intently at the camera, his mouth slightly agape, like a child's.

The day before Bilal left, he ran into Dayday at a busy indoor market in Tetouan. Bilal had shaved his beard, Dayday recalled, and was carrying a yellow travel bag. He said he was going on a trip. They hugged.

"If he had told me where he was going, I could have gone with him," Dayday told me. "Or stopped him."

I asked which it would have been.

"I would have stopped him," Dayday said. "But maybe he would have convinced me to go with him. He knew how to convince people."

The Choice

Dayday seems to walk along a precipice. Some days he is tempted to jump, to leave for Iraq himself.

"If I found someone to take me, I would go tomorrow," he told me one afternoon in June.

In some ways, Dayday believes that Bilal was right to leave for Iraq. All Moroccans have a duty to defend other Muslims under attack, he says. He spends hours listening to the pirated CDs of incendiary sheiks. He can tick off the requirements of jihad like a grocery list: You must ask your parents' permission; you must pay your debts. He breathlessly defends suicide bombings as a necessary weapon against the American forces in Iraq. When a Muslim land is occupied, he argues, Muslims must rise up to defend it. This vocabulary has entered the realm of his personal life. When his mother tells him he can't marry Leila, his lifelong love, he threatens to "go do jihad in Iraq."

But something always holds him back. He has seen too many images of Muslims dying at the hands of other Muslims. Most suicide operations in Iraq are now targeted at Shiites or Sunnis, he says, not at the American soldiers whom he would gladly face. "You can't know who you're going to kill," he told me. That critique of suicide attacks in Iraq is often heard around Jamaa Mezuak these days.

Dayday's thinking reflects his moods, which swing with the highs and lows of an uncertain life. He earns about \$6 a day by selling smuggled goods at the market. It will take years for him to save enough money to build a floor atop his parents' ramshackle house. And that is the prerequisite for marrying Leila.

Dayday sings her name sometimes. She lives in a village high in the Rif Mountains. They

rarely see each other, and time is running out. He is sure that someone else will marry her first. And yet there is no solution. It is his obligation, as a Muslim man, to provide a home for his wife. Every night, when Dayday returns to the cramped dwelling he shares with a dozen relatives, he is reminded of his failure. "You want to feel like a man," said Dayday, who has a soft beard and tired eyes.

So why has Dayday not followed Bilal's path? The question of what drives someone to terrorism has given rise to a cottage industry of theories since Sept. 11. None may fully explain what happened in Jamaa Mezuak: why some of its young men chose to become terrorists when most have not. The notion that poverty is to blame has been debunked again and again. And while religious extremism can feed militancy, many experts prefer to emphasize the anger generated by political conflicts, like the war in Iraq or the Arab-Israeli struggle.

Many may sympathize with a cause, but few ever turn to violence. Marc Sageman, a psychiatrist and former C.I.A. case officer, holds that people prone to terrorism share a sequence of experiences, which he outlines in his forthcoming book, "Leaderless Jihad." They feel a sense of moral outrage that is interpreted in a specific way (the war in Iraq, for example, is interpreted as a war on Islam); that outrage resonates with the person's own experiences (Muslims in Germany or Britain who feel marginalized might identify with the suffering of Iraqis); and finally, that outrage is channeled into action.

This process, Sageman told me, is rarely a solitary one. He and a growing number of law-enforcement officials and analysts argue that group dynamics play a key role in radicalization. While ideology may inspire terrorists, they say, it takes intimate social forces to push people to action. Friends embolden one another to act in ways they might not on their own. This might be called the peer-pressure theory of terrorism. Experts in the field refer to it as the BOG, for bunch of guys (or GOG, for group of guys). "Terrorism is really a collective decision, not an individual one," said Sageman, who coined the theory. "It's about kinship and friendship."

Kinship can also work to opposite effect. It is certainly part of the reason why Dayday has not left Tetouan. Most of the men with whom he prays and works admire Bilal's courage in going to Iraq but prefer a different kind of jihad, or struggle, for themselves. They want to improve their lives. "I'm working to support my family," one of Dayday's closest friends, a merchant in his 30s, told me. "If I go, who will support my family?"

Jihadi groups, like most social circles, tend to rely on frequent, sustained interaction, Sageman told me. People are drawn together by a common activity, like soccer, or by a common set of circumstances, like prison. Often they meet in the temporary spaces born of [immigration](#). Tetouan, in its own way, is a diaspora setting, with families in constant migratory flux. In groups predisposed to violence, there is often a shared grievance around which members first rally. In the case of urban American gangs, the grievance could be police brutality. For the Hamburg cell behind 9/11, it was the war in Chechnya.

Law-enforcement agencies have begun changing their approach to counterterrorism in tandem with their heightened awareness of the role that groups play. Investigators in Europe, Canada and the United States are now conducting surveillance of suspects for longer periods of time, in part to observe the full breadth of their social networks.

Yet in Jamaa Mezuak, the notion that groups play an important role in radicalizing young Muslims is nothing novel. "It's the problem of friends," said Ahmed Asrih, the father of the candy seller who was linked to the Madrid bombings. "If you're friends with a good person, you're good. If your friend is a pickpocket, you become a pickpocket."

The Aftermath

Bilal tried to sound calm on the phone from Syria. But he called again and again, five or six times. He asked trivial questions, as if pretending everything was fine. Had his little brother done his homework? How were his parents? On the other end of the line, they were frantic. When the calls stopped, the house fell quiet, except for the occasional wail of

grief. Only three of the five Ben Aboud boys remained.

That week, the youngest son went hunting for his passport. When he found it, the skinny 19-year-old quietly approached his father.

“Take it and hide it,” he told his father, “so you can have some peace.”

When news of the men’s departure first circulated in Jamaa Mezuak, people experienced a familiar wave of shock. The authorities raided the imam’s house and took him away. By then, three men from other neighborhoods in Tetouan had also departed.

Their journey to Iraq appears to have been well planned. American intelligence analysts familiar with the case told me that the men from Tetouan headed to Damascus, where they bought cellphones under the instruction of two Moroccan men living in Scandinavia. The Tetouan men then e-mailed the phone numbers to the men in Scandinavia, who forwarded the numbers to a person in Damascus with links to militant networks in Iraq. That person contacted the volunteers to arrange their voyage into Iraq.

Bilal and Hamza did not make it that far, according to the analysts. They were arrested and held in Syria, possibly awaiting extradition to Morocco, though the news had not reached Jamaa Mezuak when I was there. Moroccan officials told me that one of the other men from Tetouan, Said Oulad Akchine, died in Iraq, but they offered no details.

The fate of the five other Tetouan men — including Muncif, Younes and Abdelmunim — remains unknown. But a recent American military operation in Iraq offers some clues. In early September, soldiers raided a suspected militant safe house and seized a trove of documents related to the foreign-fighter network in Iraq, a senior military official told me. The material included what amounted to intake forms for foreign fighters arriving in Iraq, with their names, countries of origin, how much money they had and details about their families. Such forms were found for at least some of the eight men who left Tetouan for Iraq, the official said. He would not identify the men but said they are probably dead or in military custody.

Since the start of the war, a few thousand foreign jihadis have heeded the call to join militant networks in Iraq. Most are men in their 20s. Typically, they fall under the influence of an imam who helps them contact intermediaries for the insurgents in Iraq, the American official told me. They go off expecting to fight a heroic battle but often find out after arriving in Iraq that they are to be deployed instead on suicide missions targeting other Muslims, the official said. Based on the accounts of captured fighters, even when they protest, they are sometimes given no choice. “At the end of the day, nobody cares about these kids,” the official said. “They are Al Qaeda precision-guided munition.”

The numbers of foreign fighters entering Iraq have dropped substantially since this spring, the official said, at least in part because would-be jihadis have become more aware that the majority of suicide attacks are aimed at other Muslims. Military officials also gleaned information from the raid in September that indicates a shift: fewer jihadis are coming from Saudi Arabia, while more are arriving from North Africa, an estimated 40 percent of the roughly 60 to 75 fighters who land in Iraq every month. The shift happened in the summer of 2006, when the first men from Jamaa Mezuak began leaving for Iraq.

None of them, it appears, left behind videos explaining their decisions, as is common for suicide bombers in some Arab countries. There are no posters in the neighborhood exalting them. “It’s forbidden,” Hamza’s friend said. “Maybe you can feel it. But you cannot show it.”

Bereft of any information, their mothers wait. Some of them told me they refuse to believe that their boys could be capable of such horror. They are really in Spain, they said. They will be coming home any day.

“A mother can feel it when her child has a fever,” Souad Ashtut, the mother of Bilal and Muncif, said. “So how could I not feel that he died? I feel that my children are still alive.”

Any little thing stirs a memory. The mother of Abdelmunim, the sea smuggler, opens the wrong drawer, and there are his swimming trunks. She spots a stranger with the same lumbering stride. She sees his black eyes in the daughter he left behind.

"I want proof," Abdelmunim's mother told me in July. "I want to see just a piece of his bone. Just to be sure. Just to be sure if he died."

She leaned on a rusty door, her face buried in a towel. Chicks staggered around the yard. A breeze rustled the trees as a gate whined shut in the distance.

"If I ever find the person who put this idea in his head, I will kill him," she said.

Grief has aged Abdelmunim's 22-year-old wife, Boushra. She dreads walking in public. People talk. Some gossip that he sold her gold jewelry to buy the plane ticket. She has lost 17 pounds and can no longer look at photographs of her husband. "He could not have done this," Boushra said as she sat in the sun one afternoon, rail-thin and draped in black. Her toddler, Maram, squealed at her feet.

Abdelmunim's little brother, Usama, withdraws into bouts of silence. He used to ride into the ocean on his brother's shoulders, he told me one afternoon. Then he paused and covered his face with small hands. He could no longer speak. His father has stopped working and wanders the neighborhood in a long djellaba. He is sure that his son is still alive.

In the months following the men's departure, the authorities opened a police station next to the school where the young jihadis once congregated. In the course of reporting this story, families talked to me in their doorways while watching nervously to see who might be listening. I was followed closely by a government agent, who aggressively questioned several people I interviewed, threatening at least one of them with a visit from the police.

Suspicious have chilled the neighborhood. One afternoon in June, a woman peered out her window at Abdelmunim's house. Her son played soccer with his little brother Usama. The boy seemed nice enough, but she worried that he was so quiet. "You can't know what a quiet person is thinking," the woman said. Usama might put the wrong ideas in her son's head. A few weeks later, she sent her son to live with her parents a few blocks away.

People in Jamaa Mezuak seem deeply troubled by the violent fate of the young men who grew up in their midst. Some of the neighbors view the phenomenon as a sort of freak accident. Others see an obvious and alarming pattern. Whatever caused these men to become terrorists, the aftershocks of their decisions have been deeply felt. Mechanics, politicians, homemakers and schoolchildren have argued endlessly about the true meaning of jihad, about why some people are willing to kill themselves and take the lives of others, about whether these men did it simply for fame.

They seem most disapproving of the Madrid bombings, in part because so many locals have relatives living in the Spanish capital who could have easily been killed on the same commuter trains. Again and again, I heard the same refrain: killing innocent people is not jihad.

But some people in Jamaa Mezuak have a different take on the five men who left for Iraq. "They are resistance fighters," Mohsin Chabab, a party planner, told me.

I asked Chabab about his own interpretation of jihad. Couldn't these men have worked to improve their own lives, or conditions in their own neighborhood, rather than leaving to fight in another country? "Why didn't George Bush work on the United States?" he shot back. "He went and occupied Afghanistan. It's the same thing."

The closer I got to the friends of the Madrid and Iraq groups, the less criticism of violence I encountered. In Madrid, Chino's brothers live in the shadow of their brother's notoriety. Five of them share a dingy apartment. They are closely watched by the police, they say. Yussef, who works as a waiter, no longer knows whom to trust. If he tells people about his brother, they may think he is capable of the same. He keeps to himself. "I'd prefer to put

up a mirror and talk to it," he said. Yet he still finds justification for Chino's catastrophic plot and the many innocent lives it claimed. He does not consider his brother a "terrorist," he said. "This was about injustice," he said as we sat on a bench in downtown Madrid in July. "He wanted to help people. His intention was not to kill. It was to save."

If people from Jamaa Mezuak feel conflicted about the meaning of jihad, they seem to have fewer differences in their view of the United States. Conversations about terrorism typically lead to the same pronouncement: "The biggest terrorist in the world is the American president," a 30-year-old barber told me while wearing a baseball cap with gold letters that spelled "America" across the front. The same discussions often bring a facile condemnation of Jews. In the neighborhood, heroin is known as the "bone of Jews." It was Jews, according to lore, who planted the drug in Jamaa Mezuak.

This kind of talk leaves Youssef Hnana, a local historian, feeling hopeless. His city has not lived up to its promise, he said. He prefers to reflect on the Tetouan of the mid-19th century, when the thriving port nearby drew a peaceful coexistence among Jews, Christians and Muslims. He believes that many young Muslims today are headed in the wrong direction. "The way they think has changed," he said, swatting a fly from his face. "The fact that you kill yourself just like this, it is a very strange thing. It's a shame for our city."

The Moroccan authorities claim to have stemmed the flow of volunteers headed for Iraq. But terrorism continues to torment the country. This spring, six suicide bombers strapped with explosives blew themselves up in Casablanca, killing themselves and a police officer. Then in August, a man in the city of Meknes tried and failed to blow himself up, along with a bus full of tourists. Investigators are still trying to make sense of these amateur attacks. Some of the bombers knew one another from Sidi Moumen, a section of Casablanca that bears a certain resemblance to Jamaa Mezuak.

One evening in July, the sun was setting over the neighborhood when Dayday began making tea. He crushed mint leaves into a bowl as the water boiled. In the next room over, where he and his brothers sleep, I looked at an album of photographs. Bilal appeared again and again. The most recent picture was taken one month before he left. They had gone on a picnic in the mountains. In the photograph, Dayday, Bilal and two other men had formed an acrobatic pyramid. Bilal is standing on his friends' shoulders. His arms are extended, as if he is flying.

Later that night, Dayday and I hiked up the highest hill in Jamaa Mezuak. The air had cooled, and the sky was black. A shepherd passed by with his herd. We continued to climb the garbage-strewn slope. Clouds rolled over us, almost close enough to touch. "We are living in heaven," Dayday said with a chuckle. The city sparkled.

Suddenly Dayday extended his arms out and began running toward a cliff. "Watch me," he said. "I'm going to make jihad."

Then he bounded down the hill, pretending to disappear.

Andrea Elliott is a reporter for The New York Times. She won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for a series of articles about an imam in Brooklyn.

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