

The Use of Bay'ah by the Main Salafi-Jihadist Groups

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Abstract

The practice of bay'ah (the taking of an oath of allegiance) is one of the classic procedures for formalizing relations between individuals or organizations in the Muslim world. The concept has become fundamentally important within the global jihadi movement and is a key element for understanding the establishment and development of different allegiances between the various actors that currently form the movement. Through the use of bay'ah, the two main Salafi-jihadist organizations, al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS), have achieved a global expansion after establishing allegiance relationships with dozens of groups around the world. For this reason, it is important to analyze how this mechanism functions and how it is instrumentalized.

Keywords: allegiance, al-Qaeda, bay'ah, Islamic State, jihadism

Introduction

The practice of *bay'ah* is of unquestionable importance in Islamic tradition, solidly grounded on passages from the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. Nonetheless, the exact origin and meaning of the term is not entirely clear and is open to different interpretations, depending on the classical sources used, some of which predate Islam (such as the *Hilf al-Mutayyabin*, an oath of allegiance made between different clans of the *Quraysh* tribe and later used as a reference by the Prophet). Its roots can also be traced back to the Arab tradition of clasping hands to seal an agreement or transaction.

The first mention of *bay'ah* in the *Qur'an* dates from 627–628, when the Prophet traveled with his followers to the *Ka'bah* (Mecca), where they pledged allegiance to him. The pact was formalized by a joining of hands between believers and the Prophet:

“Certainly was Allah pleased with the believers when they pledged allegiance to you, [O Muhammad], under the tree, and He knew what it was in their hearts, so He felt down tranquility upon them and rewarded them with an imminent conquest”.[1]

In this passage the oath of allegiance is seen as an act of submission and a display of obedience to an authority, in the figure of a leader and this is the most widely recognized interpretation of the *bay'ah* in the Islamic world. The example was followed by the caliphs who inherited the Prophet's political and religious work, to whom the Muslim community paid homage once they had demonstrated that they fulfilled the conditions for the position.[2]

In the course of centuries, the role of the caliphs as political leaders gradually declined and their powers were assumed by different local governors who effectively exercised their authority over the territories they ruled, thus leading to the emergence of the figure of the sultan. The sultans gradually came to usurp the power of the caliphs, completely appropriating it for themselves.[3] This situation, in which the caliph's role as a governor was largely nominal, is best exemplified in the Ottoman Empire.[4]

Although the sultans did not meet the classic conditions to be named as caliphs (*inter alia*, including the requirement to be a descendant of the *Quraysh* clan), they continued to use the traditional *bay'ah* formula. With the break-up of the Ottoman caliphate in 1923, the idea of pledging allegiance to the caliph became obsolete and the meaning of *bay'ah* began to acquire a more flexible application, being used by some leaders to legitimize their own rule.[5]

There are two forms of *bay'ah* within the Islamic tradition.[6] The first, known as *al-bay'at al-mutlaqah*, is viewed as an irrevocable pledge, applying only to the Prophet. According to Islamic belief, the prophets and

messengers of Allah are upright, truthful, wise, and divinely guided and protected from violating the laws of Allah. This guarantees that the *bay'ah* given to the Prophet can never be misused to commit acts that violate religious doctrines and teachings. The other pledge, known as *al-bay'at al-muqayyadah*, is a conditional promise given to a person who is not a prophet or messenger of Allah. This form of *bay'ah* is subject to the condition established in a *hadith* which states that “*There is no obedience to the creation if it involves disobedience to the Creator*”. Such pledges are not absolute and may be revoked if they entail the commission of sins or acts that go against Allah and his precepts. Any *bay'ah* made to different groups and their emirs or caliphs fall within this second definition of the term. In addition to these two forms of *bay'ah*, there is also *bay'ah uzma* [7], meaning “greater pledge”, which is a form of enduring—as opposed to temporary—commitment.

Various aspects of this *bay'ah*, in its modern interpretation, have been introduced by different Islamic groups, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood, who repeated the oath of allegiance after every meeting of their members [8], to radical groups, such as *al-Qaeda* and ISIS, which use it as an instrument to expand their global influence by establishing allegiances with other organizations operating within Salafi-jihadist ideology.

At the present time, there are different relevant contributions that address the importance of the *bay'ah* in order to understand the development of the current global jihadist phenomenon, such as that of Wagemakers [9], Milton and Al-Ubaydi.[10] However, this is an issue that has not yet been sufficiently addressed by other contributions despite its importance. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully analyze the way in which the *bay'ah* has evolved during the last decades and how currently the existence of an oath of allegiance is an essential element in order to formalize an alliance between different jihadist organizations.

The Bay'ah in the Salafi-jihadist Movement

Every terrorist group requires a staging of its ideology or agenda, and Salafi-jihadist groups are no exception; the use of *bay'ah* is a smart and practical way of demonstrating the group's power, among both its acolytes and its enemies. Nor should we ignore the staged nature of the entire ritual associated with *bay'ah*, which has now become a kind of initiation rite in which both the giver and the receiver of the allegiance obtain a variety of benefits.

Being the recipient of *bay'ah* gives the pledgee an aura of mysticism and symbolism, both of which are very important to the image of the caliph or the group he represents (although some dissenting voices among scholars believe it to be a form of idolatry (*shirk*)—the worst sin that can be committed in Salafi-jihadist ideology). Moreover, as discussed, *bay'ah* is in itself an act of submission, reinforcing the power of the recipient and as such it is a powerful propaganda weapon and a useful tool for proselytism (*da'wa*).

The individual or group making the *bay'ah* may also be driven by a variety of motivations, several of which may be identified in the present context.

On the one hand, the individual or group becomes affiliated to the group or individual receiving the *bay'ah*, who can provide access, *inter alia*, to a range of resources, image, followers, and territories—always important from an economic point of view (if we define economy broadly as the resolution of needs).

AQ may be considered to have adopted the recitation of *bay'ah* in Afghanistan in the 1990s as a form of initiation protocol (in addition to its place as a traditional Islamic practice whereby the individual shows submission and obedience to an authority, individual, or group). However, it had no formal implications, comprising as it did an individual choice, and it did not entitle the maker—or rather, it was not a prerequisite—to access training camps and programs, salary, or even promotion within the group. A good example is that of *Khalid Sheikh Mohammed*, better known as KSM, who, although considered to have been the mastermind behind the 911 attacks, “states that he refused to take a formal oath to loyalty to Bin Laden, thus preserving a last vestige of his precious autonomy”.[11]

A contrasting example—in which personal importance was given to a formalism not then viewed as a

prerequisite or to have the same significance as it currently does on the jihadist scene,—can be seen in the *bay'ah* made in 1998 to *Bin Laden* by *Nasser al-Bahri*, better known as *Abu Jandal*. [12]. In his own words, the act was as following:

“Bin Laden gave me a text and I swore allegiance. Although, until then, I had been a de facto member of al-Qaida, I stuck to this ritual, which takes place without much ceremony. I raise my hand before Bin Laden, declaring: ‘I swear before Allah that I will help and support you, regardless of my personal interest or my own ideas, in good times and bad, forgetting my personal well-being, and I promise not to question his leadership. ‘Although this does not change anything in my daily life, it does affect my mood’.” [13]

On the other hand, the *bay'ah* also holds out the possibility of joining a larger and/or more powerful group. This confers added status and can give the pledger greater ideological or military projection over other groups, individuals, or areas of interest, since he then becomes part of a greater whole, vastly simplifying the allocation of resources and execution of actions, by making him, in many cases, an executive entity rather than a “decision-making/executive” entity.

While there may indeed be a degree of independence in planning and undertaking actions, close ties are maintained with the machinery of media, resources, and propaganda at group level, combined with an element of centrality which is partly what the giver and the recipient of the *bay'ah* both seek. This win-win arrangement benefits the two parties by tapping into one another’s strengths and reducing their weaknesses.

The so called “glocal” *jihad* can also be viewed within the terms and consequences of the *bay'ah*, with groups acting locally under a shared flag and ideology, which is a powerful image and a very potent propaganda tool.

The Bay'ah Dilemma

Since 2014, local groups wishing to join the global movement [14], have had two main options, depending on their personal interests and ideological affinity, to align themselves with AQ or with IS. Prior to the emergence of IS, the global scene was headed by AQ, with backing for its undertaking coming from groups expressing support and sympathy for the cause. It is important to note that up to that point, following the *bay'ah* made by *Osama bin Laden* to *Mullah Omar* in 2001 (see below), there is little evidence of other *bay'ah* [15], related to AQ or other jihadist groups, as a formula for joining a group, apart from some testimonial cases, such as, for instance, the oath of allegiance made by *Omar Hammami* (a.k.a. *Abu Mansoor al-Amriiki*, an American who went on to become the leader of *al-Shaabab*) in Somalia around 2006 to *Xasan Turki* (*Hassan Abdullah Hersi al-Turki*), who was then (erroneously) considered to be the AQ leader in the area. [16]

With the rise of IS and the establishment of its Islamic Caliphate in 2014, that picture changed greatly. Several groups that had previously only expressed more indirect support or sympathy to the cause, chose to go one step further and recite the *bay'ah*. [17] A number of groups that had previously shown a close ideological affinity with AQ decided to switch their allegiance to IS—something which at the time appeared to be a more advantageous option. However, this trend was generally confined to less significant groups; AQ’s large regional franchises, like the ones in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the group created on the Indian Subcontinent in September 2014 (AQIS), remained loyal to AQ. While the irruption of IS had less of an impact on these organizations, splinter groups did emerge within some of them, headed by leaders of a certain importance, who were followed by some of their subordinates in pledging allegiance to IS. In September 2014, for example, *Jund al-Khilafa*, an Algerian group, split off from AQIM. [18]

IS’s ranks have certainly been swelled by a considerable number of groups from the fertile terrain that traditionally favored the spread of AQ’s ideology. Examples include newly founded groups such as *Wilayah Khorasan* [19], the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) [20], Islamic State of East Asia (ISEA) [21] and Boko Haram. [22]

One essential requirement for formalization of this union is that the *bay'ah* be accepted by the group that

receives it; only then can a relationship of allegiance be considered to exist between the two organizations. There are no fixed periods for the length of time that must elapse between the issuing of the *bay'ah* and its public acceptance. In some cases it may be merely a matter of days (in the case of Boko Haram, it took just five days from *Abubakar Shekau's* declaration of his *bay'ah* on March 8, 2015 to its acceptance on the 13th by IS spokesman *Abu Muhammad al-Adnani* in an audio message, later ratified in Issue No. 8 of *Dabiq* magazine). In contrast, the *bay'ah* made by *Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui* on behalf of ISGS in May 2015 via the Mauritanian news agency *al-Akhbar* was finally accepted a year and a half later, in October 2016, when *Amaq* (one of the news agencies associated with Islamic State), publicly recognized this allegiance through the emission of a video that featured *al-Sahraoui* reading his *bay'ah*.^[23]

Using the system of *bay'ah* pledges, both AQ and IS have been able to territorially distribute and organize their groups and franchises, thereby managing to expand their brand, ideology, and agenda beyond their original spheres of influence. Whereas AQ has done so by establishing regional franchises and alliances with locally consolidated groups, such as *al-Shabaab*, IS has created numerous provinces (*wilayat*) which replicate the organizational and functional model of the Syrian/Iraqi caliphate on a small scale.

SOME PLEDGES OF ALLEGIANCE GIVEN TO ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI AND PUBLISHED IN OFFICIAL ISLAMIC STATE MEDIA		
GROUP / FACTION NAME	COUNTRY	DATE OF STATEMENT
AL-HUDA BATALION IN MAGREB OF ISLAM	ALGERIA	30/06/2014
JAMAAT ANSAR BAIT AL-MAQDIS	EGYPT	30/06/2014
LIWA AHRAR AL-SUNNA IN BAALBEK	LEBANON	30/06/2014
JAISH AL-SAHABAB IN THE LEVANT	SYRIA	01/07/2014
MUJAHIDEEN INDONESIA TIMOR	INDONESIA	01/07/2014
TEHREEK-E-KHILAFAT	PAKISTAN	09/07/2014
ANSAR AL KHILAFAH	PHILIPPINES	14/08/2014
SUPPORTERS FOR THE ISLAMIC STATE IN YEMEN	YEMEN	04/09/2014
AL-TAWHEED BRIGADE IN KHORASAN	AFGHANISTAN	23/09/2014
JUND AL-KHILAFAH IN EGYPT	EGYPT	23/09/2014
LIONS OF LYBIA	LYBIA	24/09/2014
HEROES OF ISLAM BRIGADE IN KHORASAN	AFGHANISTAN	30/09/2014
THE SOLDIERS OF CALIPHATE IN ALGERIA	ALGERIA	30/09/2014
ANSAR AL-TAWHID INDIA	INDIA	04/10/2014
SHURA COUNCIL OF SHABAB AL-ISLAM DARNAH	LYBIA	06/10/2014
FACTION OF KATIBAT AL-IMAN BUKHARI	SYRIA	29/10/2014
ISLAMIC STATE LYBIA	LYBIA	09/11/2014
MUJAHIDEEN OF YEMEN	YEMEN	10/11/2014
ANSAR AL-ISLAM	IRAQ	08/01/2015
LEADERS OF THE MUHAJID IN KHORASAN	PAKISTAN	10/01/2015
BOKO HARAM	NIGERIA	07/03/2015
JUND AL-KHILAFAH IN TUNISIA	TUNISIA	31/03/2015
JEMAAH ISLAMIYAH	PHILIPPINES	27/04/2015
KATIBAT AL-MURABITOUN (al-Sahrawi spin-off)	MALI	14/05/2015
MUJAHIDEEN OF TUNISIA OF KAIROUAN	TUNISIA	18/05/2015
WILAYAH HIND	INDIA	07/06/2019
WILAYAT GHARB AFRIQIYYAH	WEST AFRICA	15/06/2019
WILAYAH SINAI	EGYPT	19/06/2019
WILAYAH SHARQ ASIA (EAST ASIA)	PHILIPPINES	22/06/2019
WILAYAH AL-QAWQAZ	CENTRAL ASIA	26/06/2019
WILAYAH KHURASAN	AFGHANISTAN	29/06/2019
AZERBAIJAN ISLAMIC STATE ELEMENTS (BILAD)	AZERBAIJAN	02/07/2019
WILAYAH LYBIA	LYBIA	06/07/2019
WILAYAH TURKEY	TURKEY	10/07/2019
WILAYAH WASAT AFRIQIYYAH (CENTRAL AFRICA)	DRC / MOZAMBIQUE	24/07/2019
WILAYAH IRAQ*	IRAQ	02/09/2019
BANGLADESHI ISLAMIC STATE ELEMENTS	BANGLADESH	09/08/2019

* It includes all the previous wilayat of Iraq, since they were unified in 2017 in a single province, as happened with the Syria wilayats

As mentioned, both have obtained enormous propaganda benefits by claiming responsibility for attacks in regions as diverse as Europe, the Sahel, or Southeast Asia. For their part, the aim of the groups pledging allegiance is to increase their economic, logistical, and human resources, although this is often difficult to quantify. The reality is that the development presented by the different terrorist groups that pledge the *bay'ah* to AQ or IS is uneven. Some groups have significantly increased their capacity in recent years. These include *Jama'at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* in Egypt—better known as *Wilayah Sinai* since acceptance of its allegiance in

November 2014—and the entire jihadist movement of Southeast Asia, led by *Abu Sayyaf* and the *Maute* Group. In contrast, other groups have seen scarcely any improvement in their situation, despite formal acceptance of their *bay'ah*, such as the Islamic State in Somalia and *Wilayah Khorasan*. Both of these organizations arose from schisms within existing groups (*al-Shabaab* and *Tehrik-i-Taliban*, respectively), but the alliance with IS has not allowed them to increase their resources sufficiently to allow them to wrest control from the original organizations. The situation of AQIS is similar; since its creation in 2014 it has carried out no major attacks [24] and has been unable to challenge the influence of IS in South Asia.

SOME PLEDGES OF ALLEGIANCE GIVEN TO ABU IBRAHIM AL-HASHIMI AL-QURAYSHI AND PUBLISHED IN OFFICIAL ISLAMIC STATE MEDIA		
GROUP / FACTION NAME	COUNTRY	DATE OF STATEMENT
WILAYAH SINAI	EGYPT	03/11/2019
BANGLADESHI ISLAMIC STATE ELEMENTS (BILAD AL-BENGAL)	BANGLADESH	03/11/2019
WILAYAH SOMAL (ABNA UL-CALIPHA)	SOMALIA	03/11/2019
CALYPHATE CYBER SHIELD (CCS)	VIRTUAL	04/11/2019
TELEGRAM SUPPORTERS OF ISLAMIC STATE	VIRTUAL	04/11/2019
PAKISTANI ISLAMIC STATE ELEMENTS	PAKISTAN	04/11/2019
WILAYAH YEMEN	YEMEN	04/11/2019
SYRIA ISLAMIC STATE ELEMENTS	SYRIA	05/11/2019
WILAYAH KHURASAN (ISKP)	AFGHANISTAN	05/11/2019
WILAYAH GHARB AFRIQIYYAH (WEST AFRICA)	WEST AFRICA	08/11/2019
WILAYAH AL-KHAYR	SYRIA	08/11/2019
WILAYAH SHARQ ASIA (EAST ASIA)	PHILIPPINES	09/11/2019
WILAYAH BARQA	LYBIA	15/11/2019
IRAQI ISLAMIC STATE ELEMENTS	IRAQ	17/11/2019
WILAYAT AL-IRAQ, KIRKUK	IRAQ	20/11/2019
MUJAHIDEEN INDONESIA TIMOR	INDONESIA	21/11/2019
AZERBAIJAN ISLAMIC STATE ELEMENTS (BILAD AZERBAIJAN)	AZERBAIJAN	30/11/2019

The Bay'ah of AQ and IS: Some Examples of Different Approaches

Generally speaking, AQ has traditionally set more exacting conditions and objectives before establishing a formal alliance with any group or creating a regional franchise.

IS, in contrast, has been observed showing more complacency or permissiveness regarding its conditions. Although Issue No. 5 of *Dabiq* set out clear directives on the establishment of a *wilayah*, over time, it has become obvious that these requirements have not always been enforced when accepting the *bay'ah* and establishing provinces in India [25], Turkey [26], and the Democratic Republic of the Congo [27], particularly once IS began to lose territories and influence.

It is important to note that AQ and IS have also shown different criteria for assessing and accepting the *bay'ah* made to them. On many occasions, AQ has been reluctant to have its name used outside its principal areas of operation and direct control, so that its satellite organizations would not be targeted by association with central AQ, especially following the launch of operations against AQ as part of the GWOT (Global War on Terror), primarily in Afghanistan. Moreover, AQ has always been more hierarchical, and “ceding” its name to organizations over which the leadership or *Shura* council could not maintain complete remote control, in various forms, did not square with its operational or security strategy or image.

In contrast, IS decided, as a general rule, to accept and agglutinate a larger number of groups and factions choosing to make *bay'ah* to it, building on the momentum of its increased fame. For IS, therefore, practically any *bay'ah* is welcome, since it brings a greater presence, expanded territory, a heightened external image, wider publicity, and, thus, more followers. Comparatively, then, IS might be said to have placed more importance on *bay'ah* than AQ, bringing a significant degree of formalism to the practice, especially in the way the pledges are staged. This is particularly evident in the latest *bay'ah* made by different *wilayat* and IS-supporter groups to *Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraysh*, following his appointment as the new caliph on October 31, 2019. The first to do so, on November 3, 2019, was *Wilayah Sinai*, and the last was a small group of adherents in

Azerbaijan, on November 30th. With the exception of the pledges made by the Cyber Caliphate Shield (CCS) and by some supporters via Telegram, all of these declarations followed a similar ritual, with clasped-hand gestures and identical recitation formulas. This helped create a greater external perception of unity among the different *wilayat* with regard to the pledge-taking, as if it were in some way a preordained procedure or one that followed *a priori* instructions, rather than a spontaneous act. This may be seen as a maneuver on the part of the IS leadership to give greater legitimacy to the new caliph. Its official channels screened videos showing the *bay'ah* made to the group as a standardized, regulated act, in keeping with the group's slogan, *Dawlat al Islam Baqiyah wa Tatamaddad* ("The Islamic State remains and expands").

Certain differences may also be observed in the content of the *bay'ah* made to the two organizations, and between the various organizations or individuals taking the oath of allegiance. Although there is no established norm as to the content, length, or formula of the pledge, there are certain points of coincidence between the two groups when it comes to the formula used.

A number of different oath-recitation formulas can be observed in both cases. In the case of IS, the formula is more or less standardized. The following is one model:

"We give bay'ah to Amirul-Muminin [28], the Khalifah of the Muslims, Abu Ibrajīm al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, pledging to listen and obey, in times of delight and dislike, and in times of hardship and ease, and to do so selflessly; and to not dispute the command of those in authority unless we see blatant kufr [29], concerning which we have proof from Allah, and Allah is witness over what we said!" [30]

A good example of the ceremony and formula used in the case of AQ is that made by *Abu Abbas al-Sharqui* (a.k.a. Aimen Dean) to Osama bin Laden in September 1997. In his own words:

"...He extended his right hand with his palm opened upwards and took mine. I noticed how long his fingers were and how soft his skin...Al-Ghamdi...asked me to repeat every clause after him. I recall my exact words as I looked solemnly into the al-Qaeda founder's eyes. 'I give you my allegiance to obey, to follow orders during the good times and the bad without disobeying Allah on the path of jihad. I fight alongside you when you declare war and I make peace when you make peace. And Allah is the witness to what I have declared'".[31]

The same formula is used, with certain minor variations, in one of the last *bay'ah* received by AQ, from one of its most important franchises, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), in which the current leader of the group, *Khalid Batarfi*, a.k.a. *Abu al-Miqdad al-Kindi*, swore allegiance to *Ayman al-Zawahiri*, emir of AQ, in an audio message:

"To our sheik and our emir, Abu Muhammad Ayman al-Zawahiri, I pledge my allegiance to you, will obey you at all times, and will not dispute your orders. And I pledge you to jihad for the sake of Allah, to establish the law of Allah on the earth, and this allegiance from me and all my brothers in Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula." [32]

The usual structure commonly presents several citations from the Quran or some *hadith* or *ahadith* as the way of introduction or beginning, to then go on to the personal presentation of the issuer of the *bay'ah*, indicating on behalf of which group he speaks. After this, the reasons or motivations that have led to the emission of the *bay'ah* are usually developed and explained, as well as the disposition and submission toward the receiver of the pledge. Usually, the *bay'ah* ends with some kind of praise to the receiver, some additional quotation from the Quran, the inclusion of some other *hadith* or *ahadith*, or some classic Islamic farewell formula.

One of the most significant *bay'ah*—for a variety of reasons—is that made by *Osama bin Laden* to *Mullah Omar* in the spring of 2001. *Bin Laden's bay'ah* was not made public until July 13, 2014, when it was released by *al-Sahab*, the media wing of AQ, to give greater argumentation strength to *Ayman al-Zawahiri* in his criticism speech aimed at *Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi*, who was appointed as caliph without having legitimacy or authority for it, according to AQ's vision.[33]

Speaking on legitimacy, *Osama bin Laden's bay'ah* had itself been controversial in its day, and the emir of AQ himself had been reluctant to give it, on the grounds that *Mullah Omar* had no *Quraysh* ancestry—a primary requirement for any caliph, according to the literal interpretations of certain Islamic texts by various Arab scholars. Moreover, this *bay'ah* also appears to have been physically made through a proxy; *Bin Laden* chose not to meet with *Mullah Omar* for the occasion, instead charging *Mustafa Amid*, a.k.a. *Abu'l-Walid*, with swearing the *bay'ah* on his behalf.[34] *Bin Laden* defended *Mullah Omar's* right to assume the title of *amir al-mu'minin* (Leader of the Faith) even though he did not belong to the *Quraysh* tribe, the original tribe of the Prophet.[35]

In his oath, *Osama Bin Laden* quoted the Prophet, saying that “*the one who dies without a pledge in his throat dies an ignorant death*”. This same *hadith* would subsequently be employed by *Ayman al-Zawahiri* to begin his *bay'ah* to the Taliban leader *Mawlawi Haibatullah*, using the video in which *Bin Laden* quotes it in his oath to *Mullah Omar*.[36]

A version of the same *hadith* would also be cited by *Abubakar Shekau* on March 7, 2015, when he pledged *bay'ah* to *Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi*, as the following excerpt shows:

“*From your brother in Allah, Abu Muhammad Abubakar bin Muhammad al-Shekawi, the leader of JASDJ to the caliph of the Muslims, Abu Bakr Ibrahim b. 'Awad b. Ibrahim al-Husayni al-Qurashi. We are sending you this message, following what Allah said in the Qur'an: 'And hold fast to Allah's bond, all of you, and do not fall apart.' (Q3:103) And what the Prophet said: 'Whoever dies when he had not pledged allegiance to an imam (caliph) dies a death of ignorance (jahiliyya).'*”[37]

In the same *bay'ah* from *Shekau*, the formula used for the oath of allegiance can be seen to be similar to that used on other occasions by other individuals and groups:

“*We announce our allegiance to the caliph of the Muslims Ibrahim b. 'Awad b. Ibrahim al-Husayni al-Qurashi (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) and we will hear and obey him in times of difficulty and prosperity, in hardship and ease, and to endure being discriminated against, and not to dispute about rule with those in power, except in case of evident unbelief regarding that which there is a proof from Allah.*”[38]

The *bay'ah* has also been used by some of the terrorists who have carried out attacks in Europe in recent years. Despite not having any direct link with any terrorist organization, and having received only the ideological influence of these groups or other extremist currents, some of them decided to pronounce the *bay'ah* toward IS through videos recorded by themselves prior to carrying out their attacks. This circumstance can be understood as part of the self-justification and indoctrination of these individuals, who consider themselves a part of the Salafi-jihadist movement through, among other practices, the recitation of the *bay'ah*. Such are the cases of *Anis Amri*, the author of the attack on the Berlin Christmas market in 2016, or more recently that of *Kutjim Fejzulai*, who in November 2020 killed four people in Vienna. In both cases, IS made these videos public through *Amaq* and referred to both as “caliphate soldiers”, despite the fact that they did not receive direct orders from the organization when carrying out the attacks.

Conclusions

Over the centuries, the *bay'ah* has been a frequently used mechanism throughout the Islamic world. An understanding of its use and different interpretations and forms is essential to comprehend the development of relationships between participating individuals and organizations.

Within the jihadist movement, both AQ and IS have instrumentalized its use as a means of expanding their brand beyond their traditional spheres of influence, establishing long-lasting alliances with other groups of a Salafi-jihadist ideology by way of the *bay'ah*. The *bay'ah* has become a key indicator for understanding the global dynamics and interrelations within the current jihadist movement, especially with regard to the relationships between the two main global jihadi groups and their respective affiliates.

A study of the use and number of *bay'ah* received by the respective groups shows that AQ, in keeping with its

general approach, prefers to keep the same “low profile” in its use of *bay'ah*, not renouncing it, but at the same time neither demanding it nor turning the ceremony into a propaganda exercise as IS has. IS, on the other hand, has spared no resources or planning in making the receipt of *bay'ah*, if not a requirement, at least a form of initiation rite, which it disseminates globally over its official media.

This can clearly be seen at key moments in the group's development. On April 29, 2019, for example, a video was released entitled “In the Hospitality of the Emir of Believers”, in which *Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi*, making his first appearance in many years, was shown examining the documentation of different *wilayat*. Over the following months, in a clearly orchestrated operation by IS's leadership, these same *wilayat* gradually either renewed their existing *bay'ah*, or— in the case of the new *wilayat* or *bilad* (areas, territories), such as Azerbaijan and Turkey—made the pledge for the first time. These *bay'ah* were shown in a series of videos entitled “And the best results are for the pious”, released in June and July 2019. The same occurred in November 2019, following the appointment of *Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi*, when various *wilayat* swore allegiance to the newly appointed caliph. Again, they were almost identical in their staging, script, and visual devices, suggesting that the *bay'ah* had been consciously orchestrated, rather than being spontaneous.

Possible abuse of the *bay'ah* could end up being more of a weakness than a strength. Noting that it has become a sort of visual performance intended to produce the greatest propaganda impact, some might interpret the giving of the oath as a sign of idolatry and worship (*shirk*) of the caliph—or the group he represents—which would be the worst of all sins according to the very ideology defended by the Salafi-jihadist groups.

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Notes

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- [29] *Kufr* is one of several Arabic terms used to refer to infidels and unbelievers.
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- [33] More information on Osama bin Laden's *bayah*, with verbatim excerpts, can be consulted in conjunction with an analysis of its use as an argument against the appointment of *Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi* as Caliph in Thomas Joscelyn's article “Analysis: Al Qaeda attempts to undermine new Islamic State with old video of Osama bin Laden”, *Foundation for Defense of Democracies Long War Journal*, July 15, 2015, accessible at URL: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/osama_bin_laden_disc.php
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