Germany: Doubt cast on claims of planned terrorist attack

Benjamin Harder, Dietmar Henning
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Shortly prior to September 11 this year, media outlets throughout the world reported on a resounding blow dealt to international terrorism. The *Washington Post* wrote, for example, that plans by Islamic terrorists for the "greatest strike on a US foreign installation since September 11" had been uncovered.

In the German city of Heidelberg police arrested 25-year-old Osman P., born in Germany of Turkish parents, and his 22-year-old girlfriend Astrid E., who has dual German and American citizenship. The two were accused of having planned strikes against US installations in Heidelberg on September 11, 2002.

A few days after the two alleged terrorists were seized the accusations against them began to fall apart. "What politicians tried to sell as a bold coup appears to be an unlikely scenario," commented *Speigel-Online* on September 11, 2002. But although the allegations against the young couple have not been proven, they remain under arrest.

The Baden-Wurttemberg interior minister, Thomas Schauble from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), brother of former CDU federal interior minister Wolfgang Schauble, had announced to the press that 130 kilograms of chemicals used for the manufacture of high explosives were found in the couple's apartment. In addition, police had found a picture of Osama bin Laden, electronic parts and five assembled pipe bombs.

"We suspect that the explosives found would have been used to carry out strikes against military installations in Heidelberg and the city centre," Schauble added. The alleged perpetrators were said to be strict Muslims and followers of Osama bin Laden, who hated Americans and Jews. Schauble suggested September 11 had been a possible date for the strike.

The state prosecutor's office later had to admit that hardly any of these allegations had any basis in fact. But although this was apparently evident shortly after the arrest of the accused, the state attorney responsible for dealing with terrorism, Kay Nehm, refused to take up the matter.

The chemicals found in the apartment proved to be 380 grams of gunpowder, with larger quantities of sodium nitrate, sulphuric acid and coal. The bulk of the material found was plant fertiliser along with small pieces of pipe. The case against Osman P. was that the material in his possession could be used to manufacture a pipe-bomb, using the fertiliser as raw material. In his defence, Osman P. claims that he has had a lifetime hobby of making fireworks and wanted to make some for New Year's Eve. "This is a passion which he has had since his childhood," said his lawyer, Andrea Combe. He tried the firecrackers out in a field, and "they left ten centimetre holes, not craters into which a whole city could disappear," Combe said.

According to some experts it would have been possible to manufacture close to 19 kilos of gunpowder from the chemicals found in the apartment. According to explosives expert Eberhard von Low, however, it was not possible to carry out a strike with the materials found. "The pipes are much too small," he told the *ARD-broadcast Monitor*. "They are not effective enough, the explosive itself is relatively difficult to handle. For instance, it draws moisture so that one must dry it first. And it is absolutely not a detonating explosive, like those used in the military or for industrial purposes."

Neither did the "completed" bombs, referred to by Interior Minister Schauble, exist. The pieces of pipe which were found and the alleged detonators did not fit together properly, and it is uncertain whether they could even be used to construct a pipe bomb, according to the state crime office (LKA).

The links between Osman P. and Astrid E. to Al Qaeda or any other terrorist organisation, and the strong religious background of the "terror pair", turned out to be untrue. Those who knew Osman P. described him as very pro-Western.

Officials responsible for state security and the relevant politicians have to date not publicly commented on any of these new findings. When Schauble was asked at a press conference whether the case of the couple had been over-

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dramatised, due to the September 11 anniversary and because of the current election campaign, he became agitated and did not reply.

The actions of the security officials and politicians have had devastating consequences for the affected pair. Astrid E.'s attorney, Thomas Zawodsky, expressed the fear that as a result of the accusations against her his client could lose her job and be forced out of the country. And he could not, at present, "advise her to return home, i.e., to the US."

It is unclear whether the two young people, who are at present on remand in the notorious Stuttgart Central Prison, will be freed. Recently the district judge refused to repeal the warrant for Astrid E's arrest, arguing that there were still pressing grounds for the implication of the pair in a criminal offence and that there was the danger that they could attempt to flee or hide evidence.

This stand has been supported by the public prosecutor's office and is based solely on the testimony of a co-worker of Astrid E. According to the co-worker, Astrid E. had allegedly warned beforehand of an attack on a US supermarket where they both worked. Moreover, she is supposed to have referred to Osama bin Laden. The informant took this information to the US military police, who then informed the German police. The accusations of the crown witness have been thrown into doubt by acquaintances who say she is psychologically unstable and has drawn attention to herself by making false assertions in the past.

The alleged Heidelberg terror attack served the CDU/CSU as welcome election campaign ammunition shortly before the federal poll. The passing on of the information through the American federal criminal police, the FBI, and the arrest of Osman P. and Astrid E. took place two weeks before polling day, as a surge in the support for the Social Democratic Party and the Greens became evident.

The CDU seized on the case to claim that the SPD-Green Party government were denying "the war on terror" and were not "serious about the danger of terrorism". In one campaign speech Edmund Stoiber, the Union candidate for chancellor, censured the government, saying that it took the US to point out to the Germans the terrorists within their own borders. On another occasion he thanked the US authorities: "Thanks to the FBI. Because without the Americans we couldn't have got our hands on them."

Bavarian Interior Minister Gunther Beckstein (CSU), a member of Stoiber's "Competence Team", immediately determined that the case proved the existence of terrorist networks. He said it was inconceivable that Osman P. planned the act alone, and demanded stronger controls on foreigners, general security checks and further state access to information. He repeated his pledge that a CSU government would introduce a third security package to tackle "Islamic terror".

In his own election statements, Stoiber underscored the announcement of his interior minister: foreigners must be prepared to be deported when they are suspected by the relevant authorities of supporting a terrorist organisation—and the quicker the better.

The president of the Federal Criminal Bureau (BKA), Ulrich Kersten, used the Heidelberg incident to demand greater police powers. He called for the reintroduction of crown witness rules—whereby informers can be granted reduced sentences, protection and other inducements—to help expose the existence of extremist groups and prevent attacks.

The arrest of the young Turkish worker and his girlfriend in Heidelberg has created a precedent to stigmatise, prosecute and take people into custody on the flimsiest of evidence. This became clear a few weeks later in Cottbus.

On October 6, the federal state attorney's office permitted police raids to be carried out against 11 alleged "Islamic terrorist cells" in the German states of Brandenburg, Hessen and Baden-Wurttemberg. The news magazine *Focus* had previously reported on an underground "Islamic Terror-Group" that allegedly planned explosive strikes against US and Jewish installations. On the basis of this report alone General Federal Attorney Kay Nehm authorised "in a deviation from the planned investigation" an end to an observation operation which had been going on for months and on the same day ordered and carried out a search of premises.

Five suspects were arrested in Cottbus, charged with having planned "attacks on Germany based on an aggressive-militant Islamic fundamentalism". A day after the arrests Nehm announced that the suspicion of terrorism was had not been proven. Four of the arrested were freed, the fifth, an Algerian, remained incarcerated on the grounds of his residency status. He is threatened with deportation.

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