Abu Sayyaf Group

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SUMMARY

Formed: 1991

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: April 4, 1991: The ASG carried out a grenade attack on Zamboanga City, killing 2 evangelical Americans (2 killed, 0 wounded).[1]

Last Attack: January 25, 2022: The ASG Nasirin sub-group attacked a military truck, killing one soldier and injuring two others. This was likely a retaliation against Philippines Military operations targeting their sub-group's lair.[2]

OVERVIEW

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is an Islamic separatist organization in the Philippines founded by Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani in 1991. Heavily influenced by Al Qaeda in its early stages, the ASG started as a splinter group of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and seeks an independent Muslim state in the southern Philippines. In the early 2000s, the ASG attracted attention through high-profile bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, and attacks. The ASG renewed its campaign to establish an Islamic state in June 2017, when it gained control of parts of Marawi, a city in the southern Philippines. It is regarded as the most dangerous militant group in the Philippines.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is an Islamic separatist organization based in the southern Philippines. It seeks an independent Islamic state for the Filipino Muslim minority, known as the Moro people, who live primarily in the Philippines' Mindanao region. The ASG has carried out several high-profile assassinations and bombings in pursuit of its goal, developing a reputation as the most violent Islamic separatist group in the Philippines. While many of the ASG's activities

center on Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago in the predominantly Moro south, the ASG also engages less frequently in terrorist acts in the Filipino capital of Manila.[3]

The ASG formed in 1991 by Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, who had studied in the Middle East with the support of a fundamentalist organization called the Islamic Tabligh. Janjalani became radicalized after traveling in Saudi Arabia, Libya, and other Muslim countries. While studying the Iranian Revolution in 1988, Janjalani reportedly met with Osama bin Laden in Pakistan and may even have fought alongside him during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, after which Janjalani developed his mission to transform the southern Philippines into an Islamic state.[4]

Janjalani was at one point a member of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), but upon permanently returning to the Philippines from the Middle East, he recruited other disenfranchised MNLF members into what would become the ASG. These ex-MNLF members held more radical views on how to establish an independent Islamic state than did their former parent organization.[5] Despite the efforts of the existing MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), persistent political and economic inequality between the Moros and other Filipinos strengthened the ASG's emergence as an alternative to those organizations. The ASG also benefited from poor economic conditions in the Philippines at the time, allowing the group to recruit new members who had relatively few economic opportunities.[6]

Throughout the 1990s, the ASG gained recognition by turning to violence, engaging in bombings, kidnapping, assassinations, and other attacks with a special focus on Christians and foreigners. The ASG also targeted the Philippine military, consistent with the organization's professed goal of resisting the Philippine government and establishing an independent Moro state.[7]

While the MNLF and the MILF distanced themselves from the ASG and its extremely violent tactics, the ASG's loose relationship with Al Qaeda—stemming from Janjalani's connection to bin Laden—continued. Al Qaeda supported the ASG with funding and training; in addition, Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, a wealthy Saudi businessman and bin Laden's brother-in-law, also provided early funding to the ASG.[8] In 1991 and 1992, Al Qaeda member Ramzi Yousef—a major participant in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing—traveled to the Philippines several times and, in 1994, allegedly provided training for ASG operatives.[9] During this time, Yousef and other Al Qaeda members, including Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, collaborated with the ASG in the Bojinka plot, in which twelve airplanes were to be bombed over the Pacific Ocean. The Bojinka plot was never executed; operatives botched the manufacturing of explosives in Yousef's Manila apartment, leading to a fire and the discovery of the plot in January 1995.[10] The Al Qaeda-ASG relationship weakened after Pakistan arrested Yousef and the Philippines blocked Khalifa from entry after the discovery of his connection to the plot.[11]

After Philippine police forces killed Janjalani in a 1998 shootout, the ASG fractured into two factions. Khadaffy Janjalani, brother of the deceased ASG founder, led one group, while a commander named Galib Andang led the other. Fragmentation and deterioration of discipline within the ASG, combined with the loss of Al Qaeda's assistance, pushed the organization to substitute its terrorist activities for kidnappings. These kidnappings were conducted specifically

to obtain ransom, which was necessary for the group's financial survival.[12] In 2000, the ASG conducted its first international attack, kidnapping twenty-one people from a Malaysian resort.[13]

In the aftermath of Al Qaeda's September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, the ASG was targeted by U.S. forces and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) under the wide-ranging Operation Enduring Freedom, which included a 2002 U.S. deployment of 1,650 troops to the Philippines. The reinvigoration of counterterrorism efforts damaged the ASG. Galib Andang, for example, was captured in 2003. While the ASG did suffer losses, the elimination of certain key figures like Andang also decreased fragmentation.[14]

Consequent to the decrease in fragmentation, the ASG was once again able to consolidate, and carried out several major attacks in the early 2000s. These included the ASG's deadliest attack, the 2004 *Superferry 14* bombing in Manila Bay that killed 116, and the 2005 "Valentine's Day Bombings." New U.S.-AFP counterterrorism efforts followed these high-profile attacks, and Khadaffy Janjalani was killed in 2006. As before, the ASG's leadership losses and subsequent decentralization resulted in an end to mass bombings and a return to kidnapping for ransom in 2007.[15]

For a time beginning in 2007, the ASG mainly engaged in kidnapping activities, often threatening to behead hostages unless a ransom was paid. Most kidnapping victims have been Filipinos, although the ASG also targets foreigners in the southern Philippines, including tourists at resorts and foreign workers. The ASG's kidnapping activities themselves appear to be profit-driven rather than politically motivated, although the ransoms fund weapons and other supplies.[16] Because of the ASG's small size and focus on using kidnapping and extortion to make money, some analysts and officials began to describe the ASG as more of a criminal gang than an ideologically driven organization.[17] However, as the ASG has established increasingly strong ties with IS, its actions have returned to large-scale bombings with political motives, as well as armed attacks on both military and civilian targets. They have also continued to engage in kidnapping for ransom. [18]

The ASG is the smallest and most radical of the Philippines' Islamic separatist groups, and the Philippine government does not consider it a legitimate negotiating partner. Likewise, because the ASG purportedly aims to create an independent state through violent resistance rather than negotiation, it has shown little inclination towards peace talks with the Philippine government.[19] The ASG has instead sought to undermine the latest round of peace negotiations between the government and the MILF, conducting attacks to destabilize ceasefire agreements and discourage further dialogue.[20] In July 2014 on the island of Jolo, the ASG killed at least 21 Muslims celebrating the end of Ramadan, reportedly in retaliation for their support of the peace process.[21]

ASG and ISIS built connections beginning on July 23, 2014, when Isnilon Hapilon—an ASG leader—and a group of unidentified men appeared in a YouTube video pledging allegiance to IS and to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Days later in another video, a group of men identifying themselves as ASG members also pledged allegiance to IS and Baghdadi.[22] In September 2014, the ASG threatened the lives of two German hostages, demanding that Germany pay a ransom and rescind its support for U.S. attacks on IS.[23]

Scholars and officials, including Lieutenant General Rustico Guerrero of the Philippine Army, said they believed that the ASG has pledged allegiance to IS solely to promote its own interests, rather than those of IS.[24] The ASG had earlier demanded only a ransom for the German hostages, and in October 2014, it released the hostages and reported that the ransom had been paid; there were no reported changes in German policy toward U.S. attacks on IS.[25]

In 2016, IS released a video showing four "battalions" of militants pledging allegiance to IS, who followed up with a video accepting the pledges from militant groups in the Philippines.[26] IS claims responsibility for attacks by the ASG and called for IS followers to go fight in the Philippines.[27] Following their declaration of allegiance to IS, ASG tactics were still primarily kidnapping for ransom and civilian attacks.[28] In a 2016 propaganda video, IS endorsed Abu Sayyaf sub-leader Isnilon Hapilon as the acting emir of Southeast Asia, although it had not declared the Philippines to be a formal province of the caliphate. This "has facilitated cooperation across ethnic groups" and several pro-IS groups consolidated under Hapilon's leadership.[29] The IS-supported half of ASG was now centered in Basilon, while the other half of the ASG which was not loyal to Hapilon generally remained on Jolo.[30]

On May 23, 2017, the ASG launched an aggressive series of attacks in Marawi, a Muslim majority city in Mindanao. Fighting began after government forces tried to capture Isnilon Hapilon in Marawi based on some actionable intelligence.[31] Other jihadist groups supported the ASG battle in Marawi, particularly the new IS-affiliated Maute Group. By June they had claimed parts of the city.[32] Attacks also occurred elsewhere in the region.

In August 2017, an estimated 60 to 100 members of the ASG attacked a town called Maluso, killing nine people and injuring 10 others.[33] Some fighters refer to the state they sought to create in the Mindanao region as the "East Asia Wilayat" or "Wilayah al-Filibin", a name IS neither officially supported nor denounced.[34] Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law and the U.S. provided 50 to 100 special operations forces soldiers for training and technical assistance.[35]

On October 17, 2017, the Philippine government declared Marawi reclaimed after 5 months of fighting. In total, the battle for Marawi resulted in the deaths of more than 1,000 people (including an estimated 900 militants), and the displacement of an estimated 200,000 people. According to President Duterte and the Philippines military, Hapilon died during the final push to reclaim Marawi. The high death toll of ASG fighters and the loss of key leadership leaves the future of the ASG uncertain.[36] In recent years, the existence of many ASG factions—often based on clan or familial ties—has made it hard for group leader Radulan Sahiron to exert central command and control. Instead, the ASG is increasingly decentralized with different deputy leaders carrying out their own operations as they see fit.[37]

On July 24, 2018, the Philippine House of Representatives passed the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), the final name of the former Bangsamoro Basic Law which would establish a new autonomous region for Moro Muslims in the south.[38] With President Rodrigo Duterte's signing the bill into law, a Muslim regional entity was created in Mindanao. With the bill's passing, the MILF, representatives of which were present during the signing of the bill in Manila, declared its support. MILF leader Ebrahim declared that 30-40,000 fighters would be decommissioned.[39]

President Duterte signed the law into effect on July 26, 2018, although Misuari and the MNLF remain opposed to the BOL and want the government to honor the 1996 ARMM agreement and place Misuari in the position of governor of the autonomous region.[40]

On July 31, 2018, a car bomb exploded at a checkpoint in Basilian's Lamitan City, killing at least 10 people, including the driver, a Philippine Army Special Forces sergeant, four Philippine Army-led local militiamen, and several civilians including a woman and child.[41] The AFP has assigned blame on militants linked to the ASG.[42]

Sub-leader Sawadjaan began training suicide bombers around 2018, and attacks have included military bases and churches, sparking concern for experts who had previously believed that suicide bombing would not come to the Philippines.[43] A U.S. Department of Defense Report to Congress said Sawadjaan was believed to be the "acting emir" of IS in the Philippines, although this has not been publicly confirmed by IS.[44]

On June 27, 2019, an Indonesian couple bombed a Roman Catholic church in Jolo during Sunday Mass, killing an estimated 20 people and wounding dozens more.[45] This attack came a week after voters in the Sulu province (where Jolo is located) voted not to become sami-autonomous, per the Bangsamoro Organic Law signed in 2018.[46] On August 24, 2020, two suicide bombers attacked a Jolo town plaza, one of whom was the wife of Norman Lasuca, the first "homegrown" Filipino suicide bomber. These attacks have sparked concern about entire families being radicalized.[47]

The group has continued to associate itself with IS, including flying the IS flag over kidnappings and attacks. This association can likely be credited with the increase in suicide bombing tactics.[48]

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

The ASG's leadership is currently fragmented, especially after the deaths of several of the group's leaders in 2006-2007. It is unknown whether one key figure leads the ASG, but the existence of many factions, often based on clan or family, and loose associations within the group suggests that a central leadership is unlikely at this time. Instead, the ASG has several leadership figures who carry out their own operations.[49] However, following the ASG pledging allegiance to IS in 2016, some consolidation occurred.[50]

Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani (1991 to December 18, 1998): Janjalani was the founder and first key leader of the ASG. He was killed by police in a 1998 gunfight on the island of Basilan.[51]

Khadaffy Janjalani (1998 to September 4, 2006): After Abdurajak Janjalani's death, his younger brother Khadaffy assumed a key leadership role. Khadaffy was killed in a 2006 confrontation with Philippine troops.[52]

Radulan Sahiron (Unknown to Present)**:** Sahiron, also known as Commander Putol, became a key leader of the ASG after Khadaffy Janjalani's death. He had previously held top

leadership and advisory positions within the ASG. Sahiron continues to be an important ASG public figure and operational commander, leading one of the two current primary factions.[53]

Alhamser Limbong (Unknown to March 30, 2002): Limbong, also known as Commander Kosovo, led the ASG's Manila cell, according to Philippine police.[54] He was likely plotting a bombing involving 180 pounds of TNT at the time of his March 30, 2002 arrest during a raid in Manila.[55] Limbong was killed in 2005 during an attempted jailbreak, along with ASG leader Galib Andang.[56]

Galib Andang (1998 to December 2003): Andang, also known as Commander Robot, led one ASG faction after Abdurajak Janjalani's death. Andang was captured in a 2003 clash with the military and was killed in 2005 during an attempted jailbreak, along with ASG leader Alhamser Limbong.[57]

Abu Sulaiman (Unknown to January 16, 2007): Abu Sulaiman, born as Jainal Antel Sali, Jr., was a high-ranking ASG leader and spokesman. Together, Abu Sulaiman and Khadaffy Janjalani reportedly unified six or more ASG factions.[58] Abu Sulaiman was considered by the Philippine military to be one of Khadaffy Janjalani's successors, and he was killed by the army in 2007.[59]

Abdul Basir Latip (Unknown to 2009): Latip is an ASG co-founder and served as a key financial officer, moving funds from Al Qaeda to the ASG. He also allegedly established ties between the ASG and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).[60] In 2009, Latip was detained in Indonesia and deported to the Philippines for arrest.[61]

Albader Parad (Unknown to February 2, 2010): Parad was a military commander and ranking leader of the ASG.[62] He led an ASG cell on the island of Jolo and was killed by the Philippine military in 2010.[63]

Gumbahali Jumdail (Unknown to February 2, 2012): Jumdail, also known as Doc Abu, was an ASG regional leader.[64] He was killed by the Philippine air force in 2012.[65]

Isnilon Totoni Hapilon (Unknown to October 16, 2017): Hapilon, also known as Abu Musab, Sol, Abu Tuan, Esnilon, Salahudin, and The Deputy, is considered one of the ASG's key current leaders, along with Radulan Sahiron.[66] Before assuming this role, Hapilon served as an ASG deputy commander.[67] In June 2016, IS released a video declaring Hapilon as the group's emir of the Philippines.[68] Hapilon was located and killed by the Philippine Military in 2017, towards the end of the Marawi Crisis.[69]

Yasser Igasan (2007 to Present): Igasan, also known as Kumander Diang, is a current leader of the ASG.[70] Although the Philippine military reported that Igasan was elected to succeed Khadaffy Janjalani in 2007, that claim was later retracted.[71]

Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan (Unknown to Present): Sub-leader of a faction of around 200 participants, Sawadjaan is considered by the US State Dept to be the "acting emir of IS" in the Philippines, and has trained the first Filipino suicide bombers. He is suspected to be behind both Jolo Church bombings, as well as other significant recent attacks.[72]

B. NAME CHANGES

- 1989: Mujahedeen Commando Freedom Fighters (MCFF). The MCFF was Abdurajak Janjalani's first group, composed of disillusioned MNLF members. It was established within the MNLF, but it became the ASG in 1991, when Janjalani officially split from the MNLF.[73]
- 1991: Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Abdurajak Janjalani renamed the group after Professor Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a resistance leader in Afghanistan. The name translates to "father of the swordsman."[74]
- Unknown: Al Harakat Al Islamiyyah (AHAI). This name translates to "The Islamic Movement" and is an alternative name for the ASG, reportedly preferred by the ASG's earliest members.[75]

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2008: 200-500 (US State Department)[76]
- April 2010: 445 (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point)[77]
- July 2013: 380 (Xinhua News)[78]
- May 2015: 400 (Associated Press)[79]
- June 2019: Less than 400 (AP News)[80]
- June 2021: 50 (The Star - Malaysia, size estimate provided by "intelligence sources" that may understate ASG numbers)[81]

D. RESOURCES

The ASG has received money or training from other Islamist militant groups in the past, including Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah.[82] Today, the ASG's main source of funding is criminal activity, to which the group increasingly turned after the decline of funding from foreign sources in the mid-1990s. The ASG is best known for engaging in kidnapping, demanding ransom from wealthy families and Western governments, generating up to several million dollars per ransom. The ASG also finances itself through blackmail, extortion, smuggling, and sales of marijuana.[83]

Besides financially supporting its members, the ASG uses its money primarily to buy weapons and communications equipment.[84] A 2005 Philippine military estimate suggested that the ASG held about 480 weapons, in addition to equipment for night vision capabilities, thermal imaging, speedboats, and more.[85] The ASG has reportedly bought weapons from the AFP, indicating the possibility of local military corruption.[86] The ASG has also allegedly obtained weapons from the Infante Organization, a U.S.-Philippines illegal drug and weapons supply group whose leader was arrested in 2003, and from Viktor Bout, an international arms trafficker who also supplied Al Qaeda and Hezbollah before his 2008 arrest.[87]

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

The ASG originated in the southern region of the Philippines. It continues to train and operate mainly on the island of Mindanao, in particular the Zamboanga Peninsula, and the Sulu Archipelago, which includes the islands of Basilan, Jolo, and Tawi-Tawi.[88] Less frequently, the ASG also conducts operations in the Manila area.[89] Additionally, the ASG has conducted kidnappings and attacks in nearby Malaysia, beginning in 2000 by kidnapping visitors to a resort.[90]

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

The ASG aims to establish an independent Salafist Sunni Islamic state in the Mindanao region for the Filipino minority known as the Moros. This goal is shaped by the historical narrative of the "Bangsamoro" struggle, in which Filipino Muslims—concentrated in the southern Philippines where Muslim merchants arrived in the 1300s or earlier—have long clashed with the Spanish, American, and Filipino governments that they believe have sought to oppress them.[91] The ASG also aims to expel the Christian settlers who migrated to Mindanao from other regions in the Philippines such as Luzon and the Visayas. These Christian settlers began migrating to the southern Philippines with government encouragement in the 1910s; they now comprise 75% of the region.[92]

Despite the ASG's stated goals, the organization has shown signs of becoming motivated more by material gain than by ideological struggle. For a time, some analysts and officials began likening the ASG to a criminal gang.[93] It's unclear whether the group's recent dedication to IS is motivated by the material and social support it gives them, or by genuine belief. Most likely, it is some undefinable combination of both motivations.[94]

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

The ASG has never engaged in peace talks or any other form of nonviolent political activity. It specifically promotes armed struggle as the means of achieving an independent Moro state.[95] The ASG has conducted attacks to destabilize ceasefire agreements and discourage peace negotiations between the government and the MILF.[96] In July 2014 on the island of Jolo, the ASG killed at least 21 Muslims celebrating the end of Ramadan, reportedly in retaliation for their support of the peace process.[97]

C. TARGETS & TACTICS

As part of its struggle for an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines, the ASG emphasizes the targeting of Philippine military forces, foreigners, and Christians. The ASG also targets a much larger variety of individuals, including local politicians, business people, and ordinary Filipinos.

The ASG has used such tactics as assassinations, armed attacks, beheadings, bombings, murder, robbery, kidnappings, and monetary extortion of businesses and individuals. While the ASG conducted several high-profile political bombings in the early 2000s, kidnapping for ransom is the ASG's current major activity, and the ASG seems to use this tactic with little regard for ideology. The rise of the ASG's profit-driven criminal activities, coupled with the decline of clearly political attacks like mass bombings, suggests a shift from a principally religious or ideological rationale to material motivations.[98]

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

April 4, 1991: The ASG conducted a grenade attack in Zamboanga City, killing two U.S. Christian evangelists. (2 killed, unknown wounded).[99]

August 1991: The ASG bombed a Christian missionary ship, *M/V Doulos*. (2 killed, 40 wounded).[100]

April 14, 1995: The ASG attacked the Christian town of Ipil. (53 killed, 48 wounded, ~30 hostages).[101]

April 23, 2000: The ASG conducted its first attack in Malaysia, kidnapping twenty-one people from a tourist resort in Sipadan. These hostages were all released or escaped. (0 killed, unknown wounded, 21 hostages).[102]

May 27, 2001: ASG gunmen kidnapped tourists, including three Americans, from the Dos Palmas resort in Palawan. Six days later, ASG members brought at least some of these hostages to a hospital in Lamitan, where they took more hostages, resulting in Philippine troops laying siege to the hospital.[103] After the kidnapping, the U.S. and the Philippines conducted massive military operations against the ASG in an attempt to rescue the hostages. Some hostages escaped or were released while others—including two of the Americans—were killed. (2 killed, unknown wounded, 20 hostages).[104]

March 4, 2003: A bomb exploded in a shed outside the main terminal building of the Davao International Airport. An ASG spokesman called a national radio station the following day, claiming responsibility for the attack. (21 killed, 148 wounded).[105]

February 27, 2004: A member of the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), a group closely tied to the ASG, detonated a bomb on *Superferry 14*, a passenger ferry carrying 900 passengers out of Manila. The ASG claimed responsibility for planning the attack, which was confirmed by a subsequent government investigation. The *Superferry 14* bombing was the Philippines' deadliest terrorist attack and the world's deadliest terrorist attack at sea. (116 killed, unknown wounded).[106]

February 14, 2005: ASG operatives simultaneously detonated two bombs in Mindanao's General Santos City and Davao City, closely followed by a third bomb in Makati City. These attacks became known as the "Valentine's Day Bombings," after the ASG's Abu Sulaiman claimed that the bombs were a "gift" to then-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. (8 killed, 147 wounded).[107]

November 13, 2007: A bomb outside the Philippine House of Representatives killed a congressman and two congressional employees. This operation was attributed to the ASG and was the first bombing attack on the Philippine Congress. (3 killed, 11 wounded).[108]

May 23, 2017 – October 17, 2017: Armed ASG and Maute group fighters overtook a hospital in Marawi City, marking the beginning of a 5-month long siege of the city.The military reported total casualties of 163 government troops, 57 civilians and 847 militants . A count of 359,680 people were reported to be displaced during this conflict. (1067 killed, unknown wounded)[109]

January 27, 2019: Two bombs were detonated at a Roman Catholic cathedral during Sunday Mass, killing 21 people and injuring "dozens more."[110] IS took credit for this attack. (21 killed, "dozens" injured).[111]

June 28, 2019, 2019: Two suicide bombers carried out an attack outside a military camp in Jolo. One of the bombers, Norman Lasuca, is considered the first "homegrown" Filipino suicide bomber. The attack killed the two bombers, three soldiers, and two civilians, and wounded 22 others. (7 killed, 22 wounded).[112]

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- U.S. State Department Foreign Terrorist Organizations: October 8, 1997 to Present[113]
- UN Al Qaeda Sanctions List: October 6, 2001 to Present[114]
- Designated Terrorist Organization by Republic of the Philippines Anti-Terrorism Council: October 16, 2020 to Present[115]
- Australian Government Listed Terrorist Organizations: November 14, 2002 to Present[116]
- New Zealand Designated Terrorist Entities: October 17, 2002 to Present[117]
- Malaysian Government Declared Specified Entity: 2001 to Present[118]

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Public support for the ASG across the Philippines is limited, with most Filipinos condemning the group's activities. The ASG does enjoy some support from Muslims in Mindanao's Jolo and Basilan regions, but this support has declined in response to the ASG's violent tactics.[119] Moderate Muslim leaders similarly reject the group.[120] The ASG relies on its members' families, friends, and other ties to the community for local support and recruitment, and it also channels funds to local communities to augment support.[121] ASG operatives blend easily into the surrounding populations, complicating government operations against them.[122]

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

From the beginning, AQ materially and ideologically influenced the ASG. Abdurajak Janjalani's relationship with Osama bin Laden shaped Janjalani's decision to establish the ASG and led to its affiliation with AQ.[123] Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, bin Laden's brother-in-law and a wealthy Saudi businessman, further strengthened the affiliation by supporting the ASG financially and logistically during the group's early stages.[124] In the early 1990s, AQ member Ramzi Yousef traveled to the Philippines several times and allegedly provided training for the ASG, becoming one of several foreign AQ members to cooperate with the ASG in training operatives and plotting attacks.[125]

The ASG's relationship with AQ weakened in the mid-1990s after the Philippines barred Khalifa from entering the country and Yousef was arrested in Pakistan. The extent of the ASG-AQ relationship after the mid-1990s remains unclear, although a 2000 Philippine military intelligence report alleged that Al Qaeda had still given the ASG training, weapons, and other support.[126]

Today, the ASG-AQ relationship may have been effectively ended by the ASG's potential new link to IS, a prominent Al Qaeda rival. On July 23, 2014, ASG leader Isnilon Hapilon and a group of unidentified men pledged allegiance to IS and to IS leader Baghdadi in a YouTube video. In another video released days later, a group of men identifying themselves as ASG members also pledged allegiance to IS and Baghdadi.[127] In September 2014, the ASG threatened the lives of two German hostages, demanding that Germany pay a ransom and rescind its support for U.S. attacks on IS.[128]

However, most scholars and officials believe that the ASG has pledged allegiance to IS solely to promote its own interests, rather than those of IS.[129] The ASG had initially demanded only a ransom for the German hostages, and in October 2014, it released the hostages and reported that a ransom had been paid; yet, there was no reported change in German policy toward U.S. attacks on IS.[130] Beyond the oath of allegiance videos, no links between the ASG and IS have been demonstrated. IS does not seem to have given funds or other material support to the ASG nor acknowledged its oath of allegiance.[131]

In concrete terms of material support and operational cooperation, the ASG has the strongest ties with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a regional Islamist militant group, from which it receives funds, logistical support, and training.[132] Some Southeast Asian military analysts say that JI and the ASG are so intertwined that they virtually function as a single organization, especially in the area of the Sulu Archipelago.[133]

The ASG's relationship with its fellow Filipino separatist groups is more ambiguous, although the MNLF and the MILF both officially condemn the ASG and its tactics. The ASG was originally a faction of the MNLF that broke away in the 1990s, just as the MILF began as an offshoot of the MNLF in the 1970s.[134] Of the Philippines' three Islamic separatist groups, the ASG is the smallest and most extreme. Unlike the MNLF and the MILF, the ASG has never engaged in peace talks with the Philippine government. Instead, the ASG has conducted attacks to undermine current peace negotiations between the government and the MILF, which is larger and stronger than the ASG.[135] The MNLF still officially denounces the ASG, even though both groups oppose the current negotiations from which they are excluded. In 2013, MNLF chairman Nur Misuari condemned the ASG's terrorization of Sulu, where the MNLF is headquartered, and announced his intention to rid the area of the ASG's criminal activities.[136] In 2020, Misuari turned ASG sub-leader Susukan over to the Philippine National Police.[137]

There are, however, signs of collaboration between the ASG, the MNLF, and the MILF on an individual level. The three groups have overlapping memberships, shared operational areas, and the common goal of establishing an independent Moro state This suggests the possibility of cooperation among lower-level operatives or individual commanders, despite the organizations' official positions. Cooperation is especially likely between the ASG and the other groups' more

extreme or dissatisfied members, who, like the ASG, reject all peace talks and autonomy agreements negotiated with the Philippine government. Some of those extreme or dissatisfied members have also gone on to join the ASG.[138]

D. STATE SPONSORS & EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The ASG may have been secretly supported by Libya during the rule of Muammar el-Qaddafi. Qaddafi had previously demonstrated support for the Moro separatist movement in general, for example by sending funds and arms to the MILF.[139] Acting as negotiator, Libya was instrumental in securing the August 2000 release of six hostages who were kidnapped by the ASG, including three French citizens, a German and a South African. In return for the release, a charitable foundation led by Qaddafi's son gave $25 million in supposed development aid to the Philippines' southern region, although this money may have actually gone to the ASG.[140] Additionally, despite claims that no ransom was ever given, Qaddafi himself may have paid the ASG $6 million for the six hostages.[141] While Libya officially denounced the ASG's kidnapping operations, the ASG reportedly received Libyan money multiple times during Qaddafi's rule, under the guise of charitable or humanitarian donations. Mosques and Islamic schools in the region also received Libyan money.[142]

MAPS

- Philippines
- Global Islamic State
- Global Al Qaeda

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[1] "Abu Sayyaf Kidnappings, Bombings and Other Attacks." GMA News Research. GMA News Online, 23 Aug. 2007. Web. 19 May 2012. http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/154797/news/abu-sayyaf-kidnappings-bombings-and-other-attacks

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