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Paul Cruickshank & Mohannad Hage Ali

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## Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda

PAUL CRUICKSHANK

Center on Law and Security  
NYU School of Law  
New York, New York, USA

MOHANNAD HAGE ALI

*Al-Hayat*  
London, UK

*Drawing on new sources, the authors argue that Abu Musab al Suri (real name Mustafa Setmariam Nasar), now in U.S. custody, is the principle architect of Al Qaeda's post-9/11 structure and strategy. His vision, which predated 9/11, of transforming Al Qaeda from a vulnerable hierarchical organization into a resilient decentralized movement, was largely the formula Al Qaeda adopted after the collapse of the Taliban. The authors show how Setmariam, whose ideas have been disseminated widely on the Internet and whose disciples have gravitated to leadership positions in the international jihad, has influenced Al Qaeda's post-9/11 strategy, targeting, and doctrine.*

In early November 2005 Pakistani police forces conducted a raid in Quetta in the south west of Pakistan, killing one man and arresting another. The man that was arrested was Mustafa Setmariam Nasar also known by his nom de guerre Abu Musab al Suri, a Syrian Jihadist with Spanish citizenship who spent a considerable part of the 1990s living in the London suburb of Neasden. A London Islamist told the authors he had been traced to an address after his wife had tried to reach him by phone from Qatar.<sup>1</sup> This is the man that for a few days after the London bombings was being labelled in news reports as the suspected mastermind behind the attacks.<sup>2</sup> The reports were wrong. Setmariam did not operationally direct the attacks. He did not know the bombers. Yet arguably his contribution to these attacks and others was greater still. In a statement that Setmariam made in August 2005 titled "Message to the British and European peoples and governments after the bombings of July 2005," that was only posted on jihadist websites on 2 December 2005 one month after his arrest, Setmariam stated: "I swear to God that I have in me a joy stronger than the joy of the farmer who sees the harvest of his fruits after a long planting and efforts and patience throughout decades of building."<sup>3</sup>

His claim should be taken at face value. Setmariam's arrest is one of the most significant but unheralded breakthroughs in the war on terrorism. This is because no other individual has done more to conceptualize Al Qaeda's new strategy after 9/11. The morphing of

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Address correspondence to Paul Cruickshank, The Center on Law and Security, NYU School of Law, 110 West 3rd St., Room 224/5, New York, NY 10012, USA. E-mail: [cruickshank@juris.law.nyu.edu](mailto:cruickshank@juris.law.nyu.edu)

Al Qaeda from an organization with its own Afghanistan-based bureaucracy, hierarchies, and modus operandi into an ideological umbrella for more loosely tied jihadists around the world, is by now a familiar story. This development has mostly been explained in terms of the external pressures on, and opportunities available to, Al Qaeda after 9/11. The loss of its training camps in Afghanistan and the killing or capture of much of its pre-9/11 senior leadership meant that if Al Qaeda was to continue to be relevant it had to switch toward inspiring and steering jihadist groups, often only loosely affiliated with bin Laden's organization. In this regard, the power of the Internet, or the video cassette aired on Al-Jazeera, was ruthlessly taken advantage of, but so too was the unpopularity in the Islamic world from 2002 of the move toward war in Iraq, a move that was seen to corroborate Al Qaeda's central claim of a worldwide plot to oppress Muslims. And the new environment made necessary a new form of terrorist attack that emerged in Bali, Istanbul, Madrid, and London, undertaken by much more locally rooted Jihadis, acting in tighter "homegrown" groups, with loose and difficult-to-trace ties to the on-the-run Al Qaeda leadership.

The "new Al Qaeda" or "Al Qaeda 2.0" or "Al Qaeda the movement" has not, however, been a merely spontaneous evolution. It has had its intelligent design too. And nobody has been more important in this regard than Setmariam. A veteran of the Afghan war against the Soviets, whose red hair and pale complexion had allowed him to blend easily into European societies in the 1990s, Setmariam ran Al Qaeda-funded training camps in Afghanistan from 1998 to 2001 and had once sat on the Shura Council of Al Qaeda, before fleeing Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban.<sup>4</sup> For some time the prevalent view among Western intelligence services was that he had gone to Iraq to work with Abu Musab al Zarqawi.<sup>5</sup> In 2004 a Spanish newspaper obtained a leaked June 2004 memo from U.S. Central Command in Dubai stating that the U.S. military believed that Setmariam might be acting as deputy and mentor to the Jordanian terrorist.<sup>6</sup> It now appears that he spent most of his time in hiding in Pakistan, possibly spending some time in Iran in the period after the fall of the Taliban.<sup>7</sup> This is the view of Fuad Hussein, a journalist from Jordan, who in 2005 wrote a biography of al Zarqawi. Fuad Hussein probably knows al Zarqawi better than any other journalist, having got to know the terrorist leader well when they shared a prison wing in Jordan in the mid-1990s. Fuad Hussein told the authors that Setmariam "had not travelled to Iraq but [had been] in Pakistan from where he posted new items to *Jihadist* websites every day."<sup>8</sup> In Pakistan, Setmariam appears to have been on the run. His will, dated December 2004, and posted on jihadist websites describes how "we are moving around with what God has given us, moving from one hideout to another with the enemies of God chasing us."<sup>9</sup>

Setmariam himself denies a direct relationship with al Zarqawi. In a December 2004 statement, he stated, "I emphasize my denial that I worked with Sheikh Abu Musab al Zarqawi. This was an honor that I did not have since I did not get the chance to go to Iraq in view of my solitude."<sup>10</sup> Rather than go to Iraq, Setmariam, in the three years after the fall of the Taliban, spent a substantial amount of time writing a 1,600-page book, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance" which was widely posted on jihadist sites in late 2004. In Setmariam's words, "I dedicated my time during my solitude to focus on the nature of upcoming confrontations and battles [being] one of the remaining jihadist specialists in the field."<sup>11</sup> His tract represented the culmination of his thinking on how the international jihad should be strategically and tactically fought.

Setmariam's influence over the direction of Al Qaeda, however, dates back much longer. In the late 1980s, he was one of those pressing bin Laden to take a more hostile line toward Saudi Arabia.<sup>12</sup> And in the late 1990s he ran the Al-Ghuraba camp in a semi-independent way from the Al Qaeda leadership, determined to press home his own

conception of jihadist strategy. Rather than concentrate on the indoctrination of the rank and file, Setmariam focused on training the future recruiters of Al Qaeda: the masterminds of future operations. The lectures he gave in Afghanistan were filmed and disseminated widely across the Muslim world. Some of these videotapes have been uncovered by police in the houses and mosques of jihadist sympathizers in various European countries.<sup>13</sup> But the authors have had the opportunity to review videotapes of his complete lecture series recently discovered in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> They reveal that as early as 2000, Setmariam was pressing a future generation of operatives and recruiters toward a new *modus operandi*, one that bears striking similarity to the evolution of the structure and strategy of Al Qaeda after 9/11.

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Mustafa Setmariam Nasar was born in Aleppo, Syria in 1958, where he studied mechanical engineering, before joining the Islamic Combat Vanguard, which was connected to the Syrian Muslim brotherhood, to fight against the Allawite Ba'ath regime.<sup>15</sup> The current head of the Syrian Muslim brotherhood, Ali Bayanoni, told the authors that even at an early age Setmariam was known as an "extremist."<sup>16</sup> Setmariam was trained by Egyptian officers in Cairo and by officers who had deserted the Syrian army in Jordan, in an era of bitter conflict between Syria and other Arab regimes. According to jihadi websites, during this period Setmariam developed a specialization in explosives engineering, urban warfare, and "special operations."<sup>17</sup> He also had a spell being trained in a camp in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In his book "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance" he recalls his experience there:

I joined a training course which prepared the Muslim Brotherhood's military branch cadres during the *Jihad* and revolution against Hafez Assad's regime. I was 22 years old and that was in the Iraqi army's Racheed camp in Baghdad in 1980. The trainer was a righteous man from the old guards who pledged allegiance to Sheikh Hassan al Bannah [the founder of the Muslim brotherhood] at 17. He accompanied Sayyid Qutb [the leading ideologue of the jihadist movement], and then spent the rest of his life outside Egypt. I recall that the first thing he said [was] "Are you Muslim brotherhood members." We all said "yes." Then the trainer said while pointing at his neck "you will all get slaughtered, do you approve of that?" Then we happily and joyfully said "we approve Sir." He then turned to the chalkboard and wrote the title of his very first lecture: "Terrorism is a duty and assassination is a *Sunnah* [an action ordained by the Prophet Mohammed]."<sup>18</sup>

Many of Setmariam's companions were indeed slaughtered during the Syrian regime's bloody crackdown in the Hama confrontations of 1982. After this, Setmariam split with the Syrian Muslim brotherhood, in protest to their ties with secular parties like the Iraqi Ba'ath Syrian branch and the Syrian Communist Party. He moved to France where he lived for three years before setting up a residence in Spain taking jobs as a tradesman and working as a journalist for Islamist publications.<sup>19</sup> He married a Spanish convert to Islam, Elena Moreno, in 1987, with whom he has had three children.<sup>20</sup> His aim, though, was still to revive the jihad in Syria and his efforts took him to Peshawar in 1988 where he met Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, the chief recruiter of Arabs to join the Afghan jihad. Azzam persuaded Setmariam to join their number. He met bin Laden and became involved with the early Al Qaeda, which he acknowledged in a statement posted on jihadist websites in December 2004:

I had the honor to know Sheikh Osama since 1988. I had the honor to become a member of al Qaeda and work with the organization until 1990 during which I trained some of the Al Qaeda vanguards. I taught martial and military science at al Qaeda camps and the camps of all Afghan Arabs. I specialized in making explosive devices and the carrying out of special operations and guerilla warfare in cities in which I received advanced training in Iraq, Egypt and Jordan.

Kamal el Helbawi, who ran a Research Institute documenting the Afghan war, remembers Setmariam from his time in Peshawar, “His book the Syrian Experience on the Islamic movement in Syria was being distributed for free and became very popular. He had extremist ideas, takfiri ideas. He was accusing the Islamic movement of being too lazy. His ideas were popular amongst the hardliners who saw him as a pioneer.”<sup>21</sup>

After three years in Peshawar, Setmariam decided to return to Europe at a time when bin Laden and Al Qaeda were decamping to the Sudan. In “The Call to Global Islamic Resistance” he states, “In 1991, I left Afghanistan to [return to] my residence in Spain and I practically lost contact with them until 1996 when we met as guests of the Taliban.” Back in Madrid, Setmariam befriended fellow Syrian Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, who on 26 September 2005 was sentenced to 27 years for holding a command role in Al Qaeda and collaborating with the 11 September plotters.<sup>22</sup>

In 1994 Setmariam decided to move to London, which, with its more tolerant attitude, was developing as a hub of radical Islamism. According to Spanish court documents, Spanish police videotaped his wife carrying furniture into a car Setmariam was borrowing from Yarkas for the move.<sup>23</sup> In London, Setmariam and his family moved into the drab London suburb of Neasden.<sup>24</sup> Setmariam had been asked to go to London by Sheikh Qari al Jazaeri, the founder of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) that at the time was waging a violent campaign against the Algerian government. The men knew each other from the days of the Afghan war and Qari wanted Setmariam to help with the media side of the group’s operations.<sup>25</sup> Setmariam’s links to the GIA prompted the British police to arrest him in connection with a series of bombings of the Paris metro by the GIA in the summer of 1995 but lacking evidence they let him go.

From his house in Neasden, Setmariam helped to edit the GIA’s newsletter “Al Ansar,” which was run by Abu Qatada, a radical Jordanian cleric and spiritual head of Al-Zarqawi’s then fledgling terrorist organization Al Tawhid.<sup>26</sup> One issue of the publication carried a fatwah from Abu Qatada calling for the killing of wives and children of those that opposed the Islamist line in Algeria.<sup>27</sup> Setmariam, was also showing a penchant for hard-line views. He later described how:

I had the honor to support the *jihad* against the government of apostates in Algeria from 1994–1996. I had the honor to disassociate myself from everyone who deviated from the right path.<sup>28</sup>

Setmariam was also developing a reputation of being extremely calculating. A prominent London Islamist told the authors, “Setmariam was a Machiavellian. For him the end justifies the means. He is nice when he needs to be, otherwise he is not.”<sup>29</sup> Kamal el Helbawi told the authors “London was a place a lot of militants came through, some people moved forward, he moved backwards.”

In 1996 Setmariam ventured back to Afghanistan where he met bin Laden again. That summer he helped set up an interview between British Journalist Robert Fisk and Al Qaeda’s leader.<sup>30</sup> Returning to London he set up a company called the Islamic Conflict

Studies Bureau in 1997. That spring he escorted CNN journalists Peter Arnett and Peter Bergen from London to Afghanistan to meet bin Laden to record Al Qaeda's leader's first television interview. Peter Bergen, who communicated with Setmariam in French, told the authors "Setmariam was intelligent, intense and well informed and very very serious. I came to admire his intellect. Of course, when I was dealing with Setmariam in 1997 he gave no hint of his radical, militant views."<sup>31</sup>

In 1998 Setmariam returned to Afghanistan to settle there with his family permanently. On leaving Europe he could reflect how his time there had benefited his strategic thinking. He felt he had a handle on the West's ways and weaknesses and that he could impart this knowledge to other jihadis. He would later state:

I am one of the few Jihadis who understand the Western culture and mentality. This is for several reasons. One of them is I lived in the West for fifteen years. I developed friendships and relationships in those societies and read lots of historical and sociological information.<sup>32</sup>

Setmariam, in his statement of December 2004, explains what he did when he settled in Afghanistan:

I had the honor to emigrate to Dar al Islam (home of Islam), Afghanistan, when this home was established. I had the honor to announce my pledge of allegiance to the Prince of the Believers Mullah Mohammed Omar in April 2000. I worked as a mujahid in the Defense Ministry of the Taliban. For this purpose I established the *Al-Ghuraba* camp. In it I trained many Arabs and non Arabs. I worked with the information Ministry of the Islamic Ministry of Afghanistan when I was in charge of the Arabic section there. I wrote in official newspapers and prepared supportive programs for Radio Kabul in Arabic. I established the *Al-Ghuraba* Center for Studies to disseminate *jihadist* thought and the call for global resistance. I wrote thousands of pages in ideology, political, military and martial science and shariah studies. During 25 years I recorded hundreds of audio cassettes and videotapes.

According to Baker Atyani, Al Aribiya's bureau chief in Islamabad, Pakistan, who interviewed bin Laden in June 2001, Setmariam became particularly close to Mullah Omar on his return to Afghanistan. According to Atyani in the late 1990s Setmariam was "not known as an al Qaeda person."<sup>33</sup> Despite being involved with the embryonic Al Qaeda of the late 1980s, Setmariam now wanted to establish a certain amount of independence. In some ways he was a rival to bin Laden in this period: a figure already very well respected among the Arab Afghans with his own clout. Bin Laden's claims to leadership of the whole jihadist movement and burgeoning international profile agitated Setmariam. In a 19 July 1999 letter to Ayman al Zawahari found by Wall Street Journal Reporters on an Al Qaeda computer, Setmariam complains:

The strangest thing I have heard so far is Abu Abdullah (bin Laden) saying he wouldn't listen to the Leader of the Faithful (Mullah Omar) when he asked him to stop giving interviews. I think our brother (bin Laden) has caught the disease of screens, flashes, fans and applause.<sup>34</sup>

Noman Benotman, a Libyan jihadist, confirmed the tension between the two men, “before 9/11, [al Suri and Bin Laden] hated each other. Al Suri didn’t like bin Laden’s leadership because he said, “bin Laden is a dictator” and he even called him “a Pharaoh.”<sup>35</sup>

It was only after 9/11 and the U.S. offensive in Afghanistan that Setmariam gave bin Laden his full backing:

When I met Sheikh Osama, for the last time in November 2001 during the battles to defend the emirate, we pledged allegiance to the Prince of the Faithful [Mullah Omar]. I pledged to Sheikh Osama that I will persist in *Jihad* and the war against the enemy.<sup>36</sup>

Setmariam claims he was kept in the dark over the 9/11 plot, “only learning about the attacks through the media.”<sup>37</sup> He may well be telling the truth. Suspicions over his involvement in the plot center on his close relationship with Yarkas who according to the Spanish authorities set up a key planning meeting in the northeastern Spanish region of Tarragona in July 2001 and the fact that German Federal Police discovered that while he was living in London in the mid-1990s, Setmariam had received \$3,000 from Hamburg businessman Mamoun Darkazanli, who admitted to knowing Mohammed Atta, the lead 9/11 hijacker.<sup>38</sup> As yet however there is no concrete evidence linking him to the plot. Indeed the 9/11 Commission Report does not mention his name at all.

Ironically, it appears Setmariam gave bin Laden his full backing after 9/11 despite deep reservations about the consequences of the attacks. According to a London Islamist the authors spoke to, “Setmariam was one of the staunchest critics of 9/11 because Osama [bin Laden] did not get Mullah Omar’s permission. Setmariam had pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar and felt that the fall of the Taliban had resulted in the collapse of the Islamic caliphate.”<sup>39</sup> In his 2004 book Setmariam stated that “occurrences resulting from September 11th have negatively affected Muslims.” He lists the negative consequences as:

(1). The destruction of the Emirate in Afghanistan. (2). The American attack on Islam and Muslim people in the name of combating terrorism after September 11th. (3). The occupation of Iraq . . . the *Jihad* movement rose to glory in the 1960s and continued through the 1970s and 1980s and resulted in the rise of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan but was destroyed after 9/11.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the negative consequences of 9/11, Setmariam recognized that the international jihad needed its figureheads. His public praise since for bin Laden has therefore been voluminous and he now calls the September 2001 attacks “heroic and glorious.”<sup>41</sup> Setmariam’s objections were strictly strategic in that he felt that the loss of training camps in Afghanistan was too high a price to pay for an attack that did not fully paralyze the United States. In fact he stated in a January 2005 posting on a jihadist website,

I feel sorry because there were no weapons of mass destruction in the planes that attacked New York and Washington on 9/11. We might have been relieved of the biggest number possible of voters who elected Bush for a second term!<sup>42</sup>

Setmariam had a great fascination with the destructive impact of weapons of mass destruction. His training in the 1980s, including time in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, had allowed him to build up a certain expertise. According to the U.S. government, while in Afghanistan,

Setmariam assisted Al Qaeda's WMD chief, an Egyptian called Abu Khabab al-Masri, in training Al Qaeda recruits in the use of poisons and chemicals at the Derunta training camp.<sup>43</sup> A letter from Abu Khabab to Al Qaeda operatives found in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban revealed a preoccupation with developing "dirty bombs":

As you instructed us you will find attached a summary of the discharges from a traditional nuclear reactor, amongst which are radioactive elements that could be used for military ends. One can use them to contaminate an area or to halt the advance of the enemy. It is possible to get more information from our Pakistani friends who have great experience in this sphere.<sup>44</sup>

It was a preoccupation that Setmariam shared, until his arrest a worrying fact for Western security services and probably the most important factor in the issuing by the U.S. authorities, on 18 November 2004, of a \$5 million reward for information leading to his capture or killing. Setmariam responded to the issuing of this reward in a December 2004 by stating that an attack on the United States using weapons of mass destruction was "eventually possible and has now become necessary":

[One] option was to destroy the United States by means of decisive strategic operations with weapons of mass destruction including nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons if mujahidin are able to obtain them in cooperation with those who possess them, purchase them—or manufacture and use primitive atomic bombs or so called dirty bombs. I believe that the adoption of the slogan dirty bombs for a dirty nation is not free of justice. Let the radiation harm the American people who vote for the killing, destruction and expropriation of the people's resources, and [the] malignant narcissism to control others. After all, we will just say that we regret the radiation.<sup>45</sup>

In Afghanistan Setmariam developed a reputation as a hard-liner even within the jihadist fold. One fellow jihadist remembers that on occasion he personally tracked down and killed individuals who had abandoned his group.<sup>46</sup> The videos of the classes he gave at the al Ghuraba training camp, which were then distributed around the world, make chilling viewing. At one point he tells the future jihadi recruiters "Kill wherever and don't make a distinction between men, women and children."<sup>47</sup> Although in his December 2004 statement Setmariam spoke of the need not to target the innocent, his conception of those that need to be "hit" is exceptionally wide: "the Crusaders, Christians, Jews and lapsed Muslims."<sup>48</sup> Setmariam also had a strong antipathy for the Shia. In videotapes recovered from the flat of an Algerian terrorist cell in Naples in 2000, Setmariam rejects any form of cooperation between Sunnis and Shia, pointing to the "negative influence" that Shiite groups like Hezbollah have had on the Palestinian struggle.<sup>49</sup> This anti-Shia line would later play well among Sunni Iraqi insurgents downloading Setmariam's speeches from jihadi websites.

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It is as a strategic thinker that Setmariam has made his most critical contribution to the jihadist movement. He brought in what he considered to be the "best and the brightest" of the new generation of jihadists to his Al Ghuraba training camp in Afghanistan and, according to Baker Atyani, was able to entice several members of Al Qaeda to his camp. Al Ghuraba received funds from bin Laden but was independent from the other Al Qaeda camps.<sup>50</sup> Several recruits came from Europe and were dispatched back there after they



had received their training.<sup>51</sup> Setmariam later recalled that: “Among those I supervised and trained at al Ghuraba were Arabs and foreigners including Britons born, raised and resident in Britain and others from different Western countries, including some American Muslims.”<sup>52</sup>

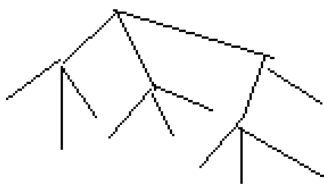
It was at Al Ghuraba that Setmariam articulated a new strategic concept for jihad. The videotapes of his lecture series from the summer of 2000 were recovered recently in Afghanistan. They contain over twenty hours of footage focused on Setmariam, clad in white Islamic garb, standing in front of a table and blackboard addressing his class, the obligatory Kalashnikov to one side. What is immediately striking is how articulately and intelligently Setmariam makes his arguments. His assumption is that his audience is a highly educated one.

Setmariam’s new strategic concept was that “individual terrorism” needed to replace the hierarchically orchestrated terrorism of Al Qaeda. He explained to his class why this was necessary:

We ask the Muslim youth to be a terrorist. Why do we ask for such individual terrorism? First because secret hierarchical organizations failed to attract Muslims. The youth fear joining such an organization because if there is a mistake then the authorities will reach them. Second because we need to give the youth the chance to play a role without being part of an organization. Some youth don’t want to join an organization and don’t know how to act on their beliefs. Third due to pressure from the Jews, Crusaders and lapsed Muslim regimes.<sup>53</sup>

Setmariam then launched into a critique of Al Qaeda’s hierarchical structure. He drew a diagram indicating how easy it was to round up a cell structure in which many cells are traced back to a leader (see Figure 1). “In the new stage,” Setmariam told his future recruiters, “You should form a brigade and work directly. I advise your brigade doesn’t exceed ten members. You shouldn’t expand or form too many. In case you are caught, they are all caught.”<sup>54</sup>

Setmariam recognized that there would need to be a great amount of mobilization to achieve his vision of a mass participation jihadist movement. The “prototype” he would later state in his 2004 book was the “Palestinian Intifada but on a broader basis which includes the Islamic world, with its arm reaching the home of the American invaders and their infidel allies from every race and place.”<sup>55</sup> To encourage such popular participation, Setmariam introduced his Al Ghuraba lecture course by saying he wanted to distribute videotapes of the course to teach individuals how to incite Muslims to become jihadists. “This should be done,” says Setmariam, by “highlighting Jewish-Crusader oppression of Muslims.” Also, he says that dwelling on the “degeneracy of the Western world”—“its sin, gays and lesbians”—is a good way to incite Muslims. Attacks should take place in the



**Figure 1.** Setmariam’s depiction of Al Qaeda’s cell structure.

country of residence of jihadis. The criteria for targets, Setmariam says, are: (1) “where it hurts the enemy and costs him the most” and (2) “where it awakens Muslims and revives the spirit of *Jihad* and resistance.” The aim he says “is to spread a *Jihadist* cancer to face the bad cancer of the world order.”<sup>56</sup>

In the years since 9/11, Al Qaeda has evolved in remarkably similar lines to Setmariam’s vision. Facing an onslaught against its organized structures, the loss of its training camps, but also the opportunity of a new cause célèbre in Iraq, Al Qaeda has morphed into a broader-based and looser movement. The terrorist strikes in Bali, Casablanca, Istanbul, Madrid, and London were all initiated by exactly the sort of small locally recruited cells for which Setmariam was calling. They represent a change in approach to the centrally organized attacks on U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998 and the 9/11 attacks. In both these instances operatives were parachuted in from Afghan training camps to carry out the strikes. They were also directed at targets (tourism and transport infrastructure) whose destruction would have a significant economic “cost.”

To make this new individual terrorism “orderly” Setmariam recognized in his 2004 tract that “wonderful individual initiatives” needed to be “directed” through strategic guidance, either from him or other Al Qaeda leaders and “invested” with “a state of general unity” or in other words be credited to Al Qaeda.<sup>57</sup> Bin Laden, al Zawahiri, and Al Qaeda leaders have certainly acted according to this advice. It now appears Al Qaeda leaders had a hand in supporting the locally recruited cell that carried out the 7 July bombings in London. In other cases they have merely telegraphed their desire for attacks, for example, on European allies of the U.S. invasion on Iraq, and when they did take place, in nearly every instance, bin Laden or al Zawahiri have quickly claimed credit. Setmariam is adamant that each jihadi operation, however autonomously initiated, should work to further the overall cause. In his videotaped Jihadist lectures he says:

If a Muslim is in Britain and doesn’t want to leave his job or university and go and fight *Jihad* on the front, what he can do is call the press agency and tell them, “I’m from the global Islamic resistance” and claim responsibility for whatever action is being done around the world.<sup>58</sup>

It is possible to argue that Al Qaeda would have evolved in this direction with or without Setmariam’s input. Just because he saw the future more clearly than others does not mean that he had a decisive role in changing jihadist strategy. The authors’ research, however, has led to the conclusion that Setmariam’s ideas *have* made a very significant impact. Many of the recruits he trained in the Al Ghuraba camp are now engaged in recruiting jihadis around the world. For example, Amer Azizi, a protegee of Setmariam’s at the Al Ghuraba training camp is wanted by Spanish authorities in connection with the 9/11 plot, the Madrid bombing, and helping to build up the Al Qaeda organization in Spain. Azizi is thought to have then traveled to Iraq to work with Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq.<sup>59</sup> But it is through Internet postings of his works and statements from Pakistan that he has been most impactful, not least because his is the most cogent and best articulated work on the strategy and tactics of jihad. Fuad Hussein is in no doubt, “he has had a big influence. I monitor the Islamist websites every day and every day there are always new posting of Setmariam’s research, writings, chapters of his books and tapes. He has had a big impact. He has big credibility because they [the jihadists] know his history. People read this in Iraq, the Arab world, in Europe and all over the world.”<sup>60</sup>

Although the authors do not have proof, it is likely that perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the recent years have been exposed and influenced by Setmariam’s postings on jihadi websites. His teachings are likely making an impact on the tactics of the Sunni insurgency

in Iraq. His hard anti Shia line and his links with Abu Qatada, Zarqawi's spiritual mentor, have given him great kudos. It is in Iraq that his vision of "thousands, even hundreds of thousands of Muslims participating in *Jihad*" has taken on a reality.<sup>61</sup> So too has his vision of a loosely structured Jihadist effort. Iraqi and American officials have told the *New York Times* that the insurgency consists of possibly as many as a hundred groups, each with separate leaders, that often act on their own or come together for a single attack.<sup>62</sup>

Iraq is also becoming what Setmariam refers to as "an open front," a necessary area for the effort of "individual terrorism" around the world because it offers a "recruitment environment" and a "safe haven."<sup>63</sup> The fact that Iraq is becoming a breeding ground and exporter of terrorism was brought home with Zarqawi's 9 November 2005 attack on international hotels in Amman, Jordan.

With regard to recent terrorist attacks in Europe, Fuad Hussein says that "it is quite possible that the *Jihadis* involved with the Madrid and London bombings were reading this material." Setmariam, in his statement reacting to the London bombings, explains that he had long urged an attack on the London Underground:

[In my teachings] I have mentioned vital and legitimate targets to be hit in the enemy's countries based on on the principle of equal treatment in case they target [our] civilians which they have done so historically. Among those targets that I specifically mentioned as examples was the London Underground. [Targetting this] was and still is the aim.<sup>64</sup>

There is also a startling similarity between Setmariam's jihadist doctrine and the locally initiated recruitment for the Madrid and London attacks. In his 2004 tract Setmariam outlined how a "builder" should form cells. This individual should be "an active individual with a security, cultural and religious eligibility, able to influence a wide circle of friends."<sup>65</sup> In Madrid the well-connected Tunisian immigrant Sarhane Fahket and the Moroccan immigrant Jamal Zougam built up their own jihadist group. Fahket was a successful real estate agent and Zougam ran a mobile phone shop. In Dewsbury, in the north of England, Mohammed Siddique Khan, a respected primary school teacher drew three impressionable young Muslims into a jihadist cell.

The fit with Setmariam's model of individual terrorism is not perfect, of course. In both the Madrid and London attacks the local group reached out for help and guidance to more experienced jihadist or Al Qaeda operatives. The Madrid bombers had connections with several leading European jihadis including members of the Moroccan Fighting Group and may have been financed in part by Abu Qatada, the spiritual leader of Al Zarqawi's terrorist group.<sup>66</sup> And the London bombers made trips to Pakistan, where their leader Mohammed Siddique Khan was filmed in an Al Qaeda video production.<sup>67</sup> But the important point is that in their prototype form, the cells were formed autonomously.

The Madrid and London bombers might well have also taken Setmariam's advice on training, "it could be in secret houses, apartments or gyms." In fact Setmariam especially stresses gyms as a good place for jihadis to meet and train. "The leader of the cell should undergo with the rest of the members of the cell an intensive fitness program in one of the violent sports."<sup>68</sup> It was in a gym in the small town of Beeston in the north of England that the London bombers used to congregate. And in Madrid, the bombers rented an apartment to conduct their training regime.

There have been claims that Setmariam played a more direct role in orchestrating the Madrid bombings. The Spanish authorities want to question him on his links with those involved in the operation, although they acknowledge they do not yet have the evidence

to directly tie him to the attacks. The investigating judge Balthazar Garzon has issued an indictment against a Moroccan protégée of Setmariam, Amer Azizi, for involvement in the Madrid plot. Azizi trained in Setmariam's Al Ghuraba camp and is now thought to have fled to join al Zarqawi's network in Iraq.<sup>69</sup> Setmariam himself in his December 2004 statement denied that he participated in the Madrid plot, "In June 2004, I sent a statement to leading Spanish newspapers to underscore the fact I had nothing to do with the attack."<sup>70</sup>

Setmariam's exact links to the perpetrators of the Madrid attacks will emerge over time. He certainly knew some of the dramatis personae involved, from his time living in Spain and also his relations with Abu Qatada who is suspected of financing and assisting Al Qaeda affiliates in Spain. However, the fact that he had been hiding in Pakistan since the collapse of the Taliban makes it very unlikely that he was directly involved. The Jordanian journalist Fuad Hussein, who has close contacts with Al Qaeda leaders, says, "Setmariam's role was to give advice. He was not operationally involved. He did not have control of the movement."

It was a strategist and online teacher, however, that Setmariam posed the greatest threat against the West. His arrest has removed the jihadist movement's most articulate thinker. Despite the fact his tapes and writings will continue to influence jihadis, this is no small breakthrough. Setmariam was a dangerous man, determined to push Al Qaeda toward use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States and her allies. Setmariam has encouraged jihadis to adopt brutal methods in order to achieve their goals and has scant regard for civilian life.

Indeed, developments in another Spanish legal case, the April 1985 bombing of a restaurant popular with U.S. servicemen near the Torrejon de Ardoz air force base near Madrid, which killed 18 Spaniards, point to a possible early involvement at the coal face of terrorism. When old photos of him were widely circulated after the London bombings on an initial suspicion of his involvement, Spanish police realized that his features exactly matched those of a man seen sitting at the restaurant with a sports bag at his feet who left just before the explosion. Spanish authorities have reopened the case and will seek Setmariam's extradition on charges of participation in this attack.<sup>71</sup>

Setmariam's August 2005 statement, posted in December 2005 is his last and most chilling. His previous hope, expressed in his December 2004 statement, had been that the Europeans might embrace bin Laden's 2004 offer of a truce. Somewhat absurdly, in August 2005, he still had faint hopes that "wise men such as Crown Prince Charles, Ken Livingston and George Galloway" or the "Spanish government" might be able to influence Europe in this regard. But his call is for renewed attacks and alarmingly he states that Britain, the country in which he settled, the "historical fortress of injustice" should be the number one target.<sup>72</sup>

About Blair's claim that there is no link between the bombings and the Iraq and Afghanistan invasion, I say that we incited our followers and fought, and we will continue our war against America and its aggressive allies, especially Britain until they withdraw their armies from our countries and leave us alone to reform the corruption of the rulers who were imposed by them. Did you understand the reason behind the London bombings or do you need what we are now preparing for you?<sup>73</sup>

His last strategic insight is that with the United States and its allies bogged down in Iraq the moment was right to unleash a new wave of terror:

I reiterate my call for mujahadin who are spread in Europe and in our enemies' countries or those able to go there, to the significance of moving fast to hit Britain, Italy, Holland, Germany, Japan, Australia, Russia and France and all countries who have a military presence in Iraq, Afghanistan or the Arab peninsula or to hit their interests in our countries and all over the world. And let all the sleeping cells awaken now because the war is in its peak and the enemy is about to collapse with the evidence for this now being clear. Those who sleep now may not be able to participate when they awaken.<sup>74</sup>

## Notes

1. Setmariam's wife Elena Moreno confirmed her husband's arrest to Spanish reporters in December 2005, stating: "I have recently received a phone call from a person in whom I have complete confidence who has confirmed to me that Setmariam was held when the news broke around 3 November last... he has disappeared and I do not know exactly whose hands he is in." See "Wife of Spanish al Qaeda suspect slams official silence on husband's location," *El Mundo* (Spanish Daily), 27 December 2005. As of January 2006 Pakistan's government has not officially acknowledged the arrest; however, Pakistani officials do acknowledge the arrest privately. Two U.S. counterterrorism officials told CNN anonymously on 4 November 2005 that Setmariam was in custody. See "Officials: al Qaeda Operative Captured, CNN News Website, 4 November 2005. Available at [www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/asiapcf/11/04/pakistan.terrorarrest/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/asiapcf/11/04/pakistan.terrorarrest/index.html)

2. For example, Patrick Hennessy, David Harrison, and Daniel Foggo, "Foreign Terrorist Cell was behind London Bombings," *Sunday Telegraph* (London), July, 10 2005, Nick Fielding and Gary Walsh, "Top Suspect," *Sunday Times* (London), 10, July 2005.

3. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, dated August 2005 and posted on Jihadist websites on 2 December 2005.

4. Katherine Shrader, "Wanted Muslim extremist hopscoches the globe connecting terrorists," *Associated Press*, 3 August 2005.

5. For example, see Lorenzo Vidino, "Another Dynamic Duo," *National Review*, 21 May 2004.

6. Pedro Arnuero, "Mastermind of 3/11 is Now Organizing Attacks in Iraq With Al-Zarqawi," *La Razon* (Spanish Daily), 20 November 2004.

7. Katherine Shrader, "Wanted Muslim extremist hopscoches the globe connecting terrorists," *Associated Press*, 3 August 2005.

8. Fuad Hussein, phone interview by authors to Amman, Jordan, 29 November 2005.

9. Setmariam's will was posted on the Al-Safnat Jihadi Internet forum on 4 November 2005.

10. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, December 2004. The statement was originally posted by Abd-al-Tawab al-Shami, who called himself the office manager of the "Al-Tahrir forum." The posting also announced the opening of a website for Abu-Musab al-Suri ([www.abumusab.cjb.net](http://www.abumusab.cjb.net)) with "the largest jihad encyclopedia," and other books by Abu-Musab al-Suri.

11. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, December 2004.

12. As Setmariam recalls in "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.

13. See, for example, Lorenzo Vidino, "Another Dynamic Duo," *National Review*, 21 May 2004.

14. The videotapes containing Setmariam's complete Jihadist lecture series were handed to the veteran war cameraman Peter Jouvenal by an Afghan contact. They were reviewed by the authors in August 2005 in London.

15. See Murad al Shishani, "Abu Musab al Suri and the Third Generation of Salafist Jihadists," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, 11 August 2005.

16. Ali Bayanoni, interview by authors, November 2005.

17. Setmariam is profiled on the *Tawhid (monotheism) & Jihad* website, <http://www.tawhed.ws/a?i=78>.

18. Abu Musab al Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.
19. Setmariam provides details on his life in France, Spain, and the U.K. in his August 2005 Statement, posted on jihadist websites on 2 December 2005.
20. "Al Suri's wife confirms his arrest in October," *Asharq Al-Awsat (Saudi Daily)*, 27 December 2005, available at <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issue=9891&article=340315&search=السوري/20%مصعب20%ابو/ابو&state=true>
21. Kamal el Helbawi, interview by authors, London, November 2005.
22. See Lorenzo Vidino, "Another Dynamic Duo," *National Review*, 21 May 2004.
23. Katherine Shrader, "Wanted Muslim extremist hopscoches the globe connecting terrorists," *Associated Press*, 3 August 2005.
24. Nick Fielding and Gary Walsh, "Top Suspect," *The Sunday Times* (London), 10 July 2005.
25. Al Suri's profile, *Tawhid* (monotheism) & *Jihad* website, <http://www.tawhed.ws/a?i=78>
26. Nick Fielding and Gary Walsh, "Top Suspect," *The Sunday Times* (London), 10 July 2005.
27. For example, see Mark Honigsbaum and Alan Travis, "Al Qaida's Spiritual Ambassador faces return to Jordan," *The Guardian* (London), 12 August 2005.
28. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, December 2004, posted on jihadist websites.
29. The Islamist in question was interviewed in London by the authors in November 2005. He requested anonymity.
30. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, August 2005, posted on jihadist websites in December 2005.
31. Peter Bergen, interview by the authors, January 2006.
32. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, August 2005, posted on jihadist websites in December 2005.
33. Baker Atyani, phone interview by authors to Islamabad, Pakistan, 29 November 2005.
34. Allan Cullison and Andrew Higgins, "A Computer in Kabul Yields a Chilling Array of al Qaeda memos," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 December 2000 and Alan Cullison, "Inside al Qaeda's Hard Drive," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 2004.
35. Noman Benotman was interviewed by Peter Bergen in June 2005 in London; see Peter Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, January 2006).
36. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, December 2004, posted on jihadist websites.
37. Ibid.
38. The Tarragona meeting was held between Mohammed Atta and Ramzi Binalshibh. The 9/11 Report was not able to substantiate the Spanish claim that it was organized by Yarkas's group. See *Final Report of the National Commission on the Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 547 (footnote 145). On Setmariam's links with Mamoun Darkazanli see John Crewsdon, "Syrian Born Fugitive in Spanish Terror Probe also is sought by U.S.," *Chicago Tribune*, 12 July 2005.
39. The Islamist in question was interviewed in London by the authors in November 2005. He requested anonymity.
40. Abu Musab al Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.
41. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, December 2004, posted on jihadist websites.
42. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, posted 25 January 2005 on jihadist websites.
43. "Rewards for Justice" website, posted 30 November 2004, available at [www.rewardsforjustice.net](http://www.rewardsforjustice.net)
44. Roland Jacquard, *L'Archive Secretès d' al Qaida* (Paris: Jean Picollec, 2002), p. 291.
45. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, December 2004, posted on jihadist websites.
46. The jihadist in question has requested anonymity.
47. Abu Musab al Suri, jihadist training videos, dated August 2000.
48. Ibid.
49. Lorenzo Vidino, "Another Dynamic Duo," *National Review*, 21 May 2004.

50. Katherine Shrader, "Wanted Muslim extremist hopscoches the globe connecting terrorists," *Associated Press*, 3 August 2005.

51. Balthazar Garzon, Spain's Chief Counterterrorism Investigating Judge, stated in his 2004 indictment of Setmariam that "in 1998 Nasar left London for Afghanistan to train young Muslims from France, Italy and Spain who were reinstated in their respective countries as 'sleepers,' waiting for orders from the organization." See John Crewsdon, "Syrian Born Fugitive in Spanish Terror Probe also is sought by U.S.," *Chicago Tribune*, 12 July 2005.

52. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, dated August 2005 and posted on jihadist websites on 2 December 2005.

53. Abu Musab al Suri, jihadist training videos, dated August 2000.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Abu Musab al Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.

56. Abu Musab al Suri, jihadist training videos, dated August 2000.

57. Abu Musab al Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.

58. Abu Musab al Suri, jihadist training videos, dated August 2000.

59. See "Spain: A commemoration week for the Attacks' victims," *al-Hayat Newspaper*, 7 March 2005, available at [http://www.daralhayat.com/world\\_news/europe/03-2005/Item-20050306-7929bd39-c0a8-10ed-0022-da17e840cb5d/story.html](http://www.daralhayat.com/world_news/europe/03-2005/Item-20050306-7929bd39-c0a8-10ed-0022-da17e840cb5d/story.html)

60. Fuad Hussein, phone interview by authors to Amman, Jordan, 29 November 2005.

61. Abu Musab al Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.

62. Dexter Filkins, "Profusion of Rebel Groups help them to survive in Iraq," *New York Times*, 2 December 2005.

63. Abu Musab al Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.

64. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, dated August 2005 and posted on jihadist websites on 2 December 2005.

65. Abu Musab al Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.

66. Several members of the Madrid cell, including Jamal Zougam, visited Abu Qatada in London in the years prior to the attacks. When British police raided Qatada's home in 2001 they found cash worth \$296000, including a quantity of Spanish pesetas. See Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "Clerical Error: The Dangers of Tolerance," *The New Republic*, 8 August 2005. Also Phillippe Naughton, "Cleric accused over Madrid released as Spain grieves," *The Times (London)*, 11 March 2005.

67. Mohammad Sidiq Khan appeared in a videotape produced by Al Qaeda's propoganda unit "Al Sahab" (the Clouds) that aired on Al-Jazeera on 1 September 2005.

68. Abu Musab al Suri, "The Call for Global Islamic Resistance," published on jihadist websites in December 2004.

69. "Spain: A commemoration week for the Attacks' victims," *al-Hayat Newspaper*, 7 March 2005, available at [http://www.daralhayat.com/world\\_news/europe/03-2005/Item-20050306-7929bd39-c0a8-10ed-0022-da17e840cb5d/story.html](http://www.daralhayat.com/world_news/europe/03-2005/Item-20050306-7929bd39-c0a8-10ed-0022-da17e840cb5d/story.html) On Azizi suspected to be in Iraq see Daniel Trotta, "Two Fugitives Loom Large in Spain's Al Qaeda Fight," *Reuters*, 2 July 2005.

70. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, December 2004, posted on jihadist websites.

71. "High Court Reopens 1985 Islamic Terrorist Case," available at [www.thinkspain.com](http://www.thinkspain.com), 9 November 2005.

72. Statement by Abu Musab al Suri, dated August 2005 and posted on jihadist websites on 2 December 2005.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*