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Spain furious as US blocks access to Madrid bombing 'chief'

Exclusive: on the first day of the Madrid bombing trial, the splits that have emerged between Spain and the US over the War on Terror, which have their roots in the Iraq conflict, are laid bare

Sean O'Neill

The al-Qaeda leader who created, trained and directed the terrorist cell that carried out the Madrid train bombings has been held in a CIA "ghost prison" for more than a year.

Spanish officials told *The Times* last night that they are furious to have been denied access to Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, a Syrian-born terrorist who has been part of the al-Qaeda leadership since the late 1980s.

"This is Spain's most wanted man in the terrorist world - it is galling to know that he is in the hands of an ally and they will not help us," a Spanish official said.

Madrid's anger became known on the day that [29 men went on trial in the Spanish capital](#) in connection with the bomb attacks which killed 191 people in March 2004.

Setmariam, 49, who lived in Madrid, married a Spanish woman and holds Spanish citizenship, inspired and established Spain's first Islamist terror cells.

Searches after the March 2004 bombings uncovered documents which appeared to link the terrorists to Setmariam and he has thought to have issued a coded order giving the go-ahead for the attack.

Setmariam was in Afghanistan in late 2001 when the Taliban regime fell and moved with his family to Pakistan where he continued to be active in al-Qaeda.

A tall man with a pale complexion and flame red hair, Setmariam travelled widely and was often mistaken for a Westerner. He was frequently described as having "Irish looks".

During the mid-1990s he lived in London where he associated with Abu Hamza al-Masri and succeeded the radical cleric as editor of al-Ansar, a propaganda magazine for Algerian terror groups. He also associated with Abu Qatada, the extremist Jordanian cleric currently in prison in Britain.

His suspected role in the Madrid attacks and his knowledge of London meant that he was initially suspected of having played a part in the planning of the 7/7 suicide bomb attacks in 2005.

At the time of those attacks he was still at large in Pakistan where two of the London bombers are known to have received military and explosives training.

Setmariam, who pledged lifelong allegiance to bin Laden and the global jihad, has boasted on al-Qaeda websites of training thousands of foreign recruits at camps where he specialised in bombmaking and the use of poisons.

He was detained in October 2005 as he shopped for breakfast in Quetta, close to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Pakistani intelligence agents shot Setmariam's Saudi bodyguard dead but were under specific instructions to take Setmariam alive.

The FBI had offered a \$5 million reward for his capture and President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan stated in his recent memoirs that his country has received substantial sums in bounties from the US authorities.

Within a month of his capture Setmariam was handed over to the United States authorities and spirited away for interrogation at one of their secret prisons. His first stop was probably Bagram airbase, near Kabul, but his current whereabouts are unknown.



Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, who is being held in a secret location by the CIA

Setmarian's wife and three children moved from Pakistan following his detention and are now believed to be living in Qatar where she is reported to be an English teacher at a private school.

Spanish intelligence agents were said to have been allowed to question inmates of Guantanamo Bay about Setmarian in 2002. But access to suspects in US custody was blocked after Spain withdrew its troops from Iraq following the Madrid bombs.

Spain has made repeated requests to both Pakistan and the US to locate and speak to Setmarian about the train bombings but to no avail. The Spanish courts have discovered that they cannot issue an extradition request because the man they want to talk to has not been officially arrested.

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