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AQAP: Implications of Wahishi's Death

Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leader Nasir al-Wahishi's death probably will not impact the group's operations in Yemen or its capacity to strike the West, including the United States. Wahishi's demise comes on the heels of the group's loss of five high-profile leaders—mostly involved in media and radicalization—since January as a result of US airstrikes.

- Wahishi—a former bodyguard for Usama Bin Ladin in the 1990s—was primarily an ideological and symbolic leader rather than an operational commander. In a statement released through AQAP's official media outlet today, the group announced that Qasim al-Rimi—its current military chief—would replace Wahishi. Rimi is a field commander with decades of experience in paramilitary tactics, suggesting AQAP may increase its operations in the near-term to retaliate for Wahishi's death.
- Since 2009, AQAP has plotted unsuccessfully on three occasions to blow up airliners over the US, and the chief architect of these plans, bombmaker Ibrahim al-Asiri, remains at large in Yemen. In the same statement released today, AQAP announced, "To the infidel America: God has kept alive those who will trouble your life and make you taste the bitterness of defeat."

Wahishi's death may have greater impact on al-Qa'ida's nodes outside Yemen, which relied on him for strategic guidance as the principal deputy to al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Wahishi's ties to Bin Ladin—and by extension, Zawahiri—made him a trusted broker with al-Qa'ida's global affiliates, such as the Nusra Front in Syria, al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb in North Africa, and al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent, which is based in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan.

- Western media reports indicate Rimi does not have the longstanding and deep personal ties to Zawahiri that Wahishi did, which will probably add difficulty to AQAP's and Zawahiri's ability to communicate and exert influence over al-Qa'ida's various branches while continuing to bolster al-Qa'ida's global brand.

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