

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this incident. The kidnappings and Khwaja's subsequent execution show the generational change among militants in Pakistan and the evolving relationship between the ISI and Taliban fighters. Khwaja, for example, was a controversial figure due to his associations with the ISI and links with certain militant groups. After he retired from the military, he worked as a lawyer and defended suspected militants and Islamist politicians.¹⁷ He even reportedly once maintained contacts with Usama bin Ladin. It appears that the Asian Tigers killed him as revenge against the ISI and against the jihadist groups it believes are still working for the spy agency.

The new generation of militants in Pakistan is more independent and is pursuing more radical goals. Moreover, these domestic militant groups share links with transnational terrorist networks such as al-Qa`ida, and they are angry with Pakistan's government for aligning with the United States and NATO in the "war on terrorism." It appears that they want to embarrass Pakistan's government and force it to accept their demands. Future kidnapping attempts of high-profile security officials and other more aggressive tactics are likely as the Pakistani Taliban grow more diffuse and increasingly unpredictable.

Rabimullah Yusufzai is a senior Pakistani journalist and political and security analyst presently working as Resident Editor of the English daily The News International in Peshawar. He is also an analyst for the leading Pakistani Urdu TV channel, Geo. He has been reporting on Afghanistan and Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and Baluchistan since the early 1980s.

The Sources of the Abu Sayyaf's Resilience in the Southern Philippines

By Rommel C. Banlaoi

SINCE THE LAUNCHING of the global war on terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the Philippines has been engaged in a prolonged military campaign against the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Key ASG leaders have been killed in this battle, while others have been imprisoned for various crimes associated with terrorism. Despite these successes, authorities have not been able to eliminate the ASG completely, and the group remains a threat to Philippine internal security. Even after losing key field commanders, the ASG is still able to replenish its membership primarily from affected and influenced villages in Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi (BASULTA) in the southern Philippines.

After providing a brief background of the ASG, this article examines the sources of the ASG's resilience in the face of government and international pressure. It argues that the ASG is a product of complex tensions in the southern Philippines, where criminal, political and militant groups at times collaborate to achieve shared goals. It also shows the limits of countering terrorism in the southern Philippines.

A Deeper Look at the Founding of the ASG

Analysts traditionally trace the evolution of the ASG to Abdurajak Janjalani, who reportedly founded the group in the early 1990s. While there is no doubt that the ASG's original ideological foundation is attributed to the political and religious ideas of Abdurajak, what he actually organized was a group called al-Harakatul al-Islamiyyah (AHAI) or the Islamic Movement, whose original members were drawn from his followers in Jamaa Tableegh, an Islamic propagation group that he formed in Basilan in the early 1980s.¹ Abdurajak officially declared

the creation of AHAI in 1989 to pursue *Jihad Fi Sabilillah*, defined as "fighting and dying for the cause of Islam."² Yet it was only in 1993 when AHAI formally organized with Abdurajak as the *amir*.³

Since the formal launch of AHAI in 1989, Abdurajak delivered several *khutbahs* or sermons and released several *fatawa* using the *nom-de-guerre* "Abu Sayyaf," in honor of Afghan resistance fighter Abdul Rasul Sayyaf.⁴ While Abdurajak idolized this Afghan leader, the suggestion that Abdurajak was an Afghan war veteran is still a subject for verification.⁵ Some living Filipino Afghan war veterans, for example, have challenged the claim that Abdurajak actually fought in the Afghan war—arguing instead that it was his younger brother, Hector, who participated in the conflict.⁶

Abdurajak's *khutbahs* and *fatawa* became popular not only in Basilan but also in Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Zamboanga City. His popularity caught the ire of police and military authorities because Abdurajak was associated with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a group that declared jihad against the Philippine government. Since Abdurajak used the pen name "Abu Sayyaf," the military described his followers as a group of Abu Sayyaf, which was popularized in media as the Abu Sayyaf Group, or ASG. The popularity of this group spread widely in Mindanao and was locally known as Juma'a Abu Sayyaf. In August 1991, Abdurajak publicly used the name ASG in connection with the bombing of the *MV Doulos*, a Christian missionary ship docked at the Zamboanga City port.⁷

From Islamic Movement to a Bandit Group

From an Islamic movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the ASG received the label of a bandit group from the

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Personal interview, Noor Muog, former member of the Abu Sayyaf Group, April 8, 2010.

⁶ There is need to conduct research on the life and stories of Filipino Muslim veterans of the Afghan war. Some have died, some have been imprisoned but there are still remaining veterans all over Mindanao. There are a few staying in Muslim communities in Manila trying to make a living peacefully.

⁷ "Abu Sayyaf Kidnappings, Bombings and Other Attacks," GMANews.tv, August 23, 2007.

¹ For a more detailed history, see Rommel C. Banlaoi, "The Abu Sayyaf Group and Terrorism in the Southern Philippines Seven Years After 9/11: Threat and Response," Philippine Institute for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, September 2008.

Philippine government for partaking in several bombing, extortion and kidnap-for-ransom activities. Although the ASG received initial funding from al-Qa`ida in the mid-1990s through the activities of Muhammad Jamal Khalifah, external funding was cut off when Philippine authorities discovered Khalifah's clandestine operations in the country.⁸

To mobilize resources, the ASG resorted to a kidnap-for-ransom spree in the late 1990s. The ASG's most publicized kidnap-for-ransom activities were the March 2000 attacks in elementary schools in Basilan,⁹ the April 2000 attack at the Sipadan resort of Malaysia¹⁰ and the May 2001 attack at the Dos Palmas resort of Palawan.¹¹ These attacks prompted the Philippine government to describe the ASG as a group of bandits interested in money-making through kidnapping activities. As a result of limited foreign funding since 9/11, the ASG has relied on kidnapping activities as its major source of funding—this continues today.¹² Other sources of its funding come from extortion activities (disguised as *zakat*, or alms giving), counterfeiting of goods, illegal drug sales or serving as bodyguards for local politicians.¹³

8 The discovery is fully described in the report, "The Islamic Fundamentalist/Extremist Movements in the Philippines and their Links with International Terrorist Organizations," December 1994, produced by the Special Investigation Group-Intelligence Command of the Philippine National Police headed by Rodolfo B. Mendoza, Jr.

9 For an excellent account, see Jose Torres Jr., *Into the Mountains: Hostaged by the Abu Sayyaf* (Quezon City: Clar-etian Publications, 2001).

10 For first-hand accounts of this incident, see Roberto N. Aventajado, *140 Days of Terror: In the Clutches of the Abu Sayyaf* (Pasig City: Anvil, 2004) and Werner Wal-lert, *Hostage Terror: Abducted by the Abu Sayyaf* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2009).

11 For a gripping account of her tragedy in this attack, see Gracia Burnham, *In the Presence of My Enemies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2003).

12 Rodolfo B. Mendoza, Jr., "The Evolution of Terrorist Financing in the Philippines," presented at the International Conference in Countering the Financing of Terrorism at the Sulu Hotel, Philippines on July 7-8, 2008; Personal interview, Major General Benjamin Dolorfino, Commander of the Western Command of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Zamboanga City, Philippines, March 25, 2010.

13 Personal interview, Rear Admiral Alexander Pama, Commander of Naval Forces Western Mindanao of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Zamboanga City, Phil-

From a Bandit Group to a Terrorist Group

The aftermath of 9/11, however, resulted in the redesignation of the ASG from a bandit group to a terrorist group. The United States listed the ASG as a foreign terrorist organization, justifying the deployment of U.S. troops to the southern Philippines to assist and train the Philippine military in countering the threat. Since 9/11, the ASG has engaged in a series of terrorist activities such as the Davao International Airport bombing in March 2003 that killed 21 people, the *Superferry 14* bombing in February 2004 that killed 116 people and the Valentine's Day bombing in February 2005 that killed 20 people.¹⁴ During this period, the ASG engaged in several bombing activities that were hallmarks of terrorism rather than banditry.¹⁵

ASG's bomb-making skills were acquired through joint training with Jemaah Islamiya (JI) operatives in the southern Philippines. Dulmatin and Umar Patek, alleged masterminds of the 2002 Bali bombing, have been identified by Philippine intelligence authorities as key trainers of the ASG on the manufacture and use of improvised explosive devices.¹⁶ Dulmatin and Umar Patek trained some ASG members with members of the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

From Terrorist Group to Bandit Group Again

When the Philippine military waged Oplan Ultimatum in August 2006 as a counterterrorism offensive to eliminate the ASG, it led to the demise of key ASG leaders, particularly Khadaffy Janjalani and Jainal Antel Sali, Jr. (also known as Abu Solaiman). The success of Oplan Ultimatum led to the drastic decline of ASG membership

ippines, March 24, 2010.

14 For details on these attacks, see Enrico Antonio La Vina and Lilita Balane, "Timeline: The Abu Sayyaf Atrocities," Newsbreak Online, March 31, 2009.

15 For detailed analysis, see Rommel C. Banlaoi, "The Abu Sayyaf Group: From Mere Banditry to Genuine Terrorism," in Daljit Singh and Lorraine Salazar eds., *Southeast Asian Affairs 2006* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), pp. 247-264.

16 Dulmatin was killed in Indonesia on March 9, 2010. Umar Patek is believed to have left the Philippines, but there are reports that he is still in Jolo, Sulu in the southern Philippines.

to an estimated 200 members at the conclusion of the campaign in 2007.¹⁷

Yet the ASG was able to recover its membership when it mounted a series of kidnapping activities in 2008. This allowed the group to amass money, which attracted Muslim youth to join the spree. The massive kidnapping activities of the ASG started in June 2008 with the abduction of well-known Filipina journalist, Ces Drilon, and her cameraman. This was followed by the kidnappings of three workers of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in January 2009 and two Chinese nationals in November 2009. In between those dates, several local residents were kidnapped, with one local teacher in Jolo beheaded in November 2009.¹⁸ Indeed, the ASG degenerated into a bandit group again.

With money in their pockets resulting from several ransom payments, the ASG was able to accommodate younger recruits not interested in ideology, but in guns and money. Muslim parents in impoverished villages of BASULTA even volunteered their sons to join the ASG in exchange for a monthly supply of rice and financial support to the family of around \$200.¹⁹ Some fathers even reportedly traded their sons for guns.²⁰ There were cases where young recruits joined the ASG as a status symbol against ordinary gangs in their communities. Some entered the ASG as a result of "pot" (marijuana) sessions with members.²¹ There are a few who joined the ASG to exact revenge for the deaths of their loved ones killed by police or military forces. There are also members who joined the ASG due to clan conflicts (known as *rido*), which is prevalent in Mindanao.²²

17 Rodolfo B. Mendoza, "Updates on Terrorist Organizations in the Philippines," lecture delivered at the Brunei Darussalam Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, December 3, 2009.

18 "Teacher Beheaded in Philippines," BBC, November 9, 2009.

19 Personal interview, senior intelligence officer, Armed Forces of the Philippines, Zamboanga City, Philippines, March 25, 2010.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Wilfredo Magno Torres III ed., *Rido: Clan Feuding and Conflict Management in Mindanao* (Makati City: The Asia Foundation, 2007).

Sources of ASG Resilience

As of April 2010, the ASG has an estimated 445 members, 79% of whom are 30-years-old and younger.²³ According to the Philippine government, Sulu represents the largest membership of 200 followed by 130 in Basilan, 90 in Zamboanga City, 20 in Tawi-Tawi and five in Marawi City.²⁴ The ASG has become a resilient group because it is able to replenish its membership from affected and influenced villages in BASULTA through material inducements. In Sulu alone, 46% or 115 of its total 251 villages are affected by the ASG.²⁵ In Basilan, 25% of its 187 villages are affected by ASG.²⁶ In other words, the ASG has a reservoir of new recruits that provide the group its staying power.

Aside from this reservoir, ASG leaders have also mastered the skills of conniving with ordinary criminal groups in their operational areas to mount kidnapping and other criminal activities. The ASG has recognized field commanders who are known bandits in the community. ASG commander Alpader Parad, who was killed in February 2010, was a known kidnapper rather than an ideological leader in Sulu. Other field commanders of the ASG are also leaders of notorious criminal gangs in BASULTA who are engaged in piracy, arms smuggling, drugs trafficking and counterfeiting of goods.

Furthermore, some ASG field commanders are protected by local politicians who also benefit from the illegal activities of the group—using ASG members as part of their private militias.²⁷ Although the Philippine

government has established a commission to dismantle private armies, it remains to be seen if the commission can fulfill its mandate. According to the Philippine National Police, there are more than 130 private armies in the entire country, in addition to rebel groups moonlighting as partisan armed militias of local politicians.²⁸ ASG members who are not part of the private army of a local politician offer their services as “thugs for hire,” particularly during election seasons.

In other words, the ASG has become an entrepreneur of violence with more of its members interested in pursuing money rather than a violent, Islamist ideology. While other commanders still have the illusion of waging jihad to establish an Islamic state in the southern Philippines, these individuals are a minority, usually those who studied in Islamic schools in the Philippines and abroad. Individuals such as Yasser Igasan, Khair Mundos and Isnilon Hapilon fit the description of ideological leaders. Yet Igasan, who is the nominal *amir* of the ASG, remains a jihadist but lacks loyal armed followers to promote his mission. Mundos, who is leading the ASG in Basilan, also lacks followers who are committed jihadists. Most of Mundos’ followers are bandits who are not interested in pursuing jihad. Hapilon, who is leading some of the group in Sulu, is overpowered by other ASG field commanders who are more interested in money generation. In short, the majority of ASG members are not motivated by the promise of an Islamic state or the virtue of jihad, but by the allure of money and power that comes from the barrel of a gun.

The ASG, therefore, has become a resilient group because its existence is enmeshed in a complex situation in the southern Philippines where rebels and terrorists connive with ordinary bandits, who collude with local politicians. All these various interests perpetrate violence on an island marred by more than 400 years of ethnic conflict, banditry and rebellion.

Limits of Countering Terrorism in the Philippines

With this grim reality of violence in the southern Philippines, counterterrorism measures largely based on the use of military muscle will not put an end to the ASG. Military offensives and other variants of Oplan Ultimatum can kill ASG members, but not end the ASG as a resilient group.

The ASG is a symbol of the complexities of armed violence in the southern Philippines that interact with issues of banditry, terrorism, rebellion, separatism, clan conflict, ethnic conflict and warlordism. The continuous entry of foreign jihadists to the southern Philippines only compounds these issues, as radical foreigners subvert the minds of the locals, imbuing them with a violent Islamist ideology. Moreover, they also train local fighters in sophisticated bomb-making skills. Only effective governance can limit ethnic conflict, banditry and rebellion. A strong civilian government sincere in nation-building is needed to finally put an end to the ASG by resolving the ethnic and political disputes plaguing the region.

Rommel C. Banlaoi is the Executive Director of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, an independent think-tank. He was former professor of political science and international relations at the National Defense College of the Philippines and was a consultant at the Department of National Defense and National Counter Terrorism Action Group of the Philippine Anti-Terrorism Council. He is currently lecturing at the Command and General Staff College of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and is a Senior Fellow at the Yuchengco Center of De La Salle University. He is the author of Philippine Security in the Age of Terror (2010), Counter-Terrorism Measures in Southeast Asia: How Effective Are They (2009) and War on Terrorism In Southeast Asia (2004). He is currently working on a book project on the Abu Sayyaf Group.

²³ Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Evolving Threats of Terrorism in Southeast Asia,” lecture presented at the 4th Asia Pacific Program for Senior National Security Officers organized by the Center for Excellence in National Security, Singapore, April 13, 2010. For the estimates on ASG cadre, see Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Armed Forces of the Philippines, March 2010.

²⁴ Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Armed Forces of the Philippines, March 2010.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Local politicians allegedly received commissions from ransom payments and proceeds from illicit trafficking of arms and drugs. This idea was also articulated by National Security Adviser and Acting Defense Secretary Norberto Gonzales. Also see Jocelyn Uy, “Abu Sayyaf Men Maybe Moonlighting at Private Armies—Defense

Execs,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 15, 2010.

²⁸ Jesus A. Versosa, “The PNP’s Role in Upholding the Law Against Private Armed Groups,” *Philippine National Police*, January 27, 2010.