

1 of 32 DOCUMENTS

The Washington Post

washingtonpost.com

The Washington Post

June 12, 2002 Wednesday
Final Edition

Al Muhajir Alleged to Be Scouting Terror Sites; U.S. Says Al Qaeda Had Instructed Suspect

BYLINE: Susan Schmidt and Walter Pincus, Washington Post Staff Writers

SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. A01

LENGTH: 1554 words

The American citizen suspected of plotting to detonate a radioactive bomb on U.S. soil met in late March with senior al Qaeda officials, who sent him to scout possible U.S. sites for attacks with "dirty bombs" or conventional explosives, senior intelligence officials and investigators said yesterday.

Those officials believe that Abdullah **al Muhajir** was intending to return to Pakistan with the reconnaissance information before proceeding with the plot.

At the behest of the al Qaeda terrorist network, **al Muhajir**, an American ex-convict, set off on a five-week journey that culminated in his arrest May 8 at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Along the way, **al Muhajir**, 31, spent several days in early April in Zurich, then traveled to Cairo, where he spent a month with his two children and Egyptian wife. While there, he was under close scrutiny by U.S. authorities tipped to his existence by a captured al Qaeda leader, Abu Zubaida.

Investigators are trying to piece together how a Brooklyn-born American of Puerto Rican descent, who served time as a juvenile in connection with a street gang slaying in Chicago and had numerous confrontations with Florida police as an adult, became an Islamic fundamentalist and an alleged operative for Osama bin Laden's network.

Yesterday, new details emerged yesterday about **al Muhajir's** life in the United States, including his conversion from Roman Catholicism to Islam in the mid-1990s. The leader of the Darul Uloom Institute, a school in Pembroke Pines, Fla., where **al Muhajir** studied Islam in 1995, described him as an extremely observant Muslim who stood out at the relatively liberal facility.

To date, **al Muhajir** has not been charged, but is being held in a South Carolina military brig as an "enemy combatant." Officials believe he has information that could help in the war on terror.

Al Muhajir Alleged to Be Scouting Terror Sites; U.S. Says Al Qaeda Had Instructed Suspect The Washington Post June 12, 2002 Wednesday

"He knows a lot, but so far he has not cooperated," one senior official said yesterday.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz said on CBS's "Early Show" that **al Muhajir** "clearly had associates, and one of the things we want to ask him about is who those associates were and how we can track them down."

Wolfowitz said **al Muhajir** "came into this country with the intention, by various means -- not just the dirty-bomb idea -- of killing hundreds and maybe thousands of Americans." Wolfowitz said **al Muhajir** intended to obtain radioactive material within the United States "from places like university labs."

President Bush signed the order Sunday transferring **al Muhajir** from a New York jail, where he had been secretly held for a month as a "material witness" in the war on terrorism. Yesterday Bush described **al Muhajir**, who was born Jose Padilla, as one of many "would-be killers" in U.S. custody.

"This guy Padilla's a bad guy and he is where he needs to be -- detained," said Bush, vowing that the U.S. would "run down every lead" to catch his confederates.

Attorney General John D. Ashcroft, speaking with reporters at the International Law Enforcement Academy in Budapest, said **al Muhajir** "was involved with al Qaeda in very serious terrorist plots."

U.S. officials said another al Qaeda associate involved in the alleged plan is being held by Pakistani authorities.

In a separate development, officials in Morocco said yesterday that they have arrested three Saudi nationals who were planning attacks on U.S. and British warships in the Straits of Gibraltar.

Al Muhajir's undoing came as a result of information that interrogators obtained from Zubaida, who was captured in Pakistan March 28. That information dovetailed with suspicions **al Muhajir** had previously raised at the U.S. consulate in Karachi, Pakistan.

Al Muhajir's journey to the Middle East may have begun at two mosques in Florida's Broward County. Darul Uloom Institute was one of the places where he attended Saturday morning courses in 1995.

"He used to dress with a shawl over his head. He always had his head covered," said Maulana Shafayat Mohamed, leader of the institute. "It is very unique. It is one out of a million who would do that."

Al Muhajir used the name "Ibrahim" during the three to six months that he attended, Mohamed said; the name also appears on marriage records. "He used to come, but he just disappeared. I am so baffled," he said. "He was a very quiet, quiet guy."

The institute is known for its liberal approach to Islam. It is more inclusive of women than mainstream Islam and encourages more interaction with the community at large.

Mohamed said he was contacted last May by **al Muhajir's** former wife, Cherie Stultz, who requested counseling. Mohamed said that Stultz told him that she and **al Muhajir** had divorced, and that he had married an Arab woman and moved to Egypt. His former wife also went by the name Marwah, Mohamed said.

Mohamed said he did not know when **al Muhajir** converted to Islam, and Florida officials said they were uncertain as well. **Al Muhajir**, while still Jose Padilla, served nearly a year in jail between 1991 and 1992 for an incident during which he fired a gun at another motorist. Earlier, as a teenager in Chicago, he spent several years in juvenile detention for his role in a gang killing, law enforcement officials said.

"We do not have any documents that support that this conversion took place in our jail," Broward County Sheriff Ken Jenne said yesterday, adding that his staff keeps detailed records about religious requests made by inmates.

Al Muhajir Alleged to Be Scouting Terror Sites; U.S. Says Al Qaeda Had Instructed Suspect The Washington Post June 12, 2002 Wednesday

Jenne said he is providing the FBI with the names of Padilla's cellmates, a list of his visitors and a list of imams who were authorized to enter the jail during the period **al Muhajir** was incarcerated there.

Al Muhajir left the United States, apparently for good, in 1998, living for most of the next two years in Egypt with his second wife. He fathered two children there, according to U.S. officials. They said he also has a child in the United States.

In Egypt, **al Muhajir** "spent time dealing with Islamic extremists," one senior official said.

Members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad make up a sizable part of the al Qaeda network's core group. The two groups merged in 1998.

Al Muhajir began traveling throughout the Middle East in 2000, one official said, including trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan and a pilgrimage to Mecca. In November and December of 2001, U.S. investigators believe, he first met with Zubaida, by then the senior field operations officer for al Qaeda, whose leaders were under attack in Afghanistan.

Al Muhajir began learning how to wire explosives and scoured the Internet to learn about constructing radioactive bombs, U.S. officials said. **Al Muhajir** met with Zubaida and other al Qaeda leaders in March, before undertaking his exploratory trip to the United States.

Major al Qaeda operations, such as the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, were preceded by extensive reconnaissance, which included photographing possible targets and recording the comings and goings of those who worked there.

Al Muhajir and at least one other associate who accompanied him suggested more conventional plots against the United States as well. These included the idea of bombing gas stations, hotels and other civilian targets, one U.S. official said.

Whatever assets **al Muhajir** brought to al Qaeda, his American passport was an extraordinary prize. A U.S. citizen could slip through the security cordon immigration authorities threw up after Sept. 11, escaping not only increasingly challenging visa requirements but also some of the suspicion that would greet foreign travelers arriving from Pakistan.

But the passport also may have contributed to his undoing. In February, Muhajir walked into the U.S. consulate in Karachi, a lawless city of 14 million, where, according to sources in Pakistan, he reported his passport stolen and sought a replacement at a window reserved for American citizens.

A new passport was issued the next month, but a suspicious consular official turned over the application to a security officer.

"After the passport was issued . . . the consulate officer just felt there was something odd about the case and raised it to the attention of the regional security officer," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters yesterday.

The security office investigated **al Muhajir's** activities in Pakistan, and shared the information with FBI agents and intelligence officers who have set up shop in the fortress-like Karachi consulate. By the third week in April, FBI and CIA agents were looking for **al Muhajir** based, in part, on sketchy information provided by Zubaida.

Law enforcement officials said **al Muhajir** was monitored jointly by CIA officers and FBI agents throughout his journey to Chicago, and was subjected to extra security scrutiny before entering the United States. Intelligence sources said that U.S. authorities began tracking him in Cairo.

When he was arrested at O'Hare, **al Muhajir** told authorities that he had returned to the United States to visit his mother in Florida and his son, who lives elsewhere, officials said. He also told them that he had never been in Afghanistan, which they knew to be untrue, the officials said.

Al Muhajir Alleged to Be Scouting Terror Sites; U.S. Says Al Qaeda Had Instructed Suspect The Washington Post June 12, 2002 Wednesday

Staff writers Dan Eggen in Washington, Manuel Roig-Franzia in Florida, and Kamran Khan and Karl Vick in Islamabad, Pakistan, contributed to this report.

LOAD-DATE: June 12, 2002

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

Copyright 2002 The Washington Post