On May 12, Tashnuba Hayder found herself back in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh and the birthplace she'd left more than a decade ago. Slumped on a bed she would share with four relatives that night, the 16-year-old girl from Queens, N.Y., looked stunned.

On the dusty road from the airport, she had watched rickshaws surge past women sweeping the streets, bone-thin in their bright saris. Now, in a language she barely understood, relatives lamented her fate: to be forced to leave the United States, her home since kindergarten, because the FBI had identified her as a potential suicide bomber.

"I feel like I'm on a different planet," said Tashnuba.

SUSPICIOUS CHAT ROOM

The story of how the daughter of Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh living in a neighborhood of tidy lawns and American flags was labeled an imminent threat to national
security is still shrouded in government secrecy. This account, therefore, is in large part Tashnuba’s, since federal officials will not discuss the matter.

But as the first terror investigation in the U.S. known to involve minors, Tashnuba’s case reveals how deeply concerned the government is that a teenager living in America might become a terrorist. And it has stoked the debate over balancing government vigilance and the protection of individual freedoms in the post-9/11 world.

It is not known what prompted authorities to investigate Tashnuba, who says the accusations against her are false. She says that the government apparently discovered her visits to an Internet chat room where she took notes on sermons by Sheik Omar Bakri Muhammad, a London-based Islamic cleric long accused of encouraging suicide bombers.

**ALARM BELLS**

As suicide bombings mount overseas—and with teenage girls among the perpetrators—there is no doubt that the government’s intelligence efforts are spurred by legitimate fears. But Tashnuba says she opposes suicide bombing and that the government treated her like a criminal simply for exercising her freedoms of speech and religion. She believes she was singled out because she is not a U.S. citizen, which allowed investigators to invoke immigration law, bypassing juvenile and criminal proceedings. “That gave them the green light to get me out of my family,” says Tashnuba.

The USA Patriot Act, enacted by Congress after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, provides for heightened domestic security against terrorism; it also facilitates surveillance procedures. A former FBI agent, presented with the known details of Tashnuba’s case, cites pressures and practices that shape today’s investigations. Pasquale J. D’Amuro, head of New York’s FBI office until April, says that since 9/11, agents have had to err on the side of suspicion. “The alarm bells are going off,” says D’Amuro.

Tashnuba arrived in Queens with her family at age 5. By 10, she was praying five times a day and reproaching her more secular father. She even explored Christianity for a while, but at 14 adopted a full Islamic veil. “This is what gives me an identity,” Tashnuba says of her religion.

It also estranged her from classmates at her Manhattan high school. When Tashnuba asked for home schooling, her parents resisted. They also rejected her alternate plan: an arranged marriage to an American Muslim from Michigan. The couple tried to elope but quickly returned to New York on learning that Tashnuba’s father had gone to the police. The police report would come back to haunt Tashnuba.

When she was finally allowed to begin home schooling, Tashnuba made time to listen to Sheik Omar’s live broadcasts every afternoon. “It was a casual thing,” she

**By Nina Bernstein in Bangladesh**

says, “I would have it on for a few minutes, then I would be going to CVS for my mom, whatever.”

Parts of the broadcasts have long alarmed counterterrorism investigators, who say the Syrian-born Sheik urges young Muslim men worldwide to support the Iraq insurgency on the front line of “the global jihad,” and praises the 9/11 hijackers and suicide bombings. In January, The

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Agents later seized Tashnuba's diary, schoolwork, phone book—and the computer she had repeatedly tuned to Sheik Omar’s sermons.

Times of London reported that when a female listener asked whether women are allowed to be suicide bombers, the Sheik replied: “This is no problem; there is no restriction.”

Tashnuba says the topic never came up while she listened. What she does recall is talk of a utopian Islamic state that would follow God’s will, not human desires.

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

On March 4, when FBI agent Foria Younis knocked at the Hayder family's door, she and her partner did not reveal that they were FBI agents, says Tashnuba’s mother. They claimed to be from a youth center, following up on the police report from five months earlier when Tashnuba tried to elope. Her mother readily sent Younis to her daughter’s bedroom.

From the moment Younis walked in, says Tashnuba, she started paging through Tashnuba’s papers. She was especially interested in a page with a diagram highlighting the word suicide, which Tashnuba says was part of her notes on a class discussion about why religions oppose it.

According to Tashnuba, Younis began commenting, “So, I see you’re interested in suicide,” and “So, you like staying all by yourself in your room. Are you a loner?”

Tashnuba, who had many friends, became nervous and defensive. “No, I’m just in my room,” she protested.

Agents later seized Tashnuba’s diary, schoolwork, and phone book—and the computer she had repeatedly tuned to Sheik Omar’s sermons. Tashnuba’s interest in his speeches became the lens that colored everything else about her life.

“They thought I was anti-American because I didn’t want to compromise,” Tashnuba says. “But in my high school ethics class we had Communists, Democrats, Republicans, Goths—all types. In all our classes, we were told, ‘You speak up, you give your opinion, and you defend it.’ ”

Tashnuba says this lesson backfired when she debated the Koran’s definitions of jihad with Younis, a British-born Muslim who had been concerned about radical clerics’ influence on young immigrants in Great Britain.

“It got personal,” says Tashnuba.

HELD FOR QUESTIONING

On March 24, a dozen immigration agents raided Tashnuba’s home. She says the agents told her, “Your mom just admitted you’re not here legally and we have to take you, or else take everybody.” They told Tashnuba’s family that she would probably be returned the next day.

At immigration headquarters, the FBI was waiting, along with a 16-year-old girl from Guinea whom Tashnuba knew slightly from a Manhattan mosque. The girls were driven to a maximum-security juvenile-detention center in rural Pennsylvania.

After two weeks of frantic inquiries by Tashnuba’s parents, The New York Times learned that she was one of two girls being held for questioning by the FBI.

“They tried to twist my mind,” Tashnuba says. “They had their little tactics—start with nice questions, try to get more severe . . . When I did cry, they were, like, mocking me.”

According to a government document provided to The Times, the FBI asserted that the girls presented “an imminent threat to the security of the United States based upon evidence that they plan to be suicide bombers.” The document cited no evidence. A government psychiatrist concluded that Tashnuba was neither suicidal nor homicidal, and recommended her release. But the agents, Tashnuba
says, kept “trying to link me to the psychological state.”

The questioning went on, she says, from March 24 to April 7. Tashnuba dug in her heels, especially on her belief in jihad. “If Islam is threatened, you have a right to fight back,” Tashnuba declared, citing Koranic verses.

**UNLAWFUL PRESENCE**

When the Bangladeshi Consul General in New York pressed the government for an explanation, the Department of Homeland Security replied: The sole reason Tashnuba was being held was her “unlawful presence” in the U.S.

The other girl taken into custody returned to school in May, under orders not to discuss the case. But for Tashnuba, there was no prospect of release. Her mother asked to take “voluntary departure” with Tashnuba and two younger children, and an immigration judge issued the necessary order. Tashnuba’s father and 14-year-old brother stayed in hiding in New York.

At one point in the journey, Tashnuba wished she had never gone to America, raging, “I see now you have no privacy, no liberty.” But now she wishes for even one more day in New York, “to say goodbye.”