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Rebranding terror

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Preface:

Ten years after its most devastating attack, al-Qaeda has turned into a franchiser, publisher, and occasional climate-change activist. Can the world’s most deadly terrorist group go mainstream and keep its edge?

As its enemies solemnly prepare to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the US, al-Qaeda faces an unusual predicament for a terrorist network: a brand crisis. The al-Qaeda name is being used by organisations from Yemen to Tunisia who embrace the group’s narrative of Muslim oppression at the hands of Western powers since the Crusades. Everyone in the wired world has access to Osama bin Laden’s message – but with user-generated content the al-Qaeda brand can be turned into anything anyone with a computer wants it to be. How much longer can an ideology claim to be extremist when it seems to offer something for everyone?

As it begins its second decade after September 11, is it time for al-Qaeda to rebrand, or even reinvent itself as a mainstream party that can play directly to a new broader base?

Like many successful brands, al-Qaeda has adapted to changing circumstances while staying true to its core. Even in a decade in which its operatives have failed to pull off another attack as spectacular as 9/11, the flops reinforced the brand. Blown plots, often by individuals born in western societies, have strengthened the idea of al-Qaeda as an omnipresent threat and fed its mystique of a heroic grassroots resistance against the West’s corrupted societies.

For a group with a pre-modern ideology, al-Qaeda has adjusted nimbly to 21st-century opportunities. It has used online channels and built media agencies such as As-Sahab, redirecting its propaganda from threads in obscure chatrooms to YouTube and even a slick online magazine in English, Inspire. Through those media, al-Qaeda has looked beyond merely recruiting radical individuals to resonating with wider audiences. Talking about oil contracts in the aftermath of the Iraq War was designed to appeal to the anti-global movement. Following the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, bin Laden expressed environmental concerns.

That strategy may be creating a lot of sympathisers but not many terrorists. The next natural step for bin Laden – establishing al-Qaeda as a mainstream political movement – doesn't seem to be available to him. The group's ultimate objective is the establishment of a caliphate based on a strict interpretation of Sharia law. Few of the ordinary people who might sympathise with the group, for its anti-Americanism or emphasis on the West's moral double standards, are ready to radically change their way of life. And there could not be a greater contradiction for al-Qaeda than turning into a political party, which would seem to embrace its opponents' rhetoric about democracy. Al-Qaeda's brand can thrive only at the margins.

Monocle comment:

Al-Qaeda's brand may face a potential crisis, but for liberal western countries the only strategy is to stay true to themselves. They might not be perfect but a vigorous debate over mistakes can reaffirm their greatest strengths.