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Online and Offline Pledges of IS: Creating a Nexus of Authority

By Philipp Holtmann

Synopsis

Besides its para-military campaign, 'Islamic State' (IS) is also waging a global battle for ideological hegemony over Islamic concepts of statehood and governance. An important part of this strategy is its use of offline and online pledges to create long-range command patterns and to radicalise individuals.

Commentary

THE ISLAMIC State (IS) group which has swept across large swathes of Syria and Iraq with its para-military campaign, has also used offline and online pledges of allegiance to assert its ideological interpretation of Islamic concepts of statehood and governance. It has become clearer that the ritual not only plays an important role in physical reality, but online and offline pledges to IS are closely intertwined and meant to reinforce each other.

Online pledges are supposed to stimulate rites of passage, which immerse sympathisers ever deeper into jihadi ideology and increase a feeling of shared brotherhood and communality, eventually turning them into active supporters and actors.

Virtual and physical bay'ah rituals

Since the proclamation of the IS caliphate in June 2014, the nascent organisation has put a strong focus on the marketing of popular pledges of obedience and allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. More than a dozen regional jihadi groups, formerly allied with al-Qaeda, have announced their fealty to IS since then. Also in the online world, there has been a viral competition among sympathisers and supporters to virtually pledge obedience and allegiance to IS. This, however, has been strongly criticised by other Muslims, including Salafists and Islamists, who claim that the virtual ritual as well as the IS caliphate contravenes Islamic law.

The importance IS gives to the *bay'ah* or oath-taking ritual cannot be overstressed. Pledges are regulated by a special body of rules in Islamic law and distinctive mechanisms in the Islamic political systems. Pledges, first and foremost, regulate the delegation of power and creation of leadership. Although mostly referred to as "pledges of allegiance," this expression is somehow misleading, for pledges are applied to a much wider variety of purposes.

Al-Qaeda, IS and their splinter groups have used pledges to elect and confirm leaders, to create obedience, to forge alliances and allegiances, as well as – in a tactical sense - to strengthen conviction, oblige Muslims to emigrate (*hijrah*) to safer zones, and to prepare for battle. In addition, they have been experimenting for years with different forms of oaths via social media to create long-range command-and-control patterns - including activating lone-wolf style attackers.

The online marketing of pledges started in 2004, when Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (d.2006), leader of "The Jihad and Monotheism Group" (the stem-cell of IS) swore an oath of loyalty to Osama bin Laden, thus forming al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Since then it has become common practice of groups which join AQ-Central, or lately IS, to do through online statements.

Taking it one step further

In 2005, an online activist campaigned for a "death-pledge" to Osama bin Laden on a jihadi forum, which obliged subscribers to perpetrate an attack at an announced place and time. No known attack resulted, but the activist still laid important groundwork for written pledges on the Internet.

In 2006 AQI formed "The Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI, the precursor of IS) and took the development of online pledges one step further. ISI tried to popularise the online use of "pledges of obedience" by taking an important part of the Islamic electoral process to the Internet: the popular confirmation that has to follow a leader's election by the "binding oath" of an electoral commission. Towards this end ISI started a campaign on jihad online forums, calling for members to confirm the election of its leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (k. 2010).

The online campaign was supposed to complement the ISI ground operations in Iraq. The experiment was relatively unsuccessful because al-Qaeda Central was still the figurehead of jihad and ISI appeared like a rogue, elitist outlaw. But IS, the successor organisation, has learned since then and is now approaching the task differently. The goal of IS is to make pledges appear "so common to the average Muslim that he considers those holding back as grossly abnormal".

This, together with learning from past experience, a highly professional use of social media, complementary propaganda and military campaigns, creates an entirely different situation and boosts the concept.

Boosting the concept of bay'ah

IS pledges are multifunctional, interrelated and connected to aspects of IS' vision of Islamic governance, leadership, radicalisation of single followers as well as the creation of lone-wolf style jihadi terrorism. Not only the use to which the pledges are put, but also their mechanics vary: Face-to-face handshakes and the placing of hands upon each other are accompanied by a spoken formula, and they seem to have become as valid as writing a simplified "I pledge allegiance" on online jihadi forums.

In its online high-gloss magazine "Dabiq" IS calls upon sympathisers to group together, market and popularise pledges of allegiance to IS, and if security measures do not allow, to pledge allegiance in secret, just by themselves. IS hopes that the feeling of obligation will create enough psychological pressure to lead to single attacks, such as lately in Ottawa, Canada. Other "role models" of this paradigm are individuals who perpetrated attacks and were strongly bound ideologically, such as Muhammad Bouyeri (Netherlands, 2004) and Taimour al-Abdaly (Sweden, 2010).

Even if the effectiveness of pledges for IS greatly varies, they contain extremely strong ideas of leadership and hierarchy, which can influence supporters and increase their commitment to extremist ideas. The IS goal is to use pledges to create a virtual nexus of legitimacy and long-range leadership around its brand name. Real actors and events, online campaigns and discussions as well as social media marketing of pledges are carefully interwoven.

The concept becomes inextricably connected to the strengthening the ideological authority of IS, as expressed in pledges to commit oneself "to jihad until death". If radicalisation can be influenced this

way, then this becomes part of the IS` extended virtual leadership paradigm. This may be less accurate than "true" leadership, but nevertheless psychologically very effective.

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