

## The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines

By Zachary Abuza

SINCE LAUNCHING A major offensive against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in August 2006, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have dealt the group a number of crippling blows. While members of the ASG are still at large, the frequency and lethality of their attacks have dropped precipitously since the first quarter of 2007, when several top commanders were killed. The ASG lack any semblance of central leadership at this point. Indeed, their continued existence seems to be more due to the AFP's failings than to any concerted effort to regroup. Moreover, the ASG appears short on financial resources and has reverted back to spates of kidnappings for ransom, effectively jettisoning what little ideological pretensions the group ever had.

### Background

Formed in 1991 by a veteran of the Afghan jihad, Abdurrajak Janjalani, the ASG developed as a small-scale terrorist organization committed to establishing an Islamic state in the Sulu archipelago.<sup>1</sup> Yet, unlike the larger Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the ASG was decidedly sectarian in its killings. The group attacked churches and kidnapped or killed Christian priests or missionaries. By 1996-1998, the group had been seriously degraded with the loss of their al-Qa`ida funding and the death of their leader, Abdurrajak. From 1996-2002, the Abu Sayyaf were no more than a group of well-armed kidnapers, driven by profit rather than ideological fervor. Although they gained international notoriety in 2000-2001 with several high-profile raids and large-scale kidnappings on Philippine and Malaysian dive resorts, they remained a criminal threat. The 2001 hostage taking of an American missionary couple and the beheading of another American citizen were the *casus belli* for the U.S. intervention in the southern Philippines. Since then, U.S.

Special Forces have rotated in and out of the southern Philippines where they provide training and intelligence for their AFP counterparts.

The capture and killing of several ASG leaders in 2002 actually had a backlash: Janjalani's younger brother, Khadaffy, consolidated a degree of power and re-oriented the group back toward its ideological principles. At the same time, the members of the Indonesian-

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dominated terrorist organization, Jemaah Islamiyah, based in MILF camps, established ties with the ASG. By 2003, all kidnappings had ceased, and starting in 2004 the ASG and JI had begun a new wave of terrorist bombings from Mindanao to Manila, prompting several offensives by government forces. An AFP bombing of a MILF safe house in the Liguasan Marsh where several ASG and JI members were holed up prompted the MILF to oust them.<sup>2</sup> By January 2005, top JI members Dulmatin and Umar Patek were based with the ASG in Jolo.

Operation Ultimatum began in August 2006 and continues to this day, although the real operational tempo diminished by mid-2007. U.S. military advisors and analysts were surprised that the AFP was able to maintain the offensive on Jolo Island for as long as they did. In all, eight battalions of AFP and Philippine Marines were deployed. Five years of U.S. training and assistance began to bear fruit and for the first time joint inter-service operations were showing real gains. In September 2006 and March 2007, two top leaders, Khadaffy Janjalani and Abu Solaiman, were killed.<sup>3</sup> Since then, the ASG has fallen into a tail spin.

### Current State of the ASG

While a handful of press reports<sup>4</sup> and analysts<sup>5</sup> asserted that the ASG had appointed the Middle East-trained Yasser Igasan as their new leader, there was no evidence to support this claim. Igasan had been in Saudi Arabia since 2001 studying religion and fundraising for Moro causes. An April 2008 press report from the Philippines later denied that Igasan had become the group's new chieftain, and Philippine security officials acknowledged that the ASG "haven't been able to come up with a single, influential leader who can unite the different factions."<sup>6</sup> Some of the remaining ASG leaders still at large include:

- Isnilon Totoni Hapilon, alias Salahuddin or Abu Mus`ab
- Radullan Sahiron, alias Kumander Putol
- Umbra Abu Jumdail, alias Dr. Abu Pula
- Albader Parad
- Osman, alias Usman or Rizal
- Gumbahali Jumdail
- Ustadz Hatta Haipse
- Tahil Sali
- Abu Sofian
- Suhod Tanadjalan, alias Kumander Suhod

The AFP asserted that Isnilon Hapilon was wounded in late April in a battle that killed his son.<sup>7</sup> Hapilon, who has a bounty from the U.S. government of up to \$5 million, remains one of the leading figures of the movement. Although Radullan Sahiron remains at large, at 71-years-old and missing a limb the AFP no longer see him as an active leader. Umbra Abu Jumdail (Abu Pula) remains the second-most wanted figure, although Albadar Parad is often described as the group's most violent and dangerous commander. What is clear is that there are distinct factions, and the ASG in no sense is a cohesive organization.

Fleeing the authorities and short of funds, the ASG is a diminished terrorist threat. In September 2007, an

4 Jim Gomez, "Militant May Lead Philippine Terrorists," Associated Press, March 3, 2007.

5 See, for example, Taharudin Piang Ampatuan, "Abu Sayaf's New Leader: Yasser Igasan The Religious Scholar," RSIS Commentaries, July 9, 2007.

6 "Abu Sayyaf Hit by Leadership, Funding Woes," Associated Press, April 4, 2008.

7 Joel Guinto, "Abu Sayyaf Leader Hapilon, Son Wounded—Military," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 1, 2008.

1 For more, see Zachary Abuza, "Balik Terrorism: The Return of the Abu Sayyaf," Strategic Studies Institute Monograph, September 1, 2005.

2 "Istiada Bte Oemar Sovie Interview," Philippine National Police, November 9, 2006.

3 Zachary Abuza, "On the Defensive: Rebels Lose Ground in the Southern Philippines," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, April 1, 2007.

ASG operative was arrested en route to Manila where he was ordered to stage diversionary attacks. The most spectacular attack in the past year was the November 13, 2007 bombing-cum-assassination of Basilan Congressman Wahab Akbar, a former member of the ASG who had become an outspoken opponent against them.<sup>8</sup> In February 2008, two suspected ASG operatives were arrested in Davao Oriental with an Indonesian JI member, Baihaqi. On March 1, a homemade bomb ripped through a bar near an army base on Jolo,

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wounding six people. In mid-April, two bombs fashioned from 60-millimeter and 81-millimeter mortar shells were detonated outside of a Catholic cathedral and cafe in Zamboanga, although no one was injured.<sup>9</sup> That same month, police arrested an ASG operative in Quezon City, Alpaker Said (Abu Jandal), and charged him with the attack on Wahab Akbar. Police believed he was planning a new series of attacks.<sup>10</sup> There were many other small bombings in central Mindanao in late 2007 and early 2008, but most have been attributed to hard line elements of the MILF or the al-Khobar extortion gang, not the ASG.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the ASG is still able to perpetrate lethal attacks, such as

8 Three others were killed and 12 wounded at the attack on the congress. See “Rep. Wahab Akbar, 2 Others Killed in Batasan Bomb Blast,” GMANews.tv, November 14, 2007; Samira A. Gutoc, “From Sandals to Suits: Wahab Akbar, the Rebel Turned Politician,” MindaNews.com, November 15, 2007.

9 “Suspected al-Qaida Militants Bomb Cathedral, Bank in Zamboanga,” *Sun Star*, April 13, 2008.

10 Joel Guinto, “Informant vs Abu Sayyaf Suspect Gets P500,000 Reward,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 28, 2008.

11 For more on al-Khobar, see Zachary Abuza, “Criminal Gangs in the Southern Philippines,” *Jane’s Intelligence Digest*, April 10, 2008.

the May 29 bombing of an Air Force facility in Zamboanga that killed three and wounded 18.<sup>12</sup> What is all the more remarkable is that due to being constantly on the run, the ASG has been unable to leverage the technical bomb-making expertise of two JI operatives implicated in the 2002 Bali bombing—Dulmatin and Umar Patek—who have been with the ASG since early 2005.

The AFP has engaged the ASG in a small number of fierce encounters. Two police were killed in Jolo in January 2008. At the end of that month, a pitched battle in Tawi-Tawi led to the death of Wahab Opao, as well as reports that JI operative Dulmatin was killed.<sup>13</sup> Although a body was later exhumed and DNA tested, U.S. officials have failed to conclude whether the body was in fact Dulmatin’s. Between February and April, nearly 10 soldiers and marines were killed in clashes on Jolo. What is more troubling is that clashes with the ASG on Basilan, which had been clear of the ASG for several years, are now drawing the AFP into battles with the MILF, who maintain a camp in Tipo-Tipo. In July 2007, 14 AFP were killed, 10 of whom were beheaded, when the ASG sought refuge in the MILF camp.<sup>14</sup> While the MILF admitted to killing the AFP in self-defense, they denied that they were fighting alongside the ASG, giving them sanctuary or that they had beheaded the troops.<sup>15</sup> On May 25, fighting again broke out between government forces and MILF and ASG combatants in Basilan, leaving six AFP dead. Again, the MILF denied any ASG presence.<sup>16</sup>

**Re-Degeneration: Return to Kidnappings**

Perhaps the most telling sign of the ASG’s current state is their degeneration to kidnappings. While there were a number of incidences in 2007, the tempo has increased in the first half of 2008 and money has become the primary motive. In mid-January, a Roman Catholic priest was killed in a botched

12 “Bomb Kills Three Outside Philippine Air Base: Military,” Agence France-Presse, May 29, 2008.

13 “Dulmatin Died in May ‘07, Says Indon Prof,” ABS-CBN News, February 21, 2008.

14 “Militants Kill 14 Philippine Marines; Behead 10,” Agence France-Presse, July 11, 2007.

15 Joel Guinto, “AFP Files Protest vs MILF over Basilan Attack,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 26, 2008.

16 Ibid.

kidnapping, while a teacher from the parochial school was taken hostage. The teacher was released in late March after his family paid a 200,000 peso (\$4,880) ransom. In March, a South Korean and Filipino were abducted. In early April, ASG members kidnapped a Department of Education official and several teachers. On April 10, ASG gunmen released seven persons they abducted separately. On May 28, a Filipino businessman in Zamboanga was abducted.<sup>17</sup> In all of these cases, the captives were released after ransoms were paid, suggesting that the ASG is short of funds.

What concerns Philippine officials most about the trend is that the ASG seem to be planning a new wave of high profile kidnappings of tourists. On March 13, a suspected Indonesian member of JI and ASG member were arrested on the resort island of Boracay, where authorities assert they were “casing” hotels and bars.<sup>18</sup> Most recently, on June 8 Ces Drilon, a popular senior reporter for ABS-CBN, was kidnapped by suspected ASG militants; a ransom is being demanded for her release.<sup>19</sup>

**How Does the ASG Survive?**

Into the eighth year of U.S. training and hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid, not to mention the bulk of USAID funding being concentrated in Sulu and Mindanao, why have the ASG not been finished off? The current order of battle only puts them at 300-400 people. Although the terrain is very rugged, the AFP has considerable intelligence being provided from the United States. People in Jolo, at first resistant to the American presence, have been more receptive due to the civic action and medical missions being conducted. More intelligence is coming from tips from the local community who are increasingly tired of the ASG’s nihilism. Moreover, the United States has provided more than \$10 million since 2001 for information leading to arrests of ASG members.<sup>20</sup>

17 Al Jacinto, “Businessman Abducted in Zamboanga - Reports,” GMANews.tv, May 27, 2008.

18 “Bali Bombing Suspect Held in Boracay resort,” *Gulf News*, March 27, 2008.

19 “TV News Reporter, Crew Missing in Philippines,” CNN, June 11, 2008.

20 Angelo L. Gutierrez, “US Spent Over \$10M for Filipino Tipsters vs Islamic Militants,” ABS-CBN, May 5,

Part of the problem is that the operational tempo of the AFP is down considerably from 2007, when 127 ASG were killed and 38 captured.<sup>21</sup> The AFP has a tendency to not hold on to territory it has captured. In mid-April 2008, the Philippine Army disregarded the ASG as a threat and withdrew a large number of their forces from Jolo, leaving the bulk of operations with the marines.

A more cynical answer is that the AFP has little intention of finishing the job since that would end the pipeline of U.S. training and military assistance, which would force the funds allocated by the government in Manila to actually make it down to front-line troops. The campaign against institutionalized corruption in the AFP has not been as impressive. As the recent State Department report on terrorism noted, "Limited financial resources, inadequate salaries, corruption, low morale, limited cooperation between police and prosecutors, and other problems in law enforcement have hampered bringing terrorists to justice."<sup>22</sup>

Yet, the ASG is also the beneficiary of a government that has never tried to establish a holistic solution for its Moro troubles, instead killing operatives as they appear and implementing a divide and conquer policy toward the three disparate rebel groups. In March 2007, MNLF commanders in Jolo and Zamboanga quit the peace process and attacked government forces. Habier Malik joined up with the ASG in Jolo, in effect doubling their size, because the government had failed to implement the 1996 Tripoli Accords or attend the Tripartite Talks with the Organization of the Islamic Conference.<sup>23</sup> The government at first refused to attend the talks, citing the ongoing peace process with the MILF, and since then has attended but been non-committal. The parallel set of peace talks with the MILF has stalled since the November 2007 breakthrough on the issue of ancestral domain. In the end, the AFP and hardliners in the government have

refused to endorse what government negotiators agreed on. Malaysia has since begun withdrawing their peacekeepers from Mindanao, and cease-fire violations are increasing.<sup>24</sup> Frustration on the part of all the various Moro ethnic groups is palpable, and few have any faith that the government ever negotiates in sincerity.

While all three groups have failed to develop a common program or platform, at the tactical level of autonomous field commanders, there is considerable cooperation. Although this has helped keep the ASG alive, they are clearly a diminished threat.

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<sup>21</sup> This data was provided in the State Department's 2007 Philippine Country Report.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "AFP Bares P1-M Bounty for Malik, Junks Ceasefire Call," ABS-CBN, April 18, 2008.

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<sup>24</sup> Sean Yoong, "Malaysia Blames RP for Stalled Peace Talks," Associated Press, May 3, 2008.