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Fikra Forum

ISIS Messaging on the New Biden Administration

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Brief Analysis

The group showed an unusual and potentially concerning interest in the 2020 U.S. election and may be preparing new attacks as the new administration takes office.

In a recent article in the ISIS publication *El-Nabaa*, ISIS leadership has demonstrated an uncharacteristic amount of interest in the 2020 U.S. elections. While the article may simply reflect ISIS's fears around a Biden presidency, it could also be an indication that ISIS may be renewing calls for attacks on U.S. interests.

The November 2020 issue of the *El-Nabaa* publication (No. 260) featured an editorial entitled "Misled; Which God do they Worship?" This article is dedicated to a discussion of the 2020 U.S. elections, and is contrary to the organization's customary recent treatment of U.S. elections—ISIS didn't dedicate much attention to the lead-up before the 2020 elections, or to President Trump's election in 2016. Where references to U.S. elections have appeared in *El-Nabaa*, they have been cursory and brief.

In reference to the 2016 elections in its issue No. 27 (April 2016), for example, *El-Nabaa* wrote "Today, officials of the Obama administration come out to announce the declaration of the victory of the United States in its war against the Islamic State in order to save their pride. As Obama's main project was to get out the American army from Iraq, this declaration would also be helpful to his Democratic Party in the upcoming presidential elections." Moreover, the issue No. 58 (December 2016) stated that "the apostate Brotherhood juggernaut, Erdogan, did nothing to his servants from the Awakening movement except meeting with the thuggish crusaders of Russia and extending regards and congratulation to the crusaders of America on the occasion of the recent presidential elections results."

More recently, in the issue No. 220 (February 2020), ISIS stated that "what political and economic experts agree on

today [is that] even the Americans are about to announce the end of the era of American dominance over the world. Even the American government itself acts in light of this fact that is approved by the slogan that the American juggernaut, Trump, adopted to win the presidential election, which is: Let's make America great again!"

How is Biden Different?

In contrast, despite ISIS's efforts to appear indifferent, the more recent article on the U.S. elections indicates ISIS's fear regarding a Democratic presidency, suggesting that the incoming Democratic administration has pushed ISIS to show such uncharacteristic interest in a U.S. election.

The article does not focus its attention on the elections themselves or the person of the president, but rather the position of Arab and Islamic countries in regard to the next president's attitude. In the article, ISIS draws Middle East leaders' attention to the elections, focusing on common interests with the United States and how to deal with the new president.

ISIS continues to assert that it and its followers do not care who occupies the position of the U.S. presidency, saying, "As for the monotheists, their hearts are attached to God Almighty alone, they do not care that a juggernaut should replace another... they are in war against all juggernauts... they continue their jihad."

Yet the article itself seems to suggest that there is something in Biden's victory that ISIS does see as worth noting. In particular, Biden's nomination may have pushed ISIS to speak about the elections because of Biden's warmer attitude—relative to Trump—towards Muslims, particularly visible in his pledge to remove the U.S. travel ban imposed on a number of Islamic countries and his talk of introducing more Islamic contents in the American schools. If Biden achieves these measures, ISIS may see them as hindering their messaging and recruitment efforts of followers within the United States.

Moreover, Biden bears a past legacy of effectively combatting ISIS during the Obama presidency. Although Trump has repeatedly claimed that his administration eliminated ISIS, his administration's victories against ISIS were built on previous successes under the Obama administration. Before Trump entered office, the Obama administration had already significantly weakened ISIS by eliminating [60,000](#) ISIS fighters and [90](#) percent of ISIS's oil capabilities, especially significant as oil served as ISIS's main revenue source. Moreover, ISIS's territorial losses during the Obama years outweighed the losses suffered under the Trump administration, as seen in a map prepared by [Brian Glyn Williams](#) that compares the size of territories lost by ISIS during the two administrations.

As such, while the Trump administration's efforts in combating ISIS cannot be ignored, they stood on extant successes from the Obama administration. ISIS therefore sees a prominent enemy in both presidents, but shows more hostility towards Democrats, especially with the possibility that Biden will keep U.S. forces in Iraq. Biden previously [stated](#), "I support drawing down the troops. But here's the problem, we still have to worry about terrorism and [the Islamic State]."

The Possibility of an Attack on U.S. Interests

With the arrival of a new president potentially interested in a greater U.S. presence in Iraq, the article may also serve as a call for an attack on U.S. interests. The effectiveness of recent calls for ISIS attacks and the absence of *El-Nabaa's* "Happened within a Week" section in issue No. 260 could indicate that an attempt on U.S. interests may be imminent.

ISIS's recent threats and its urging of supporters to carry out attacks have found greater resonance recently. Such success appeared in the November 11 attack on the French consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, which ISIS took responsibility for in a speech by Abu Hamza al-Qurashi shortly after the attack. Likewise, threats in issues Nos. 257 and 258, in which ISIS urged supporters to attack the western countries due to the allegations of insulting the

Prophet of Islam, resulted in fatal attacks in France and Vienna.

Such successful attacks increase the importance of recognizing threats and calls for action in *El-Nabaa*. Notably, Issue 260 did not contain the “Happened within a Week” section that has appeared in issues of *El-Nabaa* since 2017, indicating that the issue may have been meant as a call to action for ISIS supporters and loyalists. Historically, additions and exclusions of sections in *El-Nabaa* have indicated a shift in the publication’s intended audience. Sometimes, the publication is meant for all Muslims, while other times for ISIS supporters and members only. The “Happened within a Week” section indicates an appeal to the general public, and not exclusively followers and loyalists within the limits of ISIS’s control. Issues like the Gulf crisis and the boycott of Qatar therefore appear in the section as news items interested to a general Muslim audience.

Therefore, the disappearance of the section since Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi’s rise as the leader of ISIS has coincided with a renewed focus on loyalists and supporters. This focus entails meaningful threats and calls to action like those in issues like No. 257, which contained the threat to the European states in the editorial section, along with threats in Abu Hamza al-Qurashi’s speech, which called for targeting Saudi Arabia and resulted in Jeddah attack, as well as issues Nos. 258 and 259 which resulted in the France and Austria operations.

Now, with the absence of the "Happened within a Week" section in issue No. 260, ISIS may be demonstrating its interest in the elections as a threat and an implicit invitation to its followers to target the United States and its interests. This may indicate the possibility of an imminent terrorist operation inside the United States or on its interests abroad.

The successful manifestation of recent attacks and the disappearance of the “Happened within a Week” section in *El-Nabaa* can therefore indicate the possibility of an attack on the United States or its foreign interests. After all, ISIS and its supporters remain at war with any United States administration and the U.S. presidents whom they describe as tyrants.

The qualities that drive ISIS to focus on the United States and seek to target it can be related to Joe Biden’s policies and his connection with the Obama administration’s successes in countering ISIS. In addition, targeting the United States gives ISIS a symbolic return to the political scene, and this combined with recent indicators suggest that an attack on U.S. interests may be forthcoming.

Since an ISIS attack on the United States might influence the Biden administration's policies towards the Middle East, increasing a U.S. presence in ISIS strongholds like Iraq at a time when the country’s presence is hotly debated within Iraq itself, it may encourage supporters to join ISIS in Iraq in resistance to renewed U.S. presence. As such, the new administration should be particularly wary in its early days to avoid an attack that draws the country into a situation that benefits ISIS’s interests. ❖



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