

ISIS' Perfect Enemy

Why the Terrorist Group Celebrated Trump's Victory

BY MARA R. REVKIN

[Foreign Affairs](#) Online, November 14, 2016

A few months ago, while analyzing jihadist chatter on social media, I was surprised to discover that Islamic State (ISIS) supporters were literally praying for a Trump presidency. At that time, an ISIS spokesman wrote online “I ask Allah to deliver America to Trump.” Meanwhile, an ISIS supporter posted on Telegram (an encrypted messaging application that hosts numerous jihadist channels) that “the ‘facilitation’ of Trump’s arrival in the White House must be a priority for jihadists at any cost!!!” It seems illogical that ISIS would prefer the candidate—now president-elect—who has vowed to “bomb the shit out of” the group and refused to rule out the possibility of using nuclear weapons against it. Yet, in the aftermath of the election, ISIS supporters and other jihadists are gleefully celebrating Donald Trump’s victory. The official newspaper of Ansar al-Sharia in the Arabian Peninsula, an al Qaeda front, went so far as to predict that “Americans will remember 11/9 the way they remember 9/11.” In the eyes of jihadists, Trump is the perfect enemy.

A. A BIPOLAR WORLD

Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric plays into jihadist narratives of a world in which the West is at war with Islam. ISIS’ view of international relations is based on a stark division between two antagonistic realms: the lands governed by the caliphate, which it calls *dar al-Islam* (“the domain of Islam”), and the lands of its enemies, known as *dar al-harb* (“the domain of war”). In this black-and-white world, ISIS seeks to eliminate what it calls the “gray zone”—multicultural societies, especially in the West, where Muslims and non-Muslims coexist peacefully.

From the perspective of jihadists, then, Trump is an ideal adversary. His Islamophobic views support their claim that the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds are engaged in an existential clash of civilizations. On November 10, one jihadist on Telegram referred to Trump as “Abu Lahab,” meaning “father of flames” in Arabic. The epithet is a reference to an uncle of the Prophet Mohamed who is condemned in the Koran as an enemy of Islam and was known for his fiery temper and reddish complexion. When the Prophet invited his uncle to believe in God, Abu Lahab threw stones at him.

Comparing Trump to Abu Lahab, the jihadist wrote, “An enemy who shows his animosity and loudly proclaims it is better than one who fights deceptively and cunningly, and this enemy will disabuse many people of their ignorance. Do not forget that when the American people felt endangered by the awakening of the Muslims they returned to their true creed without any dissimulation and chose Trump, the fundamentalist, fanatical, racist crusader for white men who brazenly shows his hostility toward Muslims and all who do not belong to the white race.” Another ISIS supporter wrote on Twitter, “Congratulate the Islamic community and the community of jihad on the victory of the fool Trump and celebrate this good news because he will undertake conquests

and crusades and he will declare it a war on Islam.” In other words, an American war on Islam is exactly what ISIS wants.

B. HOMEGROWN TERRORISM

In recent months, ISIS has been trying to divert attention away from territorial and military losses on its own turf by inspiring homegrown terror attacks in the West. In addition to eliminating the gray zone, ISIS wants to make the West a *hadinah* (incubator) for attacks that are locally planned and executed. Some ISIS supporters say they are looking forward to Trump’s presidency because they believe that his Islamophobic rhetoric will fuel radicalization in the United States and Europe.

To that end, on November 9, an ISIS-affiliated Telegram channel posted, “The media was portraying Trump as a deviant and weak phenomenon to cover up the American people’s hatred of Muslims, but it turns out that he is the most powerful incubator. When an American [presidential] candidate openly declares his animosity toward Islam and more than 51 percent of the American people vote for him [sic], this means that they are a malevolent people!!” Another ISIS-affiliated channel said, “The idiot Trump ... hates Islam more than any other [American] president. Now, Muslims everywhere will know the policies of America the despicable.” Similarly, an article on an ISIS-affiliated web forum predicted that “Trump’s win ... will bring hostility of Muslims against America as a result of his reckless actions, which show the overt and hidden hatred against them.” One al Qaeda supporter made the following ominous prediction on Twitter: “This fool, with his arrogance and racism and crazy ideas, God willing, will be the fatal arrow [that ends] the United States, and the dangers [Trump] poses will be far greater inside America than they will be beyond its borders.” According to this logic, Trump’s anti-Muslim policies “will strengthen confidence in the righteousness and soundness of the strategy of global jihadists.”

Another jihadist on Telegram sees the departure of U.S. President Barack Obama, who has specifically stated that America “will never be at war with Islam,” as an opportunity to revive the “clash of civilizations” narrative that characterized the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration. “During the Republican Bush era, when he came with his soldiers and equipment and munitions and declared with absolute clarity that it was a crusade, without equivocation, ... the people rushed to find news of the jihadists and their operations and followed them and celebrated them. But during the era of Democrats such as Obama—wolves in sheep’ clothing—Muslims began to speak of tolerance and moderation.” Policies such as “extreme vetting” of immigrants will lend credence to jihadist claim that Muslims are unwelcome and unsafe in the West, and that violence is a better strategy than social integration or political participation.

C. IRRATIONAL CHOICES

Many jihadists believe that Trump will be an unstable and irrational leader whose impulsive decision-making will weaken the United States—either by alienating critical allies, provoking new wars, or damaging the U.S. economy. Trump’s plan to make NATO and the Gulf countries pay their “fair share” to the United States in exchange for protection has been welcomed by ISIS, both because it would destabilize longstanding alliances and impose financial burdens on countries that are participating in the anti-ISIS coalition.

As one ISIS propagandist wrote on Telegram, “The sweetest thing about the infidel Trump’s victory is that he will bring an end to the Gulf countries if they do not pay him.” Another posted a picture of Trump gesticulating angrily with the caption, “The American President: Hahahahaha J,” and proceeded to comment on his volatile temperament. “They say that he can’t even handle a Twitter account. Now they will give him the nuclear codes J. The end of America will be at the hands of this fool.”

D. APOCALYPTIC SHOWDOWN

ISIS subscribes to the prophecy of a “Final Battle,” to take place in the northern Syrian town of Dabiq, in which the caliphate will decisively triumph over its enemies. Some ISIS supporters believe that Trump will lead the United States and its Western allies into the apocalyptic clash they have been waiting for. Back in October, one jihadist sympathizer on Facebook urged Americans, “Vote in droves for Trump ... We want the *malhama* [great battle] and the end of these global theatrics as quickly as possible.” Shortly after Trump’s victory, an ISIS supporter wrote “How is it possible for the nations of the unbelievers to [fulfill] the promise of our Prophet, the *malhama* [great battle]? When a fool like Trump is leading the nations of the unbelievers.” From the perspective of jihadists, Trump’s electoral victory is the beginning of the end.

Many jihadists groups aspire to create territorial “caliphates” or “emirates” that are based on principles of *sharia* and divine sovereignty. Democracy, with its man-made laws and elected leaders, is abhorrent to jihadists. In the aftermath of the election, many are using Trump’s victory to renew their condemnation of electoral politics. As a spokesman for the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) wrote on Twitter, “Trump’s victory is a powerful slap to those promoting the efficacy of democratic systems. From now on, we will not need to release propaganda illuminating the West’s machinations. All we need to do is retweet what Trump says.” An ISIS supporter, alluding to the importance of gender in this election, used Trump’s victory to point out the internal contradictions and hypocrisies of American democracy. He wrote on Twitter, “America exports to you [Muslims] so-called democracy, freedom for women, and women in leadership positions. But in the history of America, there has never been a female president.”

Jihadists are excited about Trump’s victory for many reasons, but they all lead to the same conclusion. Trump, in their eyes, will put the United States on a path to self-destruction. As the al Qaeda-affiliated ideologue Abu Mohamed al-Maqdisi wrote, “May the reign of Trump be the beginning of the fragmentation and dismantling of America.” An al Qaeda supporter on Twitter offered a similar message: “When one hears the results of the American election and sees the victory of Trump, he will see it as a good omen of the imminent collapse of the American empire ... We ask God to ensure that Trump will be the last American president, the cause of the destruction of this empire, and the last nail in its coffin.” Trump might have campaigned on a promise to destroy ISIS. But according to ISIS, Trump’s policies will destroy America while breathing new life into the global jihadist movement.