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Pledges to Islamic State: Weak and Strong Alliances

By Joseph Franco and Philipp Holtmann

Synopsis

Pledges of allegiance and obedience are the typical mechanisms used by jihadist groups to create “alliance hubs”, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which is also known as Islamic State (IS). Some of the alliances may have proven strong, while others remain weak and exist in name only.

Commentary

RECENT RESEARCH published by the US-based think-tank, Terrorism Research Initiative, argued that in order to become an effective alliance hub, a “mother organisation” must be capable of providing resources to support its partner organisations. The Islamic State (IS) appears to fulfil this criterion amongst the smaller terrorist groups to which it holds sway under *bay’ah* or pledges.

But this resource-centred focus fails to address the IS partner organisations’ varying levels of dedication. Based on the purported legalistic discourse promoted by IS, such pledges are of equal gravity to Islamic contracts of allegiance and obedience. Following this logic, a *bay’ah* addressed to IS should go beyond a mere “declaration of fidelity”. Both IS and the pledging organisation ostensibly profit equally in terms of propaganda, popularity, and mutual support from such “franchising deals”. Under the discourse of *bay’ah*, IS expects to gain more and to be acknowledged as the leader in an asymmetric alliance.

Pledges, disconnect and purported jurisprudence

However, even a limited comparison of how pledges to IS translate into actual terrorist operations reveals a disconnect between the transnational jihadist group’s self-promoted vision of leadership and reality. The behaviour of some partner organisations calls into question their ability to comply with IS strategic guidelines and commands.

It would appear that it is the interplay of ideological dedication versus financial interests that determine the effectiveness of jihadist alliance hubs and their long-range command patterns. Of the dozen or so regional jihadist groups from the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia two cases are presented to demonstrate the differing degrees of subordination to IS commands.

In mid-September 2014, the spokesperson of IS issued an online speech, commanding affiliates to start worldwide attacks against citizens from the “Coalition of the Willing”— the ad hoc group of states involved in launching an air campaign against IS fighters. Through an Internet-disseminated statement, the Jund al-Khilfa pledged allegiance to IS. Weeks later, in late September 2014, the group murdered its French hostage Hervé Gourdel, claiming to act on IS' behalf.

In a subsequent video statement justifying the gruesome act, Jund al-Khilfa not only elaborated on their motives but included excerpts of the IS spokesperson's statement. The case clearly indicates an effective long-range leadership pattern, from IS to an ideologically dedicated Jund al-Khilfa, which strongly relies on the Internet to issue alliance-contracts and disseminate orders.

Case of Abu Sayyaf Group

In contrast, this virtual leadership is negligible if not totally non-existent between IS and the southern Philippines-based Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). While the ASG has gained notoriety recently for the kidnapping of two German citizens, their motives were largely financial. As noted by many observers, the ASG has degenerated into a bandit group, with multiple factions operating in what is essentially a lawless, kidnapping-prone fringe of the southern Philippines.

The Sulu-based Hatib Sawadjaan ASG faction reportedly received ransom amounting to 250 million PHP (7.1 million SGD). What was curious was that while the Sulu-based faction purported to refer to IS-related discourse, it never pledged a *bay'ah* to Al-Baghdadi. The reference to IS was therefore made in utilitarian fashion to obscure the faction's illicit entrepreneurship.

In fact, it was another ASG faction headed by Isnilon Hapilon in Basilan that formally pledged to IS, stemming from the former's reputation as one of the “old guard” leadership of the ASG in contrast to the more upstart Sawadjaan. Hapilon's case is an archetype of how some of the more influential leaders of the ASG can be operationally and tactically inferior to other emergent ASG leaders.

Uneven impact of pledges

Juxtaposition of the Jund al-Khilfa and the ASG case demonstrates how even IS affiliates are far from being monolithic and passive receivers of jihadist discourse and strategy. The differing manifestations of IS influence, whether direct violence by affiliates or indirect use of jihadist discourse to boost affiliate reputations, thus require nuanced counter-terrorist approaches.

Within a few months IS has emerged to become the new alliance hub of global jihad. Yet contrary to its grandiose vision, IS has not yet reached the quality of command, leadership, and hierarchy; which networks of jihadist alliances typically strive for. In addition, the implementation of obligations connected to alliance-pledges with IS vary greatly. While IS—similar to al-Qaeda Central in the past—has been successful at establishing extended long-range command and deterrence patterns with some partners contrary examples are extant.

In short, states need to be cautious of Islamic State's ambitious leadership concept but at the same time remember that it is an initiative still in the making. It remains premature to judge whether Islamic State as an alliance hub will wither as quickly as it blossomed.

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