

By Scott Stewart

On Saturday, Sept. 19, the Indonesian National Police announced that a DNA test has positively identified a man killed Sept. 17 as Noordin Mohammad Top. Top was killed in a raid on a safe-house in the outskirts of Solo, Central Java, that resulted in a prolonged firefight between Indonesian authorities and militants. Police said four militants were killed in the incident and three more were taken into custody. (Two of them were arrested before the raid.) Authorities also recovered a large quantity of explosives during the raid that they believe the militant group was preparing to use in an attack on Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Indonesian National Police had reported Sept. 17 that the dead man's fingerprints matched Top's. But given several inaccurate reports of Top's demise in the past, combined with reports that the body believed to be Top's was headless — perhaps due to the explosion of a suicide belt — most observers were waiting for DNA confirmation before removing Top's name from the pinnacle of the organizational chart of Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad.

Now that Top's name officially has been scratched off the list, big questions emerge: Can Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad continue without him? Can the group be effective as a militant organization? And who will step up to fill the void left by Top?

The Importance of Leadership

All three of these questions touch on the issue of leadership. Without leadership, militant groups wither and/or disintegrate. Without skilled leadership, militant groups lose their ability to conduct effective attacks. Quite simply, leadership, skill and professionalism make the difference between a militant group wanting to attack something — i.e., possessing intent — and the group's ability to successfully carry out its intended attack — i.e., its capability.

Although on the surface it might seem like a simple task to find a leader for a militant group, in practice, effective militant leaders are hard to come by. This is because militant leadership requires a rather broad skill set. In addition to personal attributes such as ruthlessness, aggressiveness and fearlessness, militant leaders also must be charismatic, intuitive, clever and inspiring. This last attribute is especially important in an organization that seeks to recruit operatives to conduct suicide attacks. Additionally, an effective militant leader must be able to recruit and train operatives, enforce operational security, raise funds, plan operations, and then methodically execute the plan while avoiding the security forces constantly hunting the militants down.

The importance of leadership to a militant organization has been wonderfully illustrated by the trajectory of al Qaeda's franchise in Saudi Arabia. Under the leadership of Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin the Saudi al Qaeda franchise was extremely busy in 2003 and 2004. It carried out a number of high-profile attacks inside the kingdom and put everyone from the Saudi monarchy to multinational oil companies in a general state of panic. With bombings, ambushes and beheadings, it seemed as if Saudi Arabia was on its way to becoming the next Iraq. Following the June 2004 death of al-Muqrin, however, the organization began to flounder. The succession of leaders appointed to replace al-Muqrin lacked his operational savvy, and each one proved ineffective at best. (Saudi security forces quickly killed several of them.) Following the February 2006 attack against the oil facility at Abqaiq, the group atrophied even further, succeeding in carrying out one more attack, an amateurish small-arms assault in February 2007 against a group of French tourists.

The disorganized remaining jihadist militants in Saudi Arabia ultimately grew frustrated at their inability to operate on their own. Many of them traveled to places like Iraq or Pakistan to train and fight. In January 2009, many of the militants who remained in the Arabian Peninsula joined with al Qaeda's franchise in Yemen to form a new group called al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) under the leadership of Nasir al-Wahayshi, the leader of al Qaeda in Yemen who served under Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan before being arrested in Iran. Al-Wahayshi

was returned to Yemen in 2003 through an extradition deal between the Yemeni and Iranian governments and subsequently escaped from a high-security prison outside Sanaa in 2006.

Al Qaeda in Yemen's operational capability improved under al-Wahayshi's leadership, and its operational tempo increased (even though those operations were not terribly effective.) In the wake of this momentum, it is not surprising that the frustrated members of the all-but-defunct Saudi franchise agreed to swear loyalty to him. The first real fruit of this merger was seen inside Saudi Arabia in the Aug. 28 attempted assassination of Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. That the plot had to be planned and launched from Yemen reveals AQAP's weakness inside the kingdom, and the plot's failure demonstrates that, overall, AQAP is far from an effective organization.

Like the Saudi node, the fortunes of other al Qaeda regional franchises have risen or fallen based upon the ability of the franchise's leadership. For example, in August 2006 al Qaeda announced with great fanfare that a splinter of the Egyptian jihadist group Gamaah al-Islamiyah had become al Qaeda's franchise in Egypt. Likewise, in November 2007 al Qaeda announced that the Libyan Islamic Fighting group (LIFG) had joined its constellation of regional groups.

But neither of these new franchise groups ever really got off the ground. While a great degree of the groups' lack of success may have resulted from the oppressive natures of the Egyptian and Libyan governments and the aggressive efforts those governments undertook to control the new al Qaeda franchises following the announcements of their creation, we believe the groups' near total lack of success also stems in large part from the lack of dynamic leadership. Recently, LIFG leaders have issued statements speaking out against al Qaeda's operational principles and general methodology.

Dynamic leaders are indeed hard to find. Even though Indonesia has an estimated population of more than 240 million, Top was considered the most dangerous and most wanted man in Indonesia before his death. He hailed from Malaysia, not Indonesia. He was an outsider like the Jordanian-born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who brought al Qaeda in Iraq into the global spotlight.

Of course, not every leadership change is disastrous to a militant group. Sometimes a new leader breathes new life and energy into a group (like al-Wahayshi in Yemen), or the group has competent lieutenants able to continue to operate effectively after the death of the leader (like al Qaeda in Iraq after the death of al-Zarqawi). Top's replacement, and how the leadership transition affects the group, must therefore be closely monitored.

Topping Top

Top was an accomplished operational commander. He was responsible for a number of terrorist attacks in Indonesia, including the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings, the 2003 JW Marriott bombing in Jakarta, the 2004 attack on the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, and most recently, the July 17 bombings of the JW Marriott and the Ritz-Carlton in Jakarta.

Because of these attacks, Top and his militant colleagues were under extreme pressure from the Indonesian authorities, who were aided by the Australian and American intelligence services. Many of Top's closest associates, like Ridhwan Isam al-Deen al-Hanbali and Azahari bin Husin, were arrested or killed, and operations launched by Indonesian authorities thwarted several of the group's planned attacks between 2005 and 2009.

But external pressure was not the only challenge facing Top. He was also forced to deal with mounting ideological opposition to high-profile terror attacks from within Jemaah Islamiyah itself, a difference of opinion that led to Top's split with Jemaah Islamiyah and his decision to form the new group Tanzim Qaedit al-Jihad in early 2006.

Yet in spite of all this external and internal pressure, Top was still able to recruit new operatives, secure funding and maintain tight operational security. Top's penchant for security even sparked rumors that he had some sort of mystical protection, rumors fanned

by the many false reports of his capture or death. The ability to operate under such trying circumstances is the mark of a seasoned leader.

In a further challenge to Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad, two of Top's key lieutenants also died in the Sept. 17 operation. These were Maruto Jati Sulisty, thought to have been one of Top's main bombmakers; and Bagus Budi Pranoto, who had previously served a three-and-one-half-year prison sentence for hiding Top and Azahari. (Pranoto, aka Urwah, was thought to have been a polished recruiter.)

Despite the deaths of Maruto and Pranoto, there are a number of potential successors to Top. Among these are Reno, aka Teddy, the reported deputy of Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad; Saifuddin Jaelani, who reportedly recruited the suicide bombers responsible for the July hotel attacks in Jakarta; and Jalen's brother, Muhammad Syahrir. Of course, someone outside Top's immediate circle could take up the fallen militant leader's mantle. Scores of Jemmah Islamiyah militants have been released from prison in recent years, and several skilled militants like Dulmatin and Umar Patek, who have fled to the Philippines, could return. And senior Jemmah Islamiyah militants like Zulkarnaen, who enjoy respect within the group, also remain at large.

No matter who replaces Top, the follow-on investigation to the operation that resulted in the death of Top will surely prove challenging to the future leadership of Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad. Operations like the one that resulted in Top's death offer not only the opportunity for capturing or killing militants but also the potential for a huge harvest of intelligence. Indonesian authorities (aided by their allies) are surely attempting to exploit any information gained in the raid in an effort to locate other operatives, safe-houses and weapons caches. Indeed, Top himself was found due to intelligence gathered from the arrest of an associate named Rohmat on the same day as the raid in which Top died. Because of this intelligence windfall, we can anticipate a string of raids by the Indonesian government in the following days and weeks.

And while Top was able to weather such operations in the past, now that he is gone, it remains to be seen if his replacement is capable of withstanding the pressure and keeping the group together and operationally effective.

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