

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email your feedback to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

IS Distortion of *Hijrah*: Emigrating For A Lost Cause

By Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah

Synopsis

IS has intensified its call on Muslims to emigrate or hijrah to territories or regions it controls. A correct understanding of hijrah is needed to debunk IS distortion of the term hijrah.

Commentary

SINCE 2015 there have been at least a dozen Singaporeans investigated by the Singapore authorities for harbouring intention to travel or emigrate to the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). This year four individuals were detained for the same reason. In September, IS issued a propaganda video featuring a Singaporean who is known to have gone to Syria to join IS. In the brief three-and-a-half minute video, Megat Shahdan Bin Abdul Samad calls on Muslims to relocate to IS-controlled territories or locations where the group's influence is present.

He quotes a *hadith* or Prophetic saying that implicitly affirms that the duty of *hijrah* will not cease until the Final Hour (Doomsday). While most people would ignore or reject such a call, especially coming from a terrorist group, there will be a few who will fall prey to extremists' exploitation of *hijrah* and other Islamic concepts. They include the literalists and those who understand the *hadith* without using appropriate tools of enquiry and interpretation used in the science of *hadith*. Like Shahdan, they would believe that relocation to IS fulfils a religious obligation.

The Origin of *Hijrah*

IS' promotion of *hijrah* calls for a deeper examination of the concept. To begin with, what was the cause of *hijrah* as reported in Islamic history? Why did Prophet

Muhammad encourage Muslims to emigrate? How should Muslims react to calls for *hijrah*? And why should terrorist propaganda and interpretation draped in scripture be roundly dismissed?

Hijrah is Arabic for emigration. In the early days of Islam, Prophet Muhammad and his followers were ill-treated and harassed by polytheist Meccan Arabs over differences in religious beliefs. They were subjected to economic and social boycott and barred from marriage and trade. When these tactics failed to stop people from converting to Islam, the pagan Quraish clan resorted to physical abuse. This triggered the first *hijrah* to Ethiopia which was then ruled by a Christian king named Negus.

The Quraish intensified their violence when they learned that several Muslims secretly sought refuge in Medina. The clan also plotted the assassination of the Prophet. This marked a serious escalation of efforts to stop the practice of Islam, from mistreatment to violence, including an assassination plot against the Prophet.

These developments led to Prophet Muhammad's emigration to Medina. This marked the second and final *hijrah* in Islamic history. Viewed in its historical context, *hijrah* was in effect a means to preserve the basic right to practise one's faith and to protect one's life.

Distortion of *Hijrah* by IS

IS however exploited *hijrah* to build up their human capital and resources in their newly-established 'caliphate' which they declared in June 2014. The group's online magazine *Dabiq* (later known as *Rumiyah*) and weekly online Arabic newsletter *An-Naba'*, for instance, frame *hijrah* as a religious obligation, an act of worship that would bring a Muslim close to God, and a manifestation of true faith.

IS claims that Islam requires Muslims to live in an Islamic state that practises *Shari'ah* law over a territory governed by non-Muslims or by Muslims administering man-made laws.

IS asserts that Muslims should leave his country (especially in the Middle East) which was created based on the colonial era Sykes-Picot "false border demarcation" and relocate to IS to support the caliphate and redraw the borders. Both *Hadith* and *Sunnah* (Prophetic tradition and practice) were distorted to back these arguments. Shahdan's video is a clear example of such distortion.

The Correct Understanding of *Hijrah*

IS' narrative on *hijrah* needs to be debunked for its so-called religious justifications.

Contrary to IS claims, *hijrah* to IS is not among the best forms of worship and does not make a Muslim closer to God. Many acts of worship bring a Muslim closer to God, from regular prayers and repentance to generous donations and charitable acts. A *hadith* was reported to have implied that whoever comes to the mosque of Quba (in Medina) and prays in it will have a reward similar to performing an *umrah* (small pilgrimage).

This suggests that location is not fundamental to get closer to God but the performance and quality of a ritual. *Hijrah* to IS to achieve this goal is unnecessary.

IS falsely claims that Prophet Muhammad instructed Muslims to sever ties with family and tribe by performing *hijrah*. The *hadith* was, in fact, a directive for a newly-converted Muslim to detach himself from the religious practices of his people, not blood ties. This is to distinguish himself from the other faith groups through his observance of religious obligations.

Maintaining good relationship with non-Muslim family members is part of Islamic teachings. This is evident in the Prophet's behaviour towards his two pagan paternal uncles. Hence, there is nothing Islamic when a Muslim leaves his family and heads to IS - like what Shahdan did - with the hope of receiving blessings from God and die as a martyr.

Way Forward: Migration from Literalism

Lastly, Prophet Muhammad was reported as saying that *hijrah* will not cease until repentance is ceased. Repentance will not cease until the sun rises from the west (a major sign of the end of time). Although the *hadith* is authentic, its reading must be complemented with the understanding of its implicit objective. *Hijrah* in this *hadith* does not suggest a physical relocation but rather a change in mindset and behaviour.

Islam promotes progressive thinking and positive change in life. A believer must think of ways to become a better person each day to benefit not only himself but those around him including animals and nature. A Muslim who learns Islam by heart and perseveres to ponder upon its teaching marks a '*hijrah*' in his cognitive attitude towards his faith, from a literalist to a pragmatist. *Hijrah* is also a manifestation of a paradigm shift.

A Muslim who constantly seeks to upgrade his knowledge so that he could be of service to others is expressing a form of *hijrah* towards becoming a useful and productive Muslim. Similarly, a Muslim who strives to distance himself from evil is making *hijrah* towards becoming a better Muslim who understands his religion holistically. These counter-narratives can be understood from other prophetic sayings such as "An emigrant is one who ditches mistakes and sins". In another *hadith* the Prophet was reported as saying: "An emigrant is the one that ditches from anything that Allah has forbidden."

The fall of IS' de facto capital Raqqa is not likely to lead to a decline in the propagation of literalist, narrow and extremist interpretations of Islamic scriptures. IS will decentralise and exploit social media platforms to the fullest to maintain its hold over its followers and to radicalise even more vulnerable segments of society.

Given this scenario, it is imperative that action be taken not only to debunk extremist teachings through various means but also to disseminate widely moderate and progressive values which will act as a 'firewall' against false, deviant and divisive ideas.

Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah is an Associate Research Fellow with the International Centre for Political Violence & Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also a religious counsellor with the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG).

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg