IS Misconception of *Bay'at*: Nuances in Oath of Allegiance

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Synopsis

Investigations of a Singaporean national Imran Kassim on terrorism-related charges reveal that a flawed understanding of the concept of bay'at (oath of allegiance) played a role in his violent radicalisation. It is vital to advance a nuanced understanding of the concept to prevent people from falling prey to extremists' narrative and exploitation of concepts like bay'at.

Commentary

IN JULY 2017, Singapore authorities arrested two Singaporeans on terrorism-related charges. One of them is 34-year-old Imran Kassim, managing director of a logistics company. He was put under an Order of Detention (OD) for intending to undertake armed violence overseas. The Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs also stated that Imran had pledged allegiance or *bay'at* to the leader of the 'Islamic State' (IS) terrorist group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014.

Imran's detention raises several important questions about the concept of *bay'at*. To begin with, what is *bay'at*? Why is the concept frequently exploited by violent self-proclaimed "Islamist" groups? How should Muslims react to it?

The Origin of *Bay'at*

Bay'at is an Arabic term that denotes a pledge of allegiance, alliance and loyalty. It predates Islam and was a common practice among Arabs. In pre-Islamic Arabia, a pact, which was observed through the pledge of alliance, was employed between Arabian tribal groups to establish security in the absence of state power.

In early Islamic history several accounts of *bay'at* were recorded between Prophet Muhammad and residents of Medina and between his companions. For example, a group of men from the city met the Prophet at a location called 'Aqaba to embrace Islam.

They pledged not to commit customary practices of that time such as polytheism, robbery and adultery. *Bay'at* continues to be practised to this day in a few countries, especially between leaders and their followers in tribal societies, and among some Muslim groups.

Distortion of *Bay'at* by Southeast Asian Militants

In the last several decades, the concept of *bay'at* has been exploited by Muslim militant and terrorist groups to compel obedience and loyalty to the group's leader and agenda. On 23 July 2014, a splinter of the militant Filipino Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) under the Basilan wing leader Isnilon Hapilon pledged allegiance to IS which had declared the establishment of a so-called worldwide Muslim caliphate several weeks earlier.

Another Filipino group, the Raja Sulaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM), uploaded a YouTube video showing ASG members in Bicutan prison in the Philippines taking an oath of loyalty to al-Baghdadi. Similarly, in December 2015 and June 2016 IS released several videos showing acceptance of bay'at by various battalions under Hapilon.

The acceptance symbolises recognition of the groups by IS and its leaders, as well as approval to wage military operations under the banner of IS. Almost a year later the Siege of Marawi erupted. Likewise, in Malaysia, Muhammad Wanndy Mohamad Jedi who led a terrorist cell called Gagak Hitam (Black Crows) declared *bay'at* to IS. Wanndy was instrumental in orchestrating the Movida attack in Puchong, Selangor in June 2016.

Bay'at in Singapore

Bay'at made its first presence in Singapore's security scene in 2002. The Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainees revealed they had pledged allegiance to JI and/or leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). JI members were also warned that breaking the *bay'at* would result in divine retribution, hence deterring those who had reservations about the group's objectives from leaving.

Today, Singapore's security landscape is once again challenged with the threat of 'religiously-motivated' violence, this time by IS which brings together with it concepts popularised by JI such as *bay'at*. The arrest and detention of IS supporters in Singapore, like Mohamed Omar bin Mahadi (in July 2016) and Imran Kassim among others once again highlight the distortion of religious beliefs and exploitation of practices like *bay'at*.

In the case of Mohamed Omar, he had memorised the *bay'at* which he intended to take to al-Baghdadi. He and his wife were at IS' disposal to carry out any assignments IS had for them once he had taken the oath. In respect of Imran, he harboured the

intention to attack Singapore Armed Forces personnel deployed in the Global Coalition against IS. These examples show that terrorist group supporters are prepared to fulfil their *bay'at* in pursuit of their leader's agenda even if it means resorting to acts of violence and killing.

Bay'at from Islamic Perspective

Bay'at is mentioned in both the Qur'an and Hadith (Prophetic Traditions and Sayings). Its purpose is for the promotion of good and enjoining what is right and the prevention of evil and forbidding what is wrong. This doctrine is in congruence with Islamic jurisprudence which states that "actions and policies should be in the people's interest".

A *bay'at* to IS, however, is totally at variance with this positive maxim as IS has shown that its actions disregard public interest and welfare and only cause civil disorder and mayhem. IS legitimises indiscriminate killings, torture, forced conversions, and desecration of the deceased, to name a few. *Bay'at* to al-Baghdadi in effect constitutes support and endorsement of IS transgressions of Islamic laws and ethics.

Militant and terrorist groups like IS and JI in fact use *bay'at* as a mechanism to 'trap' members within the organisation and ensure their commitment and compliance. In Islam, any *bay'at* that advances violations of Islamic doctrines and practices is null and void; it is entirely permissible to break one's oath in such circumstances.

Two Types of *Bay'at*

There are two types of *bay'at*. The first is *al-bay'at al-muṭlaqah*, an irrevocable pledge. This only applies to Prophet Muhammad. According to Islamic creed, prophets and messengers of God are trustworthy, truthful, wise and divinely guided and protected from violation of God's laws. These guarantee that the *bay'at* given to the Prophet will not be abused to commit acts that violate religious doctrines and precepts.

The other pledge is *al-bay'at al-muqayyadah* or conditional pledge given to a person other than a prophet or messenger of God. This *bay'at* is, according to a prophetic saying, subject to the condition that "There is no obedience to any human being if it involves disobedience of Allah". The pledge is not absolute and it is revocable if it involves the commission of sins and acts against God.

Bay'at to al-Baghdadi clearly falls into this second category. Individuals who may have pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi can therefore revoke their pledge without any fear of divine retribution.

The recent detention of Imran Kassim again demonstrates the vulnerability of some people to terrorist ideology and propaganda. Continuous vigorous efforts are therefore necessary to counter and expose the flawed and erroneous interpretations of religious texts and exploitation of practices such as *bay'at*.

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