

Independent.co.uk

How Bin Laden 'planned to give al-Qa'ida an image makeover'

By Andrew Buncombe, Asia Correspondent
Saturday, 25 June 2011

Osama bin Laden, holed-up in his Pakistan hideaway, contemplated changing the name of al-Qa'ida in order to rebrand the organisation and make it more attractive to potential recruits, according to documents recovered from his compound.

Concerned al-Qa'ida was losing both relevance and popularity and aware its attacks had killed endless thousands of Muslims, Bin Laden pondered a makeover that included the introduction of a religious element. He wanted to stress to followers the supposedly divine nature of the assaults and the broader war against the West.

The alternatives he came up with were not snappy: Taifat al-Tawhed Wal-Jihad, or Monotheism and Jihad Group, was one; Jama'at l'Adat al-Khilafat al-Rashida, which translates as Restoration of the Caliphate Group, was another. It's unclear whether Bin Laden's desires ever advanced beyond the planning stage.

His wish to give the group's image a thorough overhaul is revealed in a letter, said to have recovered among a large stash of documents and data stored on computers that US Navy SEALs recovered from the three-storey compound in Abbottabad, where Bin Laden was killed in a raid at the beginning in May.

According to a report by the Associated Press, the letter, which did not bear any date, was found among the more recent things the al-Qa'ida leader had written during the more than five years he is believed to have spent there.

As details have emerged about the contents of the material, US officials have sought to portray various images of the al-Qa'ida leader, who appears never to have left the sanctuary of his compound and who communicated with his most trusted colleagues through one or two couriers. An official at the Pentagon initially told reporters:

"This was an active command and control centre for al-Qa'ida's top leader and it's clear that he was not just a strategic thinker for the group. He was active in operational planning and in driving tactical decisions."

The latest report suggests Bin Laden, was like an anxious CEO, worried about marketing issues and how to "sell his holy war" or jihad. Last night, there was no independent confirmation of the report. However, some experts said it was possible the 62-year-old wanted to rebrand. Indeed, in the summer of 2001, Bin Laden had earlier amended his group's name to al-Qa'ida al-Jihad, Base of the Holy War, when it formally merged with the outfit headed by Egyptian Ayman Al Zawahiri, the man who became his deputy and who has since been named al-Qa'ida leader.

The report says in his letter, Bin Laden expressed concern the organisation was referred to simply as al-Qa'ida. Losing the "jihad", had allowed the West to "claim deceptively that they are not at war with Islam". He said perhaps it was time to stress the group's proper name.

Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, said: "Bin Laden and Zawahiri realised they had to appeal to a wide group

of Muslims. That is why we saw, whenever they made a statement, some reference to the Palestinian conflict, even though they had virtually nothing to do with it.”

Mr Gunaratna said other al-Qa’ida affiliates – in places such as Iraq and Algeria - had also opted for name changes. “At the time of Bin Laden’s death, al-Qa’ida was operating in the margins,” he said. “It had no relevance to the revolutions that had taken place in the Middle East. Zawahiri wanted to infiltrate those revolutions.”

The Obama administration has sought to use the material discovered at Abbottabad to claim al-Qa’ida was struggling. In a speech this week, Mr Obama said: “The information that we recovered from Bin Laden’s compound shows al-Qa’ida under enormous strain. Bin Laden expressed concern that al-Qa’ida had been unable to effectively replace senior terrorists that had been killed and that al-Qai’da has failed in its effort to portray America as a nation at war with Islam, thereby draining more widespread support.”

©**independent.co.uk** [Terms & Policies](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Email newsletter](#) | [RSS](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Advertising Guide](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Evening Standard](#) | [Homes & Property](#) | [London Careers](#) | [Novaya Gazeta \(English\)](#)