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In a secret prison

Mustafa Setmarian, a Spanish citizen of Syrian origin and intimate collaborator of Osama Bin Laden, is trapped in a secret US prison. EL PAÍS has followed his trail to the island airbase of Diego García.

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A “jihadi” in limbo

Mustafa Setmarian is, perhaps, Al Qaeda’s number four, the most valuable member of that organization in US hands, for whom the US paid a five-million dollar reward in October 2005. Since then, he has disappeared, swallowed up by the earth. Clues point to a secret prison on the island of Diego Garcia. His Spanish wife demands that he be tried in court.

By JOSÉ MARÍA IRUJO

“Who are the principal leaders of Al Qaeda,” asked a Spanish police officer, speaking to Abd Al Rahim Abdul Rassak Janko, a Syrian citizen and ethnic Kurd, prisoner number 489, in his cell at Guantanamo. The university student, son of an abusive father and husband to two wives, replied with five names, starting with Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Seifeldin al Masri. In fourth place on the list, he named Abu Musab al-Suri, nom de guerre of Mustafa Setmarian, one of his teachers and trainers at the Arab house at Al-Farouq, a terrorist training camp about 15 kilometers north of Kabul, near the airport.

Agent Rafael Gomez Menor, one of the foremost experts on Al Qaeda networks, immediately recognized the name of Setmarian, the Syrian. This was July 24, 2002, and a Spanish mission was interrogating 13 prisoners arrested in Afghanistan, seeking information about this red-headed fellow who had joined the leadership of the most powerful terrorist organization on the planet. Two years later, on November 18, 2004 in Washington, US Department of State Spokesman Adam Ereli announced that a warrant had been issued for Setmarian’s arrest, and that US Secretary of State Colin Powell had approved a five-million dollar reward for his capture.

That reward has already been paid. It made several inhabitants of Quetta—a city in Pakistan, in one of the regions controlled by jihadis near the Afghan border—wealthy. Setmarian’s photo has disappeared from the FBI’s Most Wanted web page. Setmarian, a Syrian naturalized as a citizen of Spain and married to a woman from Madrid, was arrested in Quetta on October 2005 and turned over to American agents. Since that day, Setmarian, founder of Al Qaeda in Spain, has disappeared. As if he had been swallowed up by the earth.

How many people know where Mustafa Setmarian is now? Will he ever reappear? To the first question, a CIA agent attached to a US embassy in Europe replies, “No more than a dozen, between military and civilians.” The second question receives no answer. Nobody knows. And nobody dares to speculate.

Setmarian—50 years old, son of a teacher from Aleppo, member of the Muslim Brotherhood, creator of the new jihad, and a Bin Laden confidante—became the most valuable chess piece in CIA hands when he was captured in Quetta, where he moved like a fish in water. Several of his children were born in Islamabad, where he took refuge after the US invasion of Afghanistan in fall 2001.

Since then, just like other less-known alleged jihadis, Setmarian appears on the list of the disappeared—prisoners in the limbo of secret prisons created by the George W. Bush administration. He has beaten a macabre record that prominent Al Qaeda members like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshibh, the mastermind and organizer of 9/11, respectively, who were also arrested in Pakistan but later surfaced at the base in Guantanamo, Cuba, did not achieve.

Setmarian’s wife, Madrid native Elena Moreno, and human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch have unsuccessfully sought answers from the US government, which maintains a zealous and suspicious silence. “They reply that it is a State secret or they simply refuse to confirm or deny his kidnapping,” laments Moreno from Doha, Qatar, where she resides with her four children and works as an English teacher in an elementary school.

Setmarian’s location has been a mystery since members of the ISI, Pakistan’s sinister secret service, turned him over to US agents in exchange for the reward. But after two and a half years of obscurity, his trail leads to the US air and naval base on Diego Garcia, a British-held island in the Chagos Archipelago, in the Indian Ocean, according to former members of the US intelligence service. In November 2005, Setmarian was taken to this remote island, a British territory with just 27.2 square kilometers of surface area, site of a US military base, as former members of US espionage services revealed to the magistrate Baltasar Garzon during his stay in the US.

Garzon processed Setmarian in 2003 and issued an international warrant for his arrest which, like the US warrant, remains in effect. “Without an official declaration of his arrest we can do nothing,” clarifies Garzon. He still keeps Setmarian’s file, describing the Spanish citizen as an expert in chemical and biological warfare, in a preferential spot on the desk in his office at the Audiencia Nacional, Spain’s highest court.

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Prosecutor Pedro Rubira adds that extradition will only be requested when Setmarian’s arrest is announced, but since he was detained, the silence of US authorities is total. Silence to Moreno, his wife; silence to human rights organizations; and silence to the international press. This newspaper made repeated inquiries to the US Department of

State and the US Embassy in Madrid, and always received the same response: “This is a sensitive matter. There is nothing to say.”

Setmarian is part of the High-Value Terrorist Detainee Program, which holds detainees in secret prisons, as an FBI agent acknowledged to this newspaper. Others who have been in this program include Abu Zubayda, coordinator of Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshibh, organizers of the attacks of 9/11, who were each transferred to the naval base at Guantanamo after several years in secret prisons. All three have strong ties to jihadis in Spain. The program’s results are passed along to George W. Bush on a day-to-day basis, according to his collaborators. The president is a peculiar man who takes interest in the details and results of secret operations, like the one which took Setmarian to an unknown location in 2005. “He was a key man for the White House, among other reasons because he could lead them to Bin Laden,” claims the head of a European intelligence service.

Confidential statements of former US agents point to Diego Garcia, one of the largest US air and naval bases outside US territory, as the location where the clandestine services keep their secret prisoner. The island is home to the US 6th Fleet covering the Indian Ocean, and the B-52 bombers that operate over Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as submarine squadrons equipped with antinuclear missiles—and, since 2001, a sinister secret prison where special forces interrogate and torture jihadis captured at various locations around the planet. It is a somber and unassailable British territory, home to several dozen citizens dedicated to fishing, where at least two secret CIA flights carrying suspected Islamist terrorists made stops in 2002.

When the US military arrived on Diego Garcia 30 years ago, the island’s inhabitants, descendants of Indian immigrants and former African slaves, were forced to leave and taken by boat to the Seychelles or Mauritius. The territory was thus left free of inconvenient witnesses, in a shameful act that was revealed years later and has since ended up in court. Descendants of those citizens have claimed their right to return to the island.

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The British government was recently questioned precisely over the opaque and inconfessable activities carried out by the men of General Michael V. Hayden, CIA director, on this diminutive island that has been converted into a judicial limbo similar to Guantanamo. In a surprising and unheard-of statement several weeks ago before the Chamber of Commons, Foreign Secretary David Miliband acknowledged that he was aware of the stopover of secret flights on Diego Garcia, six years after the fact. The minister asked forgiveness, qualifying the incident as “recordkeeping errors,” and assured that British territory would never again be used without permission in operations of the US intelligence services.

According to the information provided six years after the fact by the US government, two CIA planes transporting as many suspected terrorists to Guantanamo and Morocco

stopped on Diego Garcia to refuel. One of those suspects remains at Guantanamo, close to the place where Janko, the Syrian who named Setmariam among Al Qaeda's highest leaders. The other has since been freed. Gordon Brown qualified this as a "very serious" matter. "It was lamentable that we didn't know about it," he added, laconic. As a US agent who was stationed for years in Islamabad acknowledges, "all's fair in the war against terror—even deceiving friendly governments."

The base on Diego Garcia is a laboratory for the war against Al Qaeda, even though US authorities—through Hayden, CIA Director—deny these sinister functions. However, various sources claim that members of Al Qaeda remain enclosed in this secret prison, including Hambali, chief of Jemaah Islamiyah. Associated with Al Qaeda, this Asian terrorist group was allegedly responsible for the 2002 bombings in Bali, Indonesia, that killed 200 people in a discotheque.

According to these same testimonies, Setmariam—the red-headed man who created the first jihadi cells in Spain in the 1980s, who worked with Palestinian cleric Abu Qutada in London, who served Mullah Omar in Afghanistan and climbed to the highest levels of Al Qaeda leadership—is among them. His meteoric jihadi career ended with his arrest and disappearance on the Afghan frontier. According to intelligence service reports, his book about global jihad, distributed over the internet, has served as a guide for hundreds of terrorists. His wife denies it: "He is only a writer. He has the right to be tried like any other human being." Before he was detained, Setmariam was preparing a new work on global jihad, which he expected to distribute through his web pages in 2005.

Setmariam described his last meeting with Bin Laden, whom he first met in Afghanistan in 1988, in this particularly explicit manner: "I met for the last time with sheik Osama, may God protect him, in November 2001, during the battles in defense of the emirate (Afghanistan)... and I committed to jihad and war against our enemies." Thus he wrote in a 14-page communiqué dated November 2004 and addressed to his mujahedeen through *Risalat Al Mujahedeen*, an on-line magazine he published himself in order to communicate with Syrian jihadis.

It was his final message before disappearing. In the prologue of the communiqué, Abd al Tawab al Sharmi, Setmariam's office manager, announced: "The sheik has decided to end his isolation, which has already lasted three years, since December 2001, which he dedicated to meditation and writing. He has also decided to renew his ideological activities and activities on the ground." And right there, Setmariam, the man who in the 1980s sold leather vests and Arabic items at Madrid's Rastro street market, challenged Colin Powell, announcing that he was working on the strategic design of the future jihad, a new holy war that would employ nuclear weapons of mass destruction, chemical and bacterial weapons, and dirty bombs, according to his confession.

In his manifesto, Setmariam acknowledged that he had worked for Abdallah Azzam, Bin Laden's true spiritual guide, a 48-year old Palestinian who was assassinated in Pakistan in 1989 after promising that suicide mujahedeen would obtain forgiveness for their sins and 72 beautiful women in paradise. Setmariam admitted that he rendered homage to the

leader of mujahedeen believers, Mullah Omar, a Taliban cleric who sheltered Bin Laden and his entourage in Afghanistan when almost nobody spoke of them. He also acknowledged his role in the terrorist training camps. "I worked in the Taliban Ministry of Defense, and created the Al Ghuraba training camp, mentioned by Erel (the US spokesperson who announced Setmariam's warrant), where I trained many Arabs and foreigners. And the infidels and apostates tasted the courage of some of those who I trained in the center of Asia and in Saudi Arabia."

It was easy to identify Setmariam when he was detained in Pakistan. His features and the color of his hair are unmistakable. On October 31, 2005, ISI agents arrested him in the Al Madina Utilities Store, headquarters of the Madina Trust Islamic charity organization, in the Gowlamandi quarter of Quetta, favored by Afghani and Pakistani jihadis. Setmariam was with his bodyguard. He survived a shootout that ended the life of the Saudi Shaikh Ali Mohamed al Salim. He escaped unhurt because his life was too valuable; his captors had orders to take him alive. "Dozens of jihadis have been sold in Pakistan for rewards from 10 to 5,000 dollars. Imagine what people do for five million," exclaims a Pakistani agent, who acknowledges that Setmariam was captured and handed over to the Americans. Angelica Pathet of Amnesty International has denounced this purchase and sale of suspects.

The government of Pakistan has never acknowledged Setmariam's capture. The day after the raid, Pakistani press agencies revealed his name. But three days later, then-Minister of Information Sheikh Rashid Ahmad denied knowing the identity of the arrestees. Since then, neither Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs Miguel Angel Moratinos nor Ambassador to Islamabad Jose Maria Robles Fraga have obtained any response from the Pakistani government. This elicits complaints from Moreno, who since that time has fought desperately to find her husband: "I am Spanish, my husband is a Spanish citizen, and so are my children. I think it's wrong that they've forgotten him. I expected a different reaction. At least feel like they're not abandoning you. I feel abandoned."

Last Wednesday, Alfonso Barnuevo, spokesman for Spain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responded with the same statement that he has been using for two years when referring to this case: "There is no news. There is no response. The warrant remains in effect." The Spanish government says that it has made every possible effort to find Setmariam, especially with Pakistani authorities, but with no results. Moreno wrote King Juan Carlos, but nobody has offered her information about her husband.

Setmariam's wife converted to Islam when she met him at Madrid's Escuela Oficial de Idiomas (Official Language School), in the 1980s. Her parents, who live in the Moratalaz quarter of Madrid, did not attend her wedding. The couple relocated to Granada, where Setmariam opened a store selling Arabic items. Since the couple left London, where Setmariam edited the magazine of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), and moved to Afghanistan, Moreno's parents have had no concrete information about her location.

After the kidnapping, Moreno sought refuge in Kuwait, but was later expelled. She now lives in Doha. There she made the first official efforts to find her husband and spoke with

Rafael Matos, the Spanish ambassador. “We have attended her as we would any other national citizen,” Matos says.

Few have testified of relations with Setmarian in a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. Janko, the Syrian who named Setmarian as fourth-highest ranking leader in Al Qaeda during an interview with Spanish police officers in Guantanamo, offered new information about him. According to his story, included in a confidential police report, members of the third course at the al Farouq camp accused Janko of being an “American spy.” In January and February 2001, they turned him over to an interrogator. It was Setmarian.

Setmarian’s mission was to get Janko to identify other possible “American spies.” The interrogation occurred in a place called Karga, in the industrial part of Kabul, on the right flank of the highway to Kandahar. Janko claimed that his interrogator had red hair; that his accent indicated he was from Aleppo, Syria; that he stood a few meters away. That Janko already knew much of Setmarian because “he was a highly respected figure in Afghanistan.” That those who lived in the Kabul house of Arabs, owned by Bin Laden, went to Setmarian “and paid him money so he would train them to use explosives.” That “in a certain way, he acted like a mercenary,” because he trained Muslims who came from Europe. Before 9/11, in a video posted on jihadi websites, the man who in the 1980s had sold clothing in Madrid’s street markets and frequented the Abu Baker mosque was teaching his students in Afghanistan to fly small planes into US objectives. In his last statement, Setmarian wrote, “I reiterate the right of every Muslim to defend himself from attack. I call on all Muslims to participate in this right, which is an obligatory religious precept, like prayer and fasting... Sheik Osama is today a symbol of our jihad and the entire Umma [world community].”