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Bin Laden's new image: younger, more Marxist

The former multimillionaire now blames global capitalism and class for the tragedies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Even though this new video is a dramatic departure from his usual religious rhetoric, bin Laden tells Americans to convert because Islam will set them "free," ridding them of the "warmongering owners of the major corporations." Religion is offered as a means to resolve the crisis of exploitative capital and war industry.

Surprisingly, the son of Arabia, known for his religious intolerance and fanaticism, is eager not to offend the religious sensibility of Americans. He urges them to read the Koran and learn firsthand about Islam and how the "prophet" Jesus and his mother are mentioned dozens of times. "Don't be turned away from Islam by the terrible situation of the Muslims today," he says, reading from papers in front of him, "for our rulers in general abandoned Islam many decades ago, but our fore-fathers were the leaders and pioneers of the world for many centuries, when they held firmly to Islam."

Intentionally or unintentionally, bin Laden is venturing into a new ideological terrain. He is blurring the lines between jihadist messianism and Marxist utopia, which might, in turn, throw his die-hard Salafi supporters off balance.

Militant Salafism, a hard-line sect within Sunni Islam, follows a literalist interpretation of the Koran and is suspicious of philosophical innovation. Marx's conception of material history, rendered exclusively in terms of economic impulses, is thus incompatible with Al Qaeda's brand of Islamicism.

What will Salafis make of bin Laden's recent choice to emphasize a socialist critique of Western capitalist-democracy rather than Koranic legitimization? Militant Islamists are most likely elated by the emergence of their beloved sheikh, but at the same time bewildered by his ideological language and terms of references. While US officials scrutinize the video for clues of new attacks, they seem to be losing sight of its strategic propagandist value. Bin Laden does not have to give signals to strike inside the US. Al Qaeda Central and the US are already waging war, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's No. 2, is apparently the operational commander these days, not bin Laden.

Bin Laden's address is a new twist in the ideological struggle for hearts and minds, mostly because it targets Westerners and Americans. Obviously, bin Laden and his senior associates feel confident to expand their propaganda campaign in the other war – the war of ideas.

Fawaz A. Gerges, who has just returned from a 15-month sabbatical in the Middle East, is a professor at Sarah Lawrence College and author of "Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy" and "The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global."

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