



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## The Religious Trajectories of the Moussaoui Family

Donahue, K.

### Citation

Donahue, K. (2008). The Religious Trajectories of the Moussaoui Family. *Isim Review*, 21(1), 18-19. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17238>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17238>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# The Religious Trajectories of the Moussaoui Family

KATHERINE DONAHUE

Zacarias Moussaoui's mother can look out of her kitchen windows past her terrace to the Golfe du Lion of the Mediterranean. She can also look into her own heart to find the source of her Islam. In an interview at her house in Narbonne in February 2007, she told me that she carries Islam in her heart, and that she does not have to wear it on her sleeve or in outward manifestations of religiosity. She wrote in a letter to her son Zacarias when he was in detention in New York, before his indictment for six charges of conspiracy in December, 2001, that: "The jihad we are asked to do on earth is to fight the evil within ourselves in order to be able to live in harmony with others, whatever their religion or their ideas."<sup>1</sup> The jihad she had in mind bridges borders between people and cultures. But long before she wrote that letter, Zacarias had chosen a different jihad.

The story of the Moussaoui family, all of whose members lived together in the same household for a while, therefore sharing the same

social milieu, brings into focus the importance of understanding individual action and choice. Each family member was embedded in the same socio-cultural conditions and situations, and yet each made different choices. It is the problematic role of the anthropologist to balance an understanding of those individual choices with the necessity of placing such individual action into a context that acknowledges the role of sociocultural conditions in framing those choices.

The parents of Zacarias Moussaoui are Moroccan by birth, as are two of their four children. Moussaoui's mother, Aïcha el-Wafi, was married at 14, against her will, she said. The couple's two sons, Abd Samad and Zacarias, were born in France. The Moussaouis were not observant Muslims, and Aïcha on occasion celebrated Christmas with her children. Zacarias was, according to his brother Abd Samad, first introduced to Islam when visit-

ing relatives in Morocco on summer vacations. Zacarias was by all accounts a normal French teenager, who loved Bruce Springsteen and Bob Marley and dance competitions with his blonde-haired girlfriend who lived just down the street. He was, according to his sister Jamila, "the sweetheart of the family."<sup>2</sup>

## Leaving home

But there were problems. Zacarias was of Moroccan descent, and the target of French racism. He and his brother were called "dirty Arabs." The nightclub at the bottom of the hill in his middle-class neighbourhood was the site of fights between French youths and those of North African descent. His girlfriend's parents did not approve of Zacarias. He dreamed of going to university, but he and his brother were both diverted to a technical high school from the *lycée* attended by their neighbours and friends. As Zacarias was finishing school in the early 1990s, Bosnian Muslims were being killed, Algerian elections were derailed over Islam, and the United States was involved in Kuwait and Iraq.

Zacarias moved to London in February of 1992. He told his family he wanted to learn English, and he did so. He applied to South Bank University's international business master's programme, was accepted, and received a degree. While a student there he attended Friday

**A glimpse into the family of Zacarias Moussaoui, the only person to be tried in a US court for conspiracy in the attacks of 9/11, brings into focus the importance of understanding individual action and choice in religious behaviour. Though rooted in the same social and cultural background, the members of this family have embarked on radically different religious trajectories: Moussaoui and his brother are adherents of very different forms of organized Islam, while his mother looks inward for her faith, and his sister identifies with Judaism.**

prayers at several moderate mosques, including one in Brixton. While finishing his degree the imam of the Brixton mosque, himself a Jamaican convert to Islam, noticed that Moussaoui increasingly dressed in Arab *thobes* and was becoming more militant. Moussaoui demanded that the imam tell him where the next jihad would be. When Moussaoui appeared in the mosque wearing military fatigues and carrying a backpack, the imam asked him to leave. Moussaoui had already been proselytized by groups such as al-Mu-

hajiroun ("the Emigrants"), who leafleted people emerging from the moderate mosques such as in Brixton. Moussaoui was of interest to these groups because of his education and knowledge of the West, and he was drawn to a militant Islam as well, apparently because of his experiences with French racism and his inability, despite his graduate degree, to follow his dreams of finding a good job in international business.<sup>3</sup>

By the time Moussaoui left the Brixton mosque he was cutting off ties to his family, except for one return visit in the summer of 1997. His mother did not see him again until she arrived in Alexandria, Virginia, in 2002 for hearings concerning his pending trial for six counts of conspiracy to commit terrorist acts, four of which could carry the death penalty. Testimony later admitted into court, and available on the court's website, indicates that the French police knew about Moussaoui's conversion and had followed his movements to Chechnya and Afghanistan in the 1990s. He himself admitted to his travels in court, and he actually pleaded guilty to the conspiracy charges against him in April 2005. He insisted, however, that he was not part of the 9/11 plot. He was sentenced to life in prison, escaping the death penalty because one juror held out for life.

## War of words

Meanwhile, his brother Abd Samad had married a Moroccan cousin. Abd Samad joined a mosque run by the Ahabash, or Habache, group, the Association des Projets de Bienfaisance Islamiques en France (APBIF). Al-Ahabash in Arabic translates as "the Ethiopian" or more properly, "the Abyssinian." In Arabic, the group is Jamiyyat al-Mashari al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya, in the US and other English-speaking countries, the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects (AICP). The movement has now spread beyond Lebanon to France, where it has 17 mosques or prayer halls, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, North America, and elsewhere. Abd Samad's wife Fouzia, according to Moussaoui's mother, is excessively religious, wearing long clothing covering her arms and head. She too is a member of the APBIF. Aïcha and the couple do not speak. Aïcha is unhappy that her son Abd Samad wrote a book, *Zacarias, mon frère*, in which he exposed events in the Moussaoui family's life that made her seem a less than loving mother, and there has been discussion in the French press about why he would do so.

Part of the reason lies with the poor relations between the two Muslim groups the Moussaoui brothers joined. There is little love lost between the Ahabash and the Wahhabis, or Salafis. Ali Laïdi reported that Abd Samad Moussaoui was present at a meeting in Montpellier in December, 1999, on the subject of "Islam in the Republic." Abd Samad is reported to have told a Muslim speaker that he was "worse than the Jews and the crusaders." A fight broke out, chairs were thrown, and the police were called in.<sup>4</sup>

Aïcha el-Wafi says that her son Abd Samad, a high school teacher in France, is a fundamentalist much as is her son Zacarias. In an interview with a *Time* magazine reporter, she said of Abd Samad: "...he is also an

"The jihad we are asked to do on earth is to fight the evil within ourselves"



**Courtroom drawing of Moussaoui's trial, Virginia, May 2006**

PHOTO BY ART LIEN / © AFP, 2006

Islamist radical: a Habashite, who hates the Wahabists like Zacarias, and consider them traitors and rivals.”<sup>5</sup>

The connection to the Ahabash would explain Abd Samad's own desire to distance himself from the actions of his brother even though they had been close before Zacarias left for London. A Rand Corporation report calls the Ahabash a Sufi group which is “militantly moderate,” emphasizing moderation and tolerance and opposing political activism and violence. Anti-habashite groups say that this stance is merely a comforting face put on for western consumption, and point to the fact that members of the Ahabash have been implicated in the assassination of Rafik Hariri, former prime minister of Lebanon. Tariq Ramadan has written that the Ahabash “carry on a permanent double discourse” by saying they support laicism and the emancipation of women and oppose fundamentalism on the one hand, yet at the same time accusing many Muslim religious scholars of being impious unbelievers.<sup>6</sup>

The Ahabash and the Wahhabis vehemently disagree about such points as God's omnipotence and personification; whether the Word of the Quran is from the angel Gabriel (Ahabash) or from God (Wahhabi); whether one can reach God through veneration of saints (Ahabash), or not (Wahhabi); and whether one can live as a Muslim inside states which include Christians and Jews (Ahabash) or not (Wahhabi). In France, this struggle moved beyond doctrinal views to accusations of brother against brother and friend against friend. An FBI communication presented as evidence in the Moussaoui trial said that in September 2000 French security interviewed an un-named source concerning the death in Chechnya of a friend of the Moussaoui brothers. The source was a “hibachi,” and in favour of religious moderation, which, the source said, Zacarias Moussaoui rejected. Moussaoui was said to be cold and cynical and a danger should he return to France. The source of this information was not to be revealed, but the information reflects knowledge that Abd Samad would have had of his own brother's movements.<sup>7</sup>

Moussaoui demanded that the imam tell him where the next jihad would be.

## Different paths

Abd Samad and Zacarias Moussaoui's older sisters, Nadia and Jamila, are not observant Muslims. Jamila receives psychiatric care, as does Omar Moussaoui, Aïcha's ex-husband and the children's father. Nadia has said that in her own heart, she is Jewish, that she listens to Jewish radio stations such as Radio Shalom, and reads extensively about Judaism.<sup>8</sup> Her fascination with Judaism may stem from a connection with discrimination and oppression. In an interview videotaped in France for her brother's trial, she said that she and Zacarias often talked together about racial relations. Zacarias was opposed to violence, she said, and tolerant of racial difference. One of Zacarias's best childhood friends had a Jewish parent. Both Zacarias and Nadia were impressed with the work of Martin Luther King Jr., for social justice and the cause of black Americans, with whom they both identified because of their feelings of difference and exclusion in France.<sup>9</sup> This difference and exclusion has taken each one of the Moussaouis on a different path in life. Aïcha el-Wafi would prefer that some of these paths had taken different turns.

## Notes

1. Frédéric Chambon, “Entre New York et Narbonne: l'échange épistolaire d'Aïcha et Zacarias Moussaoui,” *Le Monde*, 19 November 2001.
2. Jamila Moussaoui, videotaped testimony, US v. Moussaoui, 7 December 2005, Defense Exhibit 010.V2.
3. Plant, videotaped testimony, US v. Moussaoui, 15 November 2005, Defense Exhibit 012.V2.
4. Ali Laïdi, “Le défi islamiste,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no. 1991, 2 January 2003.
5. Bruce Crumley, “Moussaoui's Mother: ‘This is a Show Trial!’” *Time*, 20 April 2006.
6. Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 29–30.
7. U.S. v. Moussaoui, FBI Legat memo, 30 August 2001, Defense Exhibit 59B.
8. Susan Dominus, “Everybody has a Mother,” *New York Times Magazine*, 9 February 2003, Section 6: 37–41, 56, 85–87.
9. Nadia Moussaoui, videotaped testimony, US v. Moussaoui, 17 December 2005, Defense Exhibit 011.V2.

Katherine Donahue is Professor of Anthropology at Plymouth State University, USA, and author of *Slave of Allah: Zacarias Moussaoui vs. The USA* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).  
Email: kdonahue@plymouth.edu