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Reuters

Bin Laden deputy Zawahri to lead al Qaeda

By Sara Anabtawi

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Al Qaeda's long-serving number two, Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahri, has taken over the leadership after the killing of Osama bin Laden, the group said on Islamist websites on Thursday.

Bin Laden's lieutenant and the brains behind much of al Qaeda's strategy, Zawahri vowed this month to press ahead with its campaign against the United States and its allies.

"The general leadership of al Qaeda group, after the completion of consultation, announces that Sheikh Dr. Ayman Zawahri, may God give him success, has assumed responsibility for command of the group," the network said in a statement posted on Islamist websites which it often uses.

A U.S. counter-terrorism official told Reuters the United States believed the announcement was genuine, but the State Department was dismissive of its significance. "Frankly, it barely matters," spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said.

The bespectacled Zawahri had been seen as bin Laden's most likely successor after the man held responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington was shot dead by U.S. commandos in Pakistan 45 days ago.

Zawahri's whereabouts are unknown, although he has long been thought to be hiding along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The United States is offering a \$25 million reward for any information leading to his capture or conviction.

In Washington, a senior U.S. official said Zawahri would have a hard time leading the Islamist group "while focusing on his own survival."

"He hasn't demonstrated strong leadership or organizational skills during his time in AQ," the official said. "Unlike many of AQ's top members, Zawahri has not had actual combat experience, instead opting to be an armchair general with a 'soft' image."

"LACKS BIN LADEN PRESENCE"

Sajjan Gohel of Asia-Pacific Foundation security consultants said Zawahri had been in practical charge of al Qaeda for many years, but lacked bin Laden's presence and his "ability to unite the different Arab factions within the group."

Fawaz Gerges, a Middle East expert at the London School of Economics, said al Qaeda's militants in south Asia were "on the run," its leaders were deep in hiding, and a new leader would do little to help reverse their fortunes.

As for its branches in other parts of the world, they were "pitted in a fierce local struggle for survival...and are unable to coordinate their actions with the parent organization."

Others see Zawahri as capable.

"He is an able person," Pakistani Taliban spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan said by telephone from an undisclosed location.

"We have been cooperating with al Qaeda in the past and that cooperation will continue in future," he told Reuters.

When asked how Zawahri's appointment would affect the Pakistani Taliban, the spokesman said: "We have been carrying out our activities which, God willing, will gather more momentum. We will get revenge for the oppression by the West."

The Pakistani Taliban, which has close links to al Qaeda, is blamed for many suicide bombings across Pakistan. It also has ambitions to take its fight overseas. The group claimed responsibility for a botched bombing in New York in May 2010.

London-based journalist Abdel-Bari Atwan, who interviewed bin Laden in 1996, said Zawahri was the "operational brains" behind al Qaeda and was respected in part because he had been bin Laden's chosen deputy.

A contributor to another Islamist militant website, al-Ansar, said: "A worthy successor to a great predecessor. We ask God to grant you and your soldiers success for the victory of Islam and Muslims and to raise the banner of religion."

"AGENTS OF AMERICA"

Believed to be in his late 50s, Zawahri met bin Laden in the mid-1980s when both were in Pakistan to support guerrillas fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Born to an upper-class Cairo family, Zawahri trained as a doctor and surgeon.

In a video message posted on the internet on June 8, Zawahri said al Qaeda would continue to fight. He called this year's Arab uprisings a disaster for Washington because, he said, they would remove Arab leaders who were the "agents of America."

He also pledged allegiance to the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar, calling him "Emir of the Believers."

Among some Egyptians there was disdain at the news that their countryman had taken charge of al Qaeda.

Karim Sabet, 34, a director of an oil and gas start-up firm, said he was not surprised by the announcement.

"He's been the loyal No. 2 forever. Zawahri seems even more of a madman than Osama was, and he'll want to prove himself by going on the attack soon. Another devil killing in the name of Islam. Disgusting."