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Unsettling Times for Jihadists

By David Ignatius

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Let's try for a moment to read the mind of an al-Qaeda operative in the remote mountains of Waziristan as he listens to the news on the radio. His worldview has been roiled recently by two events -- one confounding his image of the West and the other confirming it.

The upsetting news for our imaginary jihadist is the election of [Barack Obama](#) as president of the United States. This wasn't supposed to happen, in [al-Qaeda's](#) playbook. Its aim was to draw the "far enemy" (meaning America) ever deeper onto the battlefields of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Instead, the jihadists must cope with a president-elect who promises to get out of Iraq and whose advisers are talking about negotiating with the [Taliban](#). And to top it off, the guy's middle name is Hussein.

Before the election, the radical Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradhawi even issued a fatwa supporting [John McCain](#): "Personally, I would prefer for the Republican candidate, McCain, to be elected. This is because I prefer the obvious enemy who does not hypocritically [conceal] his hostility toward you . . . to the enemy who wears a mask [of friendliness]."

Obama makes the jihadists nervous because he is an appealing new face whose ascension undermines the belief that Islam and the West are locked in an inescapable clash of civilizations. "The Democrats kill you slowly without you noticing it. . . . They are like a snake whose touch is not felt until its poison enters your body," observes Qaradhawi.

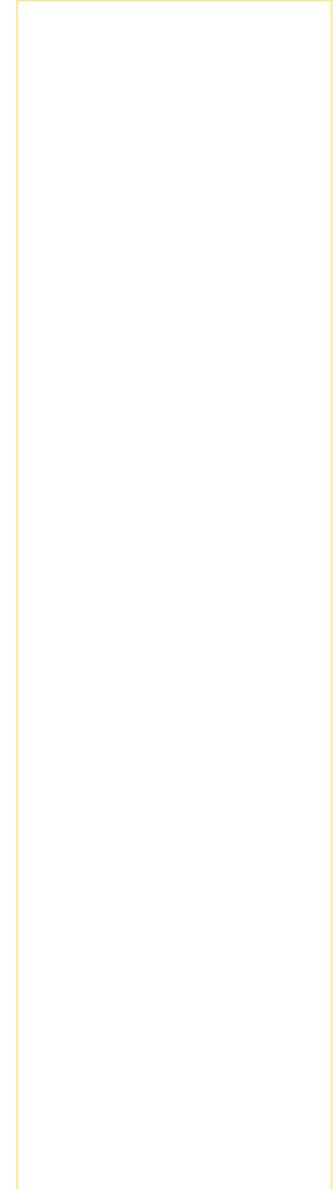
"Even in the Arab world, Obama is very popular," explains Jean-Pierre Filiu, a French scholar of Islam. "The global jihadists leaned toward McCain because they hoped the confrontation would get worse."

The key constituency in this battle of ideas isn't al-Qaeda itself, a dwindling group whose harassed members have little time to think about politics. It's the potential recruits in mosques and madrassas around the world who are assessing which way the wind is blowing. Among this group, there is a new ferment, according to a U.S. intelligence official who monitors jihadist Web sites. He sees curiosity about Obama among Muslim militant groups such as [Hamas](#), [Hezbollah](#) and the Taliban.

"If I were al-Qaeda, I would worry about the American election," says the intelligence official. He argues that the jihadists have benefited from overheated rhetoric about the "war on terrorism," which has given al-Qaeda more stature in Muslim eyes than it deserves. There is a national security opportunity, he argues, "to take advantage of a new face in Washington. The new administration has a chance to say, 'We're different.'"

Our imaginary jihadist may be singing the blues as he contemplates the Obama presidency. But when he looks on the bright side, there is the global economic disaster. The financial news brings daily evidence that Allah is smiting the infidels.

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The radicals' message is that "the kufr [unbeliever] economy is collapsing," says Filiu. This riposte is especially sharp for the wealthy Arab nations of the Gulf, the "near enemy" for al-Qaeda strategists. The jihadists can argue, "You see! You have been collaborating with them -- your money is in infidel banks, and now look!" says Filiu.

Some Muslim commentators argue that the economic crisis is divine punishment, the equivalent of the collapse of the Soviet Union. "We are happy that the U.S. economy has come across difficulty," roared Iran's radical [Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati](#) last month. "The unhappier they become, the happier we get."

Filiu says that among radical Muslims, there is a growing belief that we are entering an apocalyptic "Battle of the End of Time" foretold in a famous saying of the prophet Muhammad. This hadith predicted that the climax would come in the land known as Khorasan, which today includes Afghanistan, the tribal areas of Pakistan and parts of Iran. Filiu has gathered evidence of this Muslim eschatology in a new book called "L'Apocalypse dans l'Islam," which will be published soon in English.

So here's the challenge for Obama: Seize the moment; "turn a page" and thereby transform the intellectual battlefield; keep the military pressure on al-Qaeda's hard core, but discard the "war on terrorism" rhetoric; remind the world that al-Qaeda's victims have been overwhelmingly Muslim and that its brutal jihad has brought only ruin.

And while you're at it, Mr. President-elect, fix the global economy, which is feeding the dream of those men hiding in the caves of Waziristan that the foundations of the West are crumbling and that they can still win.

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