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IT WAS THE USUAL TRANS-atlantic flight: nine hours of fidgeting to get the pillow right, first-run movies flickering mutely on small screens, an indigestible flow of starchy food and drinks. Bound for Chicago from Zurich on the morning of May 8, the passengers of Swiss International Air Lines Flight 8 saw nothing amiss. Certainly they

didn't know they were on the front lines of a global war being waged under their drooping eyes. But the crew knew it. They had been warned that a major terrorist suspect was scheduled to fly on the plane, according to an official of the Swiss airline pilots union. And a scattering of very wakeful men in nearby seats knew it: they were actually a small squad of FBI agents and a separate team of Swiss Special Forces commandos, all carefully positioned around the suspect, all warily watching his every move. For nine hours.

This airborne stakeout was directed at one Jose Padilla, a.k.a. Abdullah al-Muhajir, a Brooklyn-born street thug now identified by investigators as a would-be Qaeda terrorist. After moving mysteriously for a month from Karachi to Zurich to Cairo and back to Zurich—the kind of city-hopping we've come to associate with a Qaeda plot—Padilla was headed back to his homeland to wreak havoc, or possibly just scout out a good target, U.S. authorities believe. Padilla allegedly was one of the band of foreign terrorists who, as the Taliban fell late last year, had escaped into Pakistan with Abu Zubaydah, a senior deputy to Osama bin Laden. Tipped off by Zubaydah—who was arrested in Pakistan in late March and has since been relentlessly interrogated in a top-secret location—authorities had recently connected a fresh pair of very alarming dots: they had pieced Padilla's



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name together with vague allegations from Zubaydah about a “dirty bomb” plot, possibly aimed at Washington, D.C. Even so, the Feds were lucky. Though Padilla came to their attention back in March, U.S. intelligence officials say they did not realize how dangerous he was until weeks after he took off on his trip, and for more than a month they had no firm fix on his whereabouts, NEWSWEEK

has learned. Only a last-minute itineraries of thousands of people known to be traveling toward the States had turned up Padilla's name than 48 hours before his flight to Chicago.

FBI bomb and hazardous specialists had been deployed to await Padilla's arrival. But the 1 O'Hare International Airport at



A Strange Journey

The path of Jose Padilla from American son to fundamentalist Muslim is still largely a mystery. What we know:

Brooklyn

THE BEGINNING
Padilla is born in 1970 into a family with strong Roman Catholic roots. He spends much of his first five years in Puerto Rico.

Chicago

THE EARLY YEARS
In 1975 the family moves to the Windy City, where Padilla joins a gang called the Maniac Latin Disciples and winds up in a juvenile center.



Florida

TRANSFORMATION
Padilla serves time in prison for a shooting, then gets a job at Taco Bell. He converts to Islam and changes his name to Ibrahim.