



Revoking the Bai'at to IS

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Introduction

To Islamist terrorist groups, the *bai'at* or pledge of allegiance is a declaration of fealty to the organizations and their leaders. Other than indicating that an individual is officially a member of the group, it is a voluntary expression of willingness to listen to and obey any orders given by its leaders.

It was with this understanding that Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi gave his *bai'at* to Osama bin Laden in late 2004. His pledge triggered members of his group, *Jamā'at at-Tawhīd wal-Jihād*, who were imprisoned in an Iranian prison to do the same.¹ In 2012, the Somali-based terrorist group al-Shabab formally pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda.² In Singapore, Ibrahim Maidin pledged his oath of allegiance to Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, Indonesian³ co-founder of Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asian-based terrorist network that had established ties with al-Qaeda.⁴

For Islamic State (IS), the group's one-time spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani underlined the importance of documenting *bai'at* by any distant group before being officially recognized as an IS *wilayah* or province.⁵ For the *bai'at* to remain in force, there should not be a protracted process of choosing the successor to Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi after his death. In this case, having an Iraqi Turkmen, Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi, as the successor to al-Baghdadi⁶ ensures that IS members continue to listen to and obey the group.

¹ Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan, *Dabiq*, Issue 6, p.42.

² See Al-Shabab

<https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-shabab> (17 January 2020)

³ See Indonesia backgrounder: How the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network operates

<http://www.seasite.niu.edu/Indonesian/Islam/ICG-Indonesia%20Backgrounder%20JI.pdf>

⁴ "The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and The Threat of Terrorism", White Paper published by Ministry of Home Affairs, Republic of Singapore, 2003.

⁵ Wilayat Khurasan and The Bai'at From Qawqaz, *Dabiq*, Issue 7, p.35.

⁶ See <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/new-islamic-state-group-leader-confirmed-report> and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/20/isis-leader-confirmed-amir-mohammed-abdul-rahman-al-mawli-al-salbi> (21 January 2020).

While IS has its own distorted interpretation of the application of the *bai'at*, this article argues that those who have given their *bai'at* to IS are not obliged to listen to and obey the outfit in carrying out atrocities which are not only contrary, but also detrimental to Islam. This article looks at the various groups who have been bound by the IS *ba'iat*, what the Islamic perspective on *ba'iat* truly is and the solution to undoing the *ba'iat* obligations among IS supporters.

The Role of Ba'iat on IS supporters and ex-supporters in prisons and displacement camps

The impact of the *bai'at* is visibly manifested among different groups of IS-linked individuals in the prisons and displacement camps set up since the fall of IS in Syria/Iraq in early 2019. Not everyone share the same stance towards IS.

Generally, there are three groups of people living in these compounds. First, is the hardcore supporters of IS, who remain loyal to their *ba'iat*. They have accepted the group's defeat but continue to resuscitate their struggle by propagating IS teachings. It has led to foreign IS women and children exhibiting violent behavior towards their "infidel" Syrian or Iraqis counterparts. This includes throwing stones, swearing at and threatening them.⁷ Some have resorted to using the sharp edges of food cans to cut their tents and terrorizing the "infidels" .⁸ Field reports also indicate that some women have joined the *Khansaa* Brigade⁹ and played the role of recruiters and propagandists.¹⁰

The second group is the former IS supporters¹¹ who realize that IS had failed to establish the "Islamic caliphate" that it had envisioned. The realization was a result of witnessing the atrocities, cruelties, injustice and rampant corruption that took place during the so-called "caliphate".¹² They are more than ready to disavow the group; however, for a number, the *bai'at* they made in the past has stopped them from moving forward. They have been misguided by the wrong interpretation of a prophetic saying which seemingly indicated that whoever dies without having *bai'at* to a leader would die a pre-Islamic death or *jāhiliyyah*.

⁷ See <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/isis-extremism-on-show-at-miserable-syria-camp> (21 January 2020).

⁸ See <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/middle-east/isis-loyalists-regroup-in-a-syrian-refugee-camp> (21 January 2020).

⁹ The Al-Khansaa Brigade is the IS all-women religious police brigade. See Wilson, Lydia. "Women in the Islamic State." In INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON NUCLEAR WAR AND PLANETARY EMERGENCIES 48th Session:

THE ROLE OF SCIENCE IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM. p. 393.

¹⁰ See <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/26/in-syria-the-women-and-children-of-isis-have-been-forgotten/>

¹¹ See "Syrian camp could be the birthplace of ISIS' revenge." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yz4CRPCzBJM> (19 January 2020).

¹² See "CBS News goes inside Syrian refugee camp filled with ISIS supporters." https://youtu.be/Ki3DG_SVMgE (21 January 2020).

For this group, the *bai'at* serves as a psychological trap. Leaving the group or disobeying the orders of its leaders is equated to committing a grave sin, incurring God's wrath on them. Being labelled as a traitor, which could expose them to danger, could be an additional important factor that prevents them from revoking the *bai'at*.

The last group represents those who were there not by choice.¹³ Apparently, some found joining IS as the only way to stay alive. Investigations have shown that IS coerced many civilians into joining the group.¹⁴

Bai'at from the Islamic lens

There were three instances of *bai'at* in the time of Prophet Muhammad; the first and the second were known as *bai'at al- 'aqabah* while the third is *bai'at ar-riḍwān*. Through these historical accounts, it is clear that Muslims are enjoined to pledge *bai'at* only to a leader who strove for the betterment of his people. All three instances of *bai'at* were in pursuit of the preservation of good and prevention of evil. They were congruent with a legal maxim grounded in Islamic jurisprudence that asserts "The government's policy should be in the people's interest" (*at-taṣarruf 'alā ar- ra 'iyah manūṭ bi al-maslahah*).

In contrast, people's interests have not been reflected in any part of IS' behavior. A *bai'at* to IS and Islamist terrorist groups is tantamount to deliberately causing confusion, violence and injustice to the masses.

In addition, there are two types of *bai'at*. The first is *al-bai'at al-muṭlaqah*.¹⁵ It refers to an irrevocable pledge which early Muslims gave to Prophet Muhammad. Islamic creed dictates that a messenger of Allah must satisfy the following conditions: being trustworthy, truthful in his words, intellectually wise and infallible or protected from sinning. These qualities authenticate their teachings and rule out any possibility of followers pledging *bai'at* to sin.

The opposite of this is *al-bai'at al-muqayyadah*¹⁶ or conditional pledge. It is a revocable *bai'at* given by Muslims to a fallible individual unlike the prophet and messenger of Allah. The guiding principle underlying the *bai'at* is the prophetic saying "there is no obedience to anyone calling for disobedience toward Allah" (*lā ṭā 'ah li makhlūk fi ma 'siat al-khāliq*). Any pledge of allegiance or loyalty is not a compelling reason for an

¹³ See "Why former Islamic State bride, Mariam Dabboussy, wants to come home." https://youtu.be/7R9_Jc9k1sU (22 January 2020).

¹⁴ See "Syrian teen says ISIS forced him to join battle" <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/syrian-teen-says-isis-forced-him-to-join-battle/> (23 January 2020)

¹⁵ Sudiman, Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin. "IS Misconception of Bay'at: Nuances in Oath of Allegiance."

¹⁶ Ibid.

individual to continue obeying his leader's command when it is clear that it contradicts authentic Islamic teachings.

An illustration of the above is what Aishah, the wife of Prophet Muhammad, said about Abu Bakr As-Siddiq (her father) who had never broken his oaths until Allah revealed the expiation for the oaths. Abu Bakar said, "If I take an oath to do something and later on I find something else better than the first one, then I do what is better and make expiation for my oath."¹⁷

To put it differently, the narration shows that if we pledge an oath to perform a particular act but later find that there is a better option or act, it is then permissible to break our oath and perform the better act. Thus, breaking an oath of allegiance such as those taken by IS members and supporters, which is against Islamic teachings, could and should be revoked.

The Way forward

The security apparatus around the world are closely monitoring any military activities to resurrect the bogus IS caliphate. It is also understandable that development in this area will be dealt decisively through kinetic responses. To complement them, combating the ideological threat continues to be imperative. Camps and prisons holding IS members could be an incubator of religious extremism if ideological engagement is absent or perceived as less critical. Hence, staunch IS followers who are refugees in displacement camps or imprisoned IS members should be engaged and encouraged to abandon their membership. Efforts should be made to present the authentic religious dimension of *bai'at* to them. This could be the first step to free them from the psychological trap they are under. More importantly, they must be convinced that there is nothing Islamic when it comes to *bai'at* to IS leaders or any individual that propagates teachings contradictory to Islam. Once convinced, anyone who has given the pledge to IS can and must withdraw from the misbegotten *bai'at*.

¹⁷ Narrated by Malik & At-Turmuzi.