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ISIS has a new leader - why it is vital to break the bai'at

The oath of allegiance is key to the leadership's hold on members and the continuation of the cycle of violence.

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A 2015 photo of walls painted with the flag commonly used by Islamic State militants in Tikrit, Iraq. PHOTO: REUTERS

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Earlier this month, social media platforms as well as online chat groups were abuzz with news and images of members of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) pledging bai'at to Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, their new caliph. The new leader himself is nowhere to be seen in the video clips. Little is known too about his background, with some reports claiming that he is the brother of ISIS founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

What is notable in this transfer of command is the role of the bai'at, an oath of allegiance that is one of the sources of power of the terrorist group, and also a potential means of undermining it if used smartly by counter-narrative advocates.

Bai'at is an Arabic term for a pledge of alliance and loyalty that predates Islam. It was common among Arab tribes then to cement their ties with such a declaration for the purpose of mutual protection.

Today, the bai'at is used by Islamist terrorist groups to enforce group cohesion and to advance a common cause.

The importance of the oath can be seen from Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's pledge of loyalty to the then Taliban leader Mullah Omar in 2001, in response to the imposition of sanctions by the United Nations.

The bai'at came into play after ISIS' so-called second caliph Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi was killed by US special forces in Syria last month. In response, online chatter, especially in the Indonesian pro-ISIS community, stressed the importance of preserving the bai'at to al-Qurashi and staying the course.

After the third emir was named, hundreds of ISIS supporters from places as far flung as Somalia, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan and Indonesia made public oaths of allegiance to him and the cause.

As can be seen, the bai'at marks the start of support and helps the group maintain its grip on members despite disruptions in leadership.

The bai'at is also a mechanism to ensure loyalty so that every order or operation is promptly executed. Members are constantly reminded that betrayal or failure to live up to the sworn oath of loyalty to the leader will result in divine retribution. This concept is effectively a psychological trap for those at odds with the leadership or contemplating exiting the group. This misguided understanding plays a significant role in suppressing the attrition rate among members. Unsurprisingly, disaffected ISIS members have been known to admit that their arrest - enabling them to break the shackles of obedience - was a blessing in disguise.

The key role of the bai'at in sustaining terrorist groups also provides an opening for those fighting them by offering a counter-narrative.

One essential step is to examine the concept and purpose of the bai'at as demonstrated by Prophet Muhammad. In many accounts of the Prophet's life, oaths are undertaken with the aim of doing good and averting evil. The Quran provides many examples of pledges made by people not to steal, slander, commit adultery or kill children.

Another important step is to refute the notion that bai'ats given to group leaders are irrevocable and have a divine stature. Islamic jurisprudence maintains that any pledge given to a person other than a prophet or messenger of God is conditional and therefore revocable. Prophet Muhammad was said to have made clear that one is not obligated to obey any human being if it involves disobedience of God, through the commission of acts of injustice and oppression. Seen in this light, there is every reason to revoke an oath of allegiance to ISIS given its violent and murderous agenda.

Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore rely on religious intervention as one of the means of countering the radical and twisted ideology being propagated by the likes of ISIS. While the group is down, it is not out and is seeking to regain momentum with the installation of a new

leader.

What government agencies, grassroots leaders, non-governmental organisations and others involved in the ongoing fight against ISIS should do with this window of opportunity is to target and publicly challenge this misguided notion of the bai'at. By busting the myth of the sanctity of the oath as constructed by ISIS, they can weaken the hold ISIS and other like-minded groups have on members and would-be members and, in the process, help prevent the revival of another cycle of violence.

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